



HEART
OF THE
SHADOW
KING

SYLVIA MERCEDES

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A KING MUST ALWAYS THINK OF HIS
KINGDOM FIRST.
EVEN ON HIS WEDDING NIGHT.



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SIXTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER NINETEEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTY](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE](#)
[CHAPTER FORTY](#)
[CHAPTER FORTY-ONE](#)
[CHAPTER FORTY-TWO](#)
[CHAPTER FORTY-THREE](#)
[CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR](#)
[CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE](#)
[CHAPTER FORTY-SIX](#)
[CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN](#)
[EPILOGUE](#)

[NEXT: WARBRIDE](#)

[Discover more from Sylvia Mercedes](#)

[About the Author](#)



*This one is for Handsome,
for his strong arms,
his true heart,
and his unending courage.*



1

FARAINÉ

Pain ripples through my body at odd intervals, like the aftershocks of a massive quake.

I'm used to pain, of course. I've lived a great deal of my life striving to stave it off. And the agony of both my recent death and resurrection was certainly more terrible than these small tremors. But this is different. This is the extreme discomfort of a spirit which had escaped the confines of a mortal body only to find itself confined once more. Protesting against imprisonment, straining at every boundary, seeking escape.

I close my eyes, breathing deeply through yet another wave as it washes over me, body and soul. There's nothing to be done, no way to escape. I must simply endure. But at least I can lean my head back against the broad chest and shoulder behind me, steady myself against another's heartbeat. A heartbeat which now pulses in rhythm with my own.

Vor's arm holds me fast around my middle as he guides his morleth down through a gaping chasm of stone. He's not spoken since we left behind the secluded pool at the base of the mountain. His silence is sweet, however, and everything he'd said while holding me in his arms on the edge of that pool still echoes in my heart.

“You are mine, Faraine. My Queen. Sovereign Lady of Mythanar and the Under Realm, from this day forth and forevermore.”

I breathe through another wave of pain. My head is light and dizzy as we descend through the winding caverns, back down into the vast dark spaces of the subterranean world. Regret pricks my heart as we leave behind the shining, distant stars. The sky holds real terror for this man who is my husband, but for me it was a relief not to feel the weight of stone overhead, at least for a little while.

The truth is, I don't belong in Vor's world. And yet, to claim the heart of the Shadow King is to claim his world as my own. Am I ready? Am I strong enough?

I gave my death in a wild attempt to save these people from destruction.

Do I have the courage to give my life as well?

My stomach tightens as Vor urges his morleth faster, and we plunge back into the Under Realm. *Lorst* crystals flash, piercing my closed eyelids with their ever-brightening glow. *Lusterling*, the trolde equivalent of day, is awakening. What will the light of a million shining crystals reveal of the city below? A city stricken by terror and savagery. A city poised on the brink of disaster.

Vor's arm tightens around me. I frown suddenly. Though I'm riding pressed so close against him, I cannot sense him. I feel the tension in his muscles, the quickness of his breath close to my ear, the rapid beat of his heart. But not his emotions. Where once his every feeling was so readily available to my perception, now there is simply absence. Surely this can't be right. I'm tired from my ordeal, distracted by the pain. That's all. Reaching out, I seek for that connection I've been able to find with most living souls since the day my gods-gift overwhelmed me, ripping me open to receive the feelings of others.

There's nothing there. No sense of him. No thrumming spirit, no silent pulse of sound, of essence. Nothing.

Almost unconsciously I release the handful of morleth mane I've been gripping and reach instead for my pendant. When my fingers find it, still hung from its delicate chain around my neck, it does not hum in response to my touch. I lift it up, twisting it to catch the flashing *lorst* lights. There's darkness in its center. I blink, look again, certain I must be imagining things. Perhaps the flickering lights are playing tricks on my eyes. But my spirit senses that darkness, that emptiness as well. That lack where there should be life.

Something has changed inside of me. Something essential. Something . . . I don't quite know what.

The morleth lets out a snort of sulfur as we emerge from the winding darkness into the huge cavern of Mythanar. I let out a gasp, dropping my crystal, and stare down at the sight below. I've not seen the city from this angle before. I had thought it great when traversing its streets or when flying on the back of a morleth over its peaked and glittering rooftops. But it was impossible then to fathom the sheer scale, the precipitous heights of its twisted towers, the plunging depths of its winding streets, the glittering crystals, the misting waterfalls, the soaring bridges and highways. All perched on the chasm's edge above a glowing river of lava. My heart quickens at the sight, at the wonder and the beauty spread before me. It's hard to imagine such an ancient, powerful city could ever be in danger of annihilation. What could possibly bring such majesty to ruin?

Dragon.

The word breathes in the back of my head, a whisper, a warning. I'm not altogether certain where I heard it, who spoke it. The idea is simply there, along with a sensation of heat and a deep, roiling wellspring of pure, celestial rage.

"Are you well, Faraine?"

Vor's voice warms my ear, sending a little shiver down my spine. I close my eyes, lean back into him, once more seeking the warmth of his emotions to enfold me. Once more finding nothing. But there must be an explanation. My gods-gift was so inundated by the recent and tremendous outpouring of my power. I just need a chance to recover. In the meanwhile, I should be glad for the reprieve. "I'm all right," I murmur, turning to tuck under Vor's chin. "I'm tired. That is all."

Does he hear the lie in my voice? Possibly. But he does not challenge it, merely kisses the top of my head and says, "Of course. You've had a terrible ordeal. I will take you directly to your room and send someone to attend you."

I don't want someone to attend me. I want him. Only him. I want to feel again the peace of his presence that once struck my gods-gifted senses so profoundly. If I cannot have that, then I would settle for the strength of his arms, the warmth of his voice, the beat of his heart.

But Vor is Mythanar's king. While he may have abandoned his city in a mad bid to save me, his people need him still.

So, I keep my mouth shut and my eyes closed, blocking out both the sight of that city and the absence of my gods-gift. The powerful beast beneath me flows through the air, down into the cavern, circling as it draws near to the palace towers. At last it alights on the balcony rail just outside my chamber. "We've arrived," Vor says gently.

Memory flashes through my mind's eye—recent memory of the last time we were here. When Vor carried me on a morleth back up from the city, intending to deliver me to my chambers. Intending never to see me again. But I'd convinced him to stay. Convinced him to give in to the burning desire which had built up such dangerous pressure between us, finally bursting free in an inferno of unrestrained passion.

Heat pools between my thighs even now at the thought. This man, who now holds me against his powerful chest, awakened such strange new sensations in me. His hands, his mouth, his teeth and tongue seemed to mold me, to make me new. I would very much like the chance to experience more such delights under his guidance and care.

Vor dismounts before reaching up to help me from the saddle. I cannot trust my legs to support me but cling to his neck, allowing him to cradle me close. The window to my chamber is wide open, and he carries me inside. All the furnishings are askew, the decorations and ornaments tumbled from their places. A few chunks of stalactite have fallen from the ceiling, one jagged piece crushing the small table that once held a silver ewer and cups. Evidence of the last stirring, which shook the city just before the cave devils attacked.

Still holding me close, Vor peers around the space, his eyes narrowed. Searching for signs of danger no doubt. "It's all right," I tell him. "The *woggha* never got in here."

"How can you be certain?"

I can't. If my gods-gift were awakened, I would be able to sense the presence of another living beast. As it is, there might be any number of cave devils hiding in my wardrobe, under my bed, up the chimney, and I would never know.

Vor sets me down on the bed, which is covered in debris. I brush dust and pebbles to the floor, while he makes a quick but thorough search of the chamber. Satisfied at last, he returns to me. "How do you feel now?" he asks, kneeling before me so that his eyes are once more level with mine. He takes both my hands in his.

"Weak," I admit. I don't tell him about the jolts of pain rippling through me at odd intervals. He has worries enough on his mind.

He lifts one hand to stroke my cheek, brow puckering. "I suppose that's

understandable, considering . . .”

“Considering I was dead not two hours ago.”

A shadow falls across his face. He leans forward, presses his forehead against mine. The shuddering intake of his breath wrings my heart. “Don’t ever leave me like that, Faraine,” he whispers. “Never again. Don’t go where I cannot follow.”

I smile, a gentle tilt of my lips. “I’ll never leave you willingly. Never by choice.”

He takes another ragged breath. Then he angles his face, his lips hovering over mine, a mere fraction of infinitesimal space separating us. I hang there, suspended in that space, waiting, longing.

He closes the distance, his mouth warm and eager. At the instant of contact, something inside me thrums to life, a faint echo of my former gift. In that echo I feel, however distantly, both his hunger and his desperation. It flows through me, driving out all pain as my own hunger, my own desperation, rises to answer his. Though my arms are still weak, I wrap them around his neck, thread my fingers through his hair, and pull him closer, closer. He responds, bowing me back over the bed. There’s grit at my back, fallen debris sharp against my skin and the thin black robe wrapping my body. I scarcely notice. All I know is my need for him, my need to deepen this connection between us. My hands run over his shoulders, his neck, his torso, finding all the cuts and wounds from his recent battle. He came to find me straight from the horror of the cave devil attack, straight from fighting to preserve the lives of his people in the face of unimaginable savagery.

But he’s here. With me now. His hands press into the bed on either side of my face, his huge body poised so as not to crush me even as his mouth covers mine. His kisses grow more adamant, demanding, as though he cannot believe I am real and requires proof. I’m still not certain myself and need his

touch to anchor me to this world. I open my mouth, deepening both our kiss and our connection.

A bolt shoots straight to my heart. A burst of raw red light explodes in my head.

Fear.

Dread.

Guilt.

These are Vor's feelings. Wrapped in his love but no less real, no less dreadful. They fill my head until it seems like many small pins are trapped inside my skull, struggling to escape through my scalp. With a gasp, I pull away from him.

Vor peers down at me, propped up on his fists, his long silver hair falling in a gentle veil around us. "What is it?" he asks, panting. "What's wrong?"

I don't want to tell him. I don't want him to know that he is hurting me. I don't want to let him go. Instead, I grimace, gripping his shoulder with one hand while the other seeks my crystal pendant. I wrap my fingers around the faceted stone. It does not respond no matter how hard I squeeze.

"Faraine?" Vor's voice is confused, tinged with fear. "Faraine, my love. Have I hurt you?" He pulls back, breaking free of my weakened arms. He sits on the edge of the bed, head bowed, and runs his fingers through his hair. "I'm such a fool! Forgive me. I'm behaving like a lustful cad when you've just—"

"No, Vor." My voice is unsteady. But the moment contact is broken, numbness spreads through my body. The pain of his emotions is so thoroughly gone, I have to wonder if I somehow invented it. I open my eyes, still gripping my crystal, and meet his stricken gaze. "It's not you. I swear. The . . . the shock of everything . . ."

He leans forward, cups my face in his palm. I wince, expecting that touch

to open a conduit between us. But there's nothing; numbness holds sway. I shiver and drop my gaze, uncertain how to feel. I'd almost prefer the pain of his guilt to this absence.

"You must rest," he says, his voice firm. "You must sleep, recover." He shakes his head, smiling ruefully. "I'm sorry, my love. I cannot help how badly I want to make up for all the time we've lost."

I touch the hand still cradling my cheek. "I want to experience everything with you, Vor. I want to fill whatever moments we have left." Then, taking his hand, I draw it down to my heart, pressing it there. "But your people need you now."

He leans forward, his eyes holding mine. "I don't want to leave you alone."

"In that case, send Hael. When you find her." I smile and tip my head a little to one side. "I'll be fine, Vor. I swear it. After everything that's happened, what could possibly frighten me now?"

His eyes search my face, seeking perhaps to pierce my façade of calm. Slowly, he shakes his head. "I fear the moment I leave your sight you'll slip away from me. A dream lost to the brutal realities of the waking world."

I lift his hand to my lips, kiss his knuckles. "I am no dream. And I will be here, awaiting your return." Pushing him from me, I finish in a firm voice: "Go. Be the king Mythanar needs."

He draws a long, steadying breath. Then, grasping me by the back of my head, he pulls me to him, capturing my lips once more. Immediately the connection between us opens wide, shattering the numbness as the intensity of his feelings radiate through me. There's still pain here: fear and anxiety and always that terrible pulse of guilt. But just now, just in this moment, all other feelings are drowned in a flood of pure love.

Almost I succumb to the temptation to grab hold of him, to pull him to me,

to take back everything I just said and keep him here with me. But I don't. And when he breaks away from me and rises from the bed, he doesn't look back. He strides across the debris in the room, steps through the window onto the balcony, never once pausing. As though he knows even a single glance will break his resolve.

The next moment, he mounts his morleth and is gone. Leaving me alone.

It's a strange sensation. One I've not felt to such a degree in a long, long time. Not since that terrible day when my gods-gift awakened, and my soul nearly drowned in the onslaught of other people's emotions. From that time onward I've lived an existence of constant connection, willing or otherwise. Even when I first arrived in Mythanar, and the feelings of the troldefolk lay beyond my reach, I wasn't unaware of them. They were still present, humming on the edge of perception.

This is different. This is emptiness. Hollow and immense.

Panic hums in my veins. I want to fling myself out of this bed, to stagger across the room, shouting for Vor to come back and wrap me in his arms. To cover me in his kisses until I feel our connection awaken once more. Only the weakness in my limbs, the pain still quivering in my bones, keeps me rooted in place. I grip dust-covered blankets with both fists, gritting my teeth. When at last some measure of panic subsides, I catch up my pendant again, lifting it to the level of my eyes.

There is that darkness. Deep in its heart. A stain that wasn't there before. What can it mean? Are my powers fading? Surely my gift cannot have left me entirely if Vor's kiss could reawaken it so. Pinching my lip between my teeth, I turn the stone around in my fingers. There was a time I would have given anything—*anything*—to be rid of this gift, this source of constant agony. But without it, who am I?

"You're gods-gifted. Bestowed with divine blessings intended for divine

purpose.”

I frown. Whose voice is that, rattling around in my head? My own delusion, no doubt. That pathetic part of me that always wanted to believe the gods I’ve served with such devotion couldn’t have made such a terrible mistake when they gifted me.

Pain ebbs at last, like the inevitable turn of the tide. It will return, of course. But for the moment, I can breathe more easily. Rising, I wait for the room to stop tilting, then try a step. My legs seem capable of bearing my weight. The rejuvenating pool repaired my broken ankle, as well as all the other cuts and bruises scoring my body. I whisper a swift prayer of thanks and, a little dizzy, cross to the window and totter out onto the balcony. Gripping the stone rail with both hands, I gaze out over the city. The last time I looked upon this view, the terror of the city folk had risen in a black wave and washed over me, drowning and pulverizing all at once. Now? Nothing. I see the city towers and rooftops, the winding roads. I see the distant cavern walls and the many bridges arching over the chasm which surrounds Mythanar. I see it all. But I do not feel it.

Divine purpose . . .

The chamber door scrapes open, pushing debris across the floor. I whirl in place and grip the window frame. My heart jolts with the hope that Vor has returned, and his name is on my parted lips. But it is Hael who steps into the chamber. Her pale skin looks strangely gray, the soft flesh almost the same shade as the *dorgarag* stone scarring her jaw and part of one cheek. She’s covered in bruises, cuts, and dark blue bloodstains. The last I’d seen her, she was defending me fiercely from cave devils, guarding my way as I climbed to the circle of stones to make my desperate stand.

“Hael!” I exclaim.

Her gaze flashes to meet mine. Deep shadows ring her eyes. She’s always

been fierce and hard, difficult even for my gods-gift to penetrate. But this is something more. Something worse.

“Hael,” I say again, and take a step toward her, leaving the support of the window frame. I wrap my arms around my middle. “Are you all right? Were you hurt in the battle?”

She stares at me. Opens her mouth. Closes it again. Then, very softly, she whispers: “Is it really you?”

Oh. Of course. The last time my loyal bodyguard saw me, I was dead. I swallow and nod. “The gods did not see fit to take me. Not yet. I’m here. I’m alive.”

She shakes her head. “I did not believe it,” she breathes. “I . . . When Vor told me . . . But I thought he must have lost his mind to madness.”

“No, Hael. I—”

Whatever else I might have said is cut off. The great warrior woman collapses suddenly to her knees, burying her face in her hands. I gape at her, shocked. On reflex, I grip my crystal, preparing for some onslaught of terrible emotion. But none comes. I see the signs of a heart torn in two but feel none of it. It is still a terrible sight. Hael is so strong, so proud, so impenetrable. What could possibly bring her so low?

“Hael?” I venture and take a step toward her. Immediately the room pitches again. I stagger and grip the back of a chair as fresh sparks of pain light up my limbs. Blackness narrows my vision, but I squeeze my eyes shut and fight against it, determined not to succumb.

When the pain subsides, my ears are filled with the broken sound of sobs. I draw a deep, steady breath. Crossing the room, I kneel beside the trolde woman and tentatively place a hand on her shoulder. She doesn’t seem to be aware of me. Between her terrible sobs, she growls out troldish words I do not understand. Until one. One single word that stands out to my ear: “Yok!”

A stone sinks in my gut.

Yok. Her brother. The young guardsman.

Something happened to the boy. Something terrible. During the attack. He would have been out there, of course, fighting them, and . . . and . . .

My sacrifice may have saved thousands. But I wasn't quick enough, wasn't strong enough to save him.

I sink down heavily beside Hael. Tears sting my own eyes, tears of pain, tears of frustration, helplessness. Futility. I have nothing to offer, no comfort, no reassurance. Nothing but my presence. So, I put my arm around the trolde woman and hold her as she mutters the same phrase over and over again like a prayer: "*Morar tor Grakanak. Morar tor Grakanak.*"

2

VOR

If I had my way, I would be down in the lower city with my warriors, hunting through the streets to make certain every single *woggha* has truly fled Mythanar. That, or I ought to be tending the wounded or helping to gather the dead and prepare their bodies. Any of these tasks, no matter how grim or dreadful, would be preferable to sitting in my throne room, receiving reports, and making myself visible to the shaken members of my court as they come and go.

And yet, here I sit. My hands clasp the carved dragon heads that make up the arms of the ancient seat from which generations of Shadow Kings have ruled this realm. My face is as hard and immovable as a statue, revealing neither horror nor relief. I am what my people require—stone. Unmoved and unmoving.

Thick blue blood oozes from a gash across Chancellor Houg’s forehead as she kneels at my feet. A trailing droplet makes its way down her temple to her jaw. “My people are still working to produce a final tally of all who died,” she informs me in her customary drone. She might as well be reciting the agenda for an upcoming festival or relating plans for a new mining venture. “There is reason to hope the casualties were not as considerable as initially feared. It seems the *woggha* were drawn toward the palace. The garden specifically. Most did not pause for slaughter.”

A chill travels down my spine. I'm still uncertain what exactly Faraine did or how she did it. I don't know if she knows. But something about the Urzulhar Circle attracted the poisoned *woggha*. There must be a connection of some kind, if only I could see it.

Only when Houg has finished her report do I ask, "And what of the infirmary? Madame Ar must be supported in her efforts."

Houg nods and unconsciously dabs at the wound on her forehead. "The infirmary is overwhelmed at present. That is all I know; I've been unable to get more specific information."

I grunt, my jaw hardening. "See to it that all those with lesser wounds are moved to other chambers. Prince Sul, for instance."

"Oh, come now, Vor. Would you really oust your own dear brother from the warmth and comfort of his sickbed? Who knew you were such a ruthless brute?"

I shift my gaze to the far end of the hall. There stands my half-brother. His arm is bound in a sling, his hair a little shaggy around his gray-cast face, but his eyes are brighter than I've seen them since we pulled him from the lake at Hoknath. And his grin is as irrepressible as ever, an incongruous sight given the shocks which have so recently shaken our city.

"Don't lurk in doorways," I growl and raise one hand to motion him forward. "It's unbecoming behavior in a prince."

"Yes, but I've never been one for becoming behavior, have I?" Sul pushes away from the doorframe and enters the room, managing to achieve an easy saunter despite his bound-up arm. Chancellor Houg rises and steps back from the throne, inclining her head politely as the prince draws near. He tosses her a wink, and she flushes and ducks her chin.

I lift one eyebrow. "You look as though you're feeling better."

He eyes me up and down, his lip curling. "I wish I could return the

compliment.”

I shrug, aware of the many cuts and bruises across my face and body. I’ve not yet found opportunity to have my wounds washed and treated. Such paltry needs pale compared to the other duties demanding my attention. Gods, what a gruesome sight I must have been when Faraine opened her eyes on the pool’s edge! It’s a wonder she didn’t die of fright all over again.

“Thank you, Chancellor,” I say, addressing Houg once more. “Your remarkable efforts during this difficult time have not gone unnoticed. See to clearing the infirmary as best you can. And have Ar check that cut of yours while you’re at it.”

My chancellor bows and makes her exit. Sul and I alone remain in the echoing throne room beneath suspended *lorst* crystals, which illuminate the vast space in a pale silver glow. Sul chose his time to make an appearance well—even ten minutes earlier, the chamber was crowded with courtiers, all demanding my attention. They have since dispersed to various tasks, and the stone walls no longer echo with the reverberations of three dozen angry, frightened voices.

Sul does not bother to bow. He sags to a seat on the dais step, resting his one good arm heavily on his upraised knee. His blasé charm melts away, and his expression more closely matches the pallor of his skin: tense, tired. Hopeless. “There are rumors rippling throughout the palace, Vor,” he says, breaking the silence between us at last.

I offer no answer, careful to maintain my impenetrable mask.

“Rumors that you,” he continues, “our mighty king, were seen fleeing the city in the wake of disaster. That you rode your morleth to the surface world, abandoning the rest of us to our fate. And that you carried your human bride with you.” At these last words, he turns to face me. His eyes are like twin chisels, seeking to crack my stone defenses.

“As I am here before you now, you may safely assume I have abandoned neither my city nor my people.”

Sul shrugs and cups his face in his palm. “I also heard rumor your wife died.”

A knife to the gut. I almost reel at the force of it and grip the dragon head carvings of my throne hard to hold myself in place. Because she did die. She died, and I carried her lifeless corpse in my arms. And I begged the gods to give her back, offered them whatever price. A price that must be paid. Somehow, somewhere. Sooner or later.

My jaw hardens. I won't let regret undermine my resolve. Whatever price the gods demand of me will be worth it. Worth it even just to have a few more hours with her. Should I rise from this throne only to drop dead upon the spot, my life taken as payment for hers, still I would deem the exchange to be in my favor.

But what would my sudden death mean for Faraine? The thought chills me. She would be trapped here in Mythanar. A city on the brink of annihilation. Surrounded by enemies.

“Vor?”

My attention snaps back to my brother's face, caught in his narrow scrutiny. “So,” he says, his voice poisonously soft. “I take it she didn't die then.”

I blink once. Then: “She is alive.”

“And what of that other rumor I heard? My spies were most eager to share it. How she was seen standing in the center of the Urzulhar Circle. How waves of strange magic burst out from the stones and across the city, stopping every *woggha* in its tracks.” He leans toward me, teeth flashing in the *lorst* light. “Is that rumor equally groundless?”

My lips thin. “You already knew she was gods-gifted.”

“Yes. But what god bestowed her gift? And for whose benefit?”

“That is none of your concern.”

“Well, if you say so!” He sits back, a huge smile breaking across his face. “What’s next on the agenda then, brother mine? Will you finish up your business here and head back to your royal chambers to *grundle* the girl until she splits in two? Should I muster our forces for the journey back to the human world, ready to give our lives in her father’s war?”

He’s trying to bait me. He wants me to let his words get under my skin until I lash back. He wants to provoke my violence and, in the same breath, my shame.

But I answer only, “You may leave my presence, Prince.”

“Oh, may I?” Though his words are flippant, Sul stands at once and backs away, never breaking eye contact. As he retreats, his expression grows more solemn. “Remember, Vor, I am sworn to your service. I vowed on the day of your coronation to serve you at whatever cost.”

“Even the cost of your life?”

My words hang between us, along with many unspoken things. Such as my near certainty that it was he, my own brother, who tried to force my hand, to make me murder Faraine. I have no proof, and he knows it. He knows as well that I suspect him. Should evidence ever come to light, he cannot doubt how swift and violent my retaliation will be.

How can any brotherly feeling exist between us under such a shadow?

He continues to back across the empty throne room until he stands beneath the last *lorst* crystal. There he pauses and bows at the waist. “Whatever I do, I do for your sake, Vor.” His voice is quiet but echoes in the stillness. “You are Mythanar’s king. You are my king.”

The words are spoken from a heart which beats with true loyalty. Yet when I look at his face, I struggle to perceive my brother, my faithful

companion, my friend. Treachery infuses every word, every gesture he makes. Or is it only my own paranoia? Is it possible I've breathed too much *raog* poison, and now it warps my senses, making me see betrayal in the face of one I love?

"Go," I growl, my voice low and hard as bedrock. "Take your rumors with you."

"I will, brother," Sul replies, his eyes holding mine for one last terrible moment. "And I'll serve you to the best of my ability. Whether you like it or not."

With that, he turns and slips through the door. Only then do I allow an expletive to breathe out through my tightly-clenched teeth. "*Morar juk!*" I snarl. "Gods above and below damn and take us both."

"Careful what you pray for. You never know when some god might actually be listening."

I spring to my feet, a wordless cry on my lips, catching up my sword with one hand. The throne is a vast thing of black marble, carved in the image of coiling dragons and spreading wings. It takes up most of the dais, an effective screen for those needed to stand at the king's back unseen: bodyguards or advisors, servants with pitchers of *krilge* to refresh the king's palate. I, however, had believed myself to be totally alone. "Who's there?" I demand, brandishing my sword. "Reveal yourself!"

There's a scuffling followed by a series of clinks. The next moment, a head covered in a deep, ratty old hood appears under the arch of one carved wing. I can discern nothing of her face save her jaw and part of her mouth. Even so, my breath catches. "Maylin."

Though her garments are little more than rags, she wears a bounty of crystals strung on a many-stranded necklace. They lie across her shrunken chest, a queen's ransom in glittering gems. They would look appropriate

gracing the magnificent figure of Queen Roh, my father's second wife. On this wizened little creature, leaning heavily on a crooked walking stick, they are pathetically incongruous.

She steps out from behind the throne and lifts her hooded head to gaze about the hall. It is a tremendous space, even by trolde standards. The last stirring brought down part of the ceiling on the south end, but otherwise it remains unscathed. The old woman shakes her head slowly, tongue clucking against her teeth. "Never thought I'd find myself here again. The last time I stood before this throne . . . well . . ." She shudders before turning to me. With a sweep of one hand, she pushes back her hood to reveal a wrinkled face with sharp cheekbones, pinched lips, and a jaw so sharp it might carve marble. Her eyes, blue and sparking like living sapphires, burn into mine.

My throat thickens. I'd know that face anywhere. Such a face no child ever forgets, regardless of the years, the separation, the pain. She's aged, of course. But she remains my mother.

I let my sword arm drop. "What are you doing here, Maylin? You abandoned the Under Realm many turns of the cycle ago. Why return now?"

She tips her head to one side, thin strands of white hair falling across her narrow shoulders. "I brought you something. A present if you will."

"I want nothing you have to offer."

"You'll want this." With that, she reaches into the deep sleeve of her robe and withdraws a stone. It's not unlike the gems on her necklace—pale blue, shining with a faint luminescence. An *urzul* crystal. The old witch holds it out, resting in the palm of her hand. It's about the same length as my little finger, uncarved and unpolished. She hefts it a moment then tosses it to me.

I catch it before it strikes my forehead. "What is this?"

"You might call it a meter," the witch replies, gripping her walking stick in both gnarled hands. "Or a gauge, perhaps."

“I don’t understand.”

She smiles. A host of delicate wrinkles crease the face which has lived in my memory pristine and untouched by time. I cannot bear to look at her. Hastily, I drop my gaze to the crystal. There’s a deep stain in its center. Not something one would notice at first glance, but unmistakable now that I’ve seen it.

“One life,” the witch murmurs, her voice low and so like how I remember it. “One life entered the sacred waters under the watchful eye of the moon. One life entered, but two emerged, while the debt remains unpaid.”

My jaw clenches, teeth grinding. “I was prepared to pay the price. Any price the gods require.”

“And it will be paid. Sooner or later.”

She steps toward me. I spring back and half-raise my sword again. She stops, holding up one hand. “You may think me an unnatural mother, Vor. Perhaps I am. Perhaps the heart that once was warm and beating in my breast has hardened over time. But I am not without sympathy. I care about the fate of Mythanar and its people. I care about you.”

“You have a strange way of showing it.” The words fall bitterly from my tongue. “You walked away from all of us a long time ago and have not shown your face since.”

“There were many reasons why I left. Many more why I returned and made my home on the surface of your world, near enough to keep an eye on the goings on down below.”

“I care nothing for your reasons.”

“No, I’m sure you don’t. You were but a child, forsaken by your mother. I did not expect you to forgive me then. I expect no forgiveness now.”

“Good. For I’m not offering.” I hold the crystal out to her. “Take your gift, witch. I want no part of it.”

“Ah, but I’ll not go until you keep it. Until you understand what it is you now hold in your hand. So, if you want a sure way to be rid of me . . .”

I resist the urge to fling it straight at her wrinkled face. But that would be too great a display of emotion. Instead, I growl, “Why go through all this trouble to bring it down here? What have you done to it? Infused it with some curse?”

“I’ve done nothing.” She holds up a hand, deflecting the accusation. “I took it from the pool after the moon had set. All the crystals that were in that water when the girl’s life was restored bear the same darkness inside. Until the debt is fulfilled, they will not shine clear again.”

“What will happen then?”

The old witch shrugs. “It’s not as though the pool gets used every second moon-turn. I was not alive the last time anyone dared attempt to reclaim a life. I have only that information which I have gathered from dubious sources.”

I inhale slowly, determined that when I speak my voice will be measured. “And how do I pay the price?”

“It will require a life. That is all I know with any certainty.”

“My own?”

“Let us hope not.”

“You’re a mad old woman. Why should I believe a word you say?”

“Perhaps you shouldn’t. But keep the crystal anyway. As a memento if nothing else.”

I look down at the stone. Its glow has intensified since resting in my palm, as though it absorbed my heat and now radiates it back at me. But in its center, the darkness seems almost to move. To pulse. An illusion? A trick? I’m not certain.

“How will I know—” I begin, raising my head. My voice breaks off. I

blink once, twice. Turn to look about the empty space under the pale glow of the hanging *lorst* crystals. I even stride around the stone wings of the dragon throne and peer into the shadowed space behind.

But Maylin is gone.

3

FARAINÉ

So, I am alone. Again.

Hael stands outside my door. I cannot feel her presence and have ceased straining my gods-gift to detect her. Following her breakdown on my floor, Hael walled herself up in layer upon layer of stone before informing me that she would keep watch. Then she made her escape. I don't doubt she is there as promised. But reaching her is out of the question.

At some point during the day, I changed from my black robe into a more modest red gown with front laces which I could manage to put on without a maid's assistance. Now I sit in a chair drawn up to an empty hearth. I do not know how to light the pale moonfire blaze that ordinarily keeps this room illuminated in silvery light. Yrt, the maid who once served me, has not shown her face. I do not know if she even survived the *woggha* attack. Or perhaps she lost loved ones and is even now in mourning. Perhaps . . . perhaps . . .

Meanwhile here I sit. Useless. Separate.

Vor named me his queen while on the banks of that pool with the moon and stars bearing witness. Queen of all Mythanar. But what queen would sit idly by in her chambers, demanding care and coddling while her people pick up the pieces of their shattered lives? Surely there must be something I can do, some way I can help.

I start to rise only for another wave of dizziness to send me sinking back

into the chair. Much of the pain which wracked my body since my reanimation has subsided, but I can't seem to get over the faintness. And I'm hungry. Terribly hungry. A strange sensation considering I was dead mere hours ago. Separated from my body, on the brink of leaving this life, this world altogether. Somehow to feel such a base, physical need seems foolish. But it's very real. I'm hungry. Ravenous even.

The lights illuminating the cavern of Mythanar fade as *dimness* sets in. I lost track of the hours when I was . . . well, dead. If I'm not mistaken, it's been a full day now since the attack and my great feat of magic. Possibly the last magical feat I will ever perform. I twist my crystal pendant on its chain. It's been a part of my life since soon after my gods-gift manifested. I long for its familiar vibrating hum, the calm it's always brought me when my powers grew too great to bear. But if I have no powers anymore, what need have I for calming crystals? I should be grateful. I should—

The door opens.

I turn in my chair, heart leaping. "Vor!"

He steps into the room, pulling the door shut behind him. And oh, gods bless him! He bears a covered food platter. He sets it down on a nearby table then turns to me. His eyes glint in the dim *lorst* light. "You're here," he says. As though until that moment, he didn't believe I would be.

Suddenly I'm not hungry anymore. Not for food at least.

I rise from my seat and, ignoring the little bursts of pain in my feet, my chest, my limbs, hasten toward him. Vor opens his arms, gathers me to him, presses me close as I breathe him in. He still hasn't washed or had his wounds treated, and he smells of death and blood, an unpleasant combination. But I won't let him go. Because underneath those scents, he also smells of *Vor*. Strength and stone, heat and power. Everything that makes him the king and the man I adore. I bury my face in his chest,

trembling as I cling to him.

At last he pushes me back just enough so that he can look down into my face. With a large, gentle hand, he smooths hair back from my forehead. His eyes study me, drink me in. Then he bends his mouth, lets it hover over mine just a moment before touching his lips gently to mine. Immediately the thrumming pulse of connection ripples to my core. Stronger than before, more needy, more insistent. I don't know if it's magic or pure instinct. I only know that I need him. All of him. As much as my body and soul can take.

I grip the back of his head and pull him down into my kiss. My lips open, my teeth part, inviting him in deeper. He answers my eagerness. His tongue enters my mouth, tangling with mine. A groan rumbles in his throat. I tremble at the sound, all those pulsing vibrations of connection between us opening wider into a channel of emotion. I feel his pain. I feel his need. I feel his pleasure as though it's mine. Because it is mine. My pain, my need, my pleasure. All are one with him.

With a gasp, he pulls back. His eyes burn as they stare down into mine. "Faraine," he says, his voice thick and low, "are you sure—"

"No," I pant, gripping his face with both hands. "Don't talk. Please."

I pull his mouth to mine again. He doesn't resist, doesn't fight. We both know what we need from each other right now. Need with the same absolute necessity of air.

So he kisses me. And I kiss him. If one can even describe such a joining with a word so tender, so simple as *kiss*. This is more than that—a battle to be fought together, win or lose. A bending and bowing, almost to the point of breaking. Grasping and gasping, nearly frantic in the knowledge that this moment, this *now*, may easily be our last. There is no time to waste. There is only whatever we can take and make of each other with all the courage our hearts and bodies may summon.

I let my hands slide from his face down his throat, across shoulders, while his hands press into my spine, travel up the back of my neck, twist in my hair. I mold my body against him, moving and rubbing until he groans, a throaty, almost primal growl. One of his hands slips to the front of my gown, teasing and pulling at my breast until my nipple is hard. His palm is warm through the silky folds of fabric. But it's not enough.

"More," I whisper, even as his kisses trail across my jaw, and his tongue and teeth explore the sensitive skin of my throat. "More, *more*."

Responding to my pleas, he grabs the front laces of my gown in a twisted handful. Rather than taking the time to untie them, he rips hard, tears the delicate fabric so that it falls open. I suck in a breath of surprise. But then his hands are on my bare flesh, and this is better, so much better. His thumb plays with my nipple even as his kisses hasten down the column of my neck, my collarbone. He kneels before me, yanking the gown down from my shoulders, trapping my arms in tight folds of fabric so that I'm pinned in his grasp. Taking my nipple in his mouth, he sucks and teases with the tip of his tongue. I lean into him, helpless against the waves of pleasure—his and mine—crashing over me.

We don't make it to the bed. There's a soft skin rug on the floor, and Vor draws me down onto it, covering my body with his. The warmth of his bare torso pressed against mine is a kind of heaven. I run my hands up and down his muscular back, noting the many cuts and ridges of scar tissue, glorying in them as part of his overall magnificence. My bodice is bunched around my waist, and soon my skirts are hiked up to join it as his hand explores the shape of my knees, my thighs. He trails a finger along my center, and I arch my back, my body responding to that touch with a jolt of pure heat. I feel again those strange sensations he called to life once before. Before our world crumbled around us, before he left me, before I died. Before I'd thought I'd

lost all chance of claiming his love.

We have another chance. By the grace and mercy of the gods, we have found one another again. And I won't lose him now.

I slide my hand down the front of his trousers, taking hold of his swelling length through the fabric. Vor inhales sharply and pulls back. One hand catches my wrist in a firm, implacable grasp. Reluctantly he draws his lips back from my skin, gazing into my eyes. "Faraine," he says, his voice husky, raw.

Tears rise hot and slip through my lashes. So, this is how it must be. Even now, after everything we've endured. After all those declarations on the edge of life and death, still he must withhold himself from me.

Vor sees the hurt in my face. Immediately heartache and regret rush from his soul. He hates this gulf between us as much as I do, more even. But his resolve is stronger. "Faraine," he says, "you are my wife, my queen. No matter what may come."

"But not . . . legally," I whisper.

"Laws be damned!" His voice is almost savage. He bends, captures my lips in his, kissing me hard in a clash of teeth and tongue and passionate resolve. When at last he draws back, staring down at me, we both gasp for breath. "In every sense that matters," he says, "I am yours, and you are mine. Forever, Faraine. To death and beyond."

More tears escape to slide down my cheeks. "But you dare not bind yourself to my father." I loathe speaking those words, bringing the image of Larongar here into this space that is meant only for the two of us. But it is a truth we cannot ignore. Ours is not a marriage of individuals, but of nations. Of worlds.

A surge of desperation washes over me. He wants so much to please me, to stop my tears. War wages inside him, as hot and furious as the ache he

feels for me. But would I force him to choose me over Mythanar and the lives of his people? Knowing as I do what a poor risk it is? I am not the valued daughter. I am the broken one. The disposable one. I am not worth it. I must be satisfied with what Vor can safely give. Grateful even. Gods above, how could I not be grateful? I died not twenty-four hours ago! And this man, this warrior, this king, fought with everything he had to bring me back from the dead.

I cup his cheek against my palm, blinking back tears. Then I draw him to me, kiss him again. Sweetly, gently. I let the warmth of his love flow across our connection, back and forth, in time with the pulse of my reawakened gift. When at length I draw back, I whisper, "I want you, Vor. That is all. I want you and whatever you're willing to give me."

He presses his forehead against mine, breathes out a terrible sigh. "I would take away your tears forever were it in my power."

But what good is there in lingering on what we cannot have and cannot give? I won't waste these precious moments with grief. I pull his mouth to mine, taste the blood, the death, the desperation on his tongue. I receive it, all of it, and the urgency it brings. My chest rises and falls heavily as his ravenous mouth leaves mine and travels between my breasts. He pulls my gown down over my hips, away from my legs, leaving me naked on that fur rug. Now he bends and kisses my stomach then ventures lower still as I writhe and moan in anticipation of what is coming. The last time had felt so unreal, the sensations he called to life in my body like nothing I'd ever imagined. I ache to experience it again. Both my flesh and my heart cry out in anguished desire.

He kneels between my thighs, his fingers running up and down my center, gazing down at me. He parts my flesh, venturing deeper, smiling as more soft gasps escape my lips. "Faraine," he murmurs. "Faraine, you are so beautiful.

My delicate human flower. It was cruel of me to take you so far from the sun of your world. To drag you into these shadows, this darkness.”

“I wanted to come.” A flush steals up my cheeks. After all the deceits that led me to his arms, to speak these words now feels almost sinful. But I cannot help it. There’s no room for falsehood here. The truth must be known. “I wanted you.”

At this he smiles, his teeth flashing in the dim *lorst* light. “Gods alone know why!”

Then he catches my hips, hoisting me up to his mouth. I hook my legs over his shoulders, arching my back as his lips and tongue find my hot core. I close my eyes, lost in the sensations of my body and the storm of emotions rolling out from him. One of my hands tangles in his hair, while the other I fling back over my head, searching for something to grasp onto. First little whimpers then deep, guttural groans burst from my lips, from my soul. I’m lost in his feelings—all longing and power and love mingled together in a maelstrom of blinding light. It overwhelms me like my gods-gift, but sweeter, purer.

I’d thought I’d lost him forever. Yet he is here. And we are together. Whatever may come, this moment will live on, an eternity of bliss unmarred by death or time.

I lean into him and his hungry mouth until everything mounting inside me bursts at last. Pure heat washes through me. My eyes flare wide as I cry out his name. All around the room, the walls themselves light up with the answering pulse of all the crystals hidden in the stone. Living crystals, glowing and reverberating in rhythm with my enraptured soul.

He continues pleasuring me until I finally slip my legs down from his shoulders and draw his mouth back up to mine. His lips are warm and wet and swollen, and my body shivers in aftershocks of delight under his hands,

his tongue, his nibbling teeth. “Everything about you is so delicious,” he murmurs against my earlobe, making me giggle in response to the tickle of his breath. “I could make a meal of you every day of my life and never want for other sustenance.”

“Are you sure you’d not grow bored on such a diet?” I laugh, wrapping my arms around his neck.

“Never,” he growls and nips my shoulder as though in proof.

I sigh, replete in his love, lost in his caresses. But something is missing. Something vital. “Vor,” I sigh, running my hands down his silky hair and across those glorious shoulders. “Vor, I want to give to you as you’ve given to me.” I take his cheeks in my hands again, pull him back up to meet my eyes. “I . . . I was told . . . Before I came here, I was given instruction in how to . . . to please my husband. There’s something I might try. If you would like.”

A smile plays across his lips, a knowing glint in his eye. But he shakes his head. “You needn’t do anything for me, little wife. Pleasing you is pleasure enough for me.”

He means it. I hardly understand it, scarcely know how to believe it. But the truth is all too evident, revealed in every exposed feeling he shares with me in this moment. He means what he says. He loves me. Truly loves me. Beyond every expectation I’ve ever dared harbor. Beyond any hope of finding belonging in this or any world. He loves me with a pure, sacrificial love that would put me before any need of his own.

This knowledge only strengthens my resolve. “Please,” I say. “I want to try.”

This time when I move to unlace his trousers, he does not stop me. Rather he assists me, standing as I slide them down his hips, over his well-shaped thighs and muscular calves. At last I behold my husband in his full glory. I’ve

seen most of him already, admired and felt intimidation by the greatness and majesty of his body and bearing. But nothing had quite prepared me for this sight. Nothing fully could.

I'm hardly a *maiden* anymore. Technically speaking I've not lost my maidenhead, but we've already done such things as to make me feel I can safely leave that label behind me. Nonetheless, a blush steels up my face. I've never seen a naked man before. It's very strange. And he's very beautiful.

"I . . . I think it might be easier if you were to lie down," I say.

He smiles again, amused by my shyness. "Whatever you wish, my love." He stretches himself out on the fur rug beside me, tucking me against his great body. I lie there for some moments, tracing my fingers across the lines of his torso and abdomen, exploring the definition of muscle and the many scars. After a long contemplative silence, he rolls over and kisses me again, pulling back only to murmur, "You needn't do anything you don't wish to, Faraine. It is enough simply to be here with you."

"I know." Pushing back, I sit up and look at him, stroke his strong, chiseled face. "This is what I want."

With those words I begin to kiss him. Timidly at first, little explorations with my lips, my tongue, my teeth. I want to mimic what he did for me, sensitive to each reaction he makes. Certain places I touch make him gasp, make his body and soul sing in response. I take my time, luxuriating in this moment with him, this world of ours. This place where we unmake and create each other by turns.

"Ah, Faraine!" he gasps at last as my kisses continue to venture lower. "You'll drive me mad!"

I smile.

Then I take him in my mouth.

It's odd at first. Like all of this has been. For a moment I doubt myself. He

is so large and, despite the detailed instructions I was given preceding my wedding night, I'm uncertain I'll be able to give him what he needs. But his groans of pleasure and the feelings vibrating from his soul don't lie. I take heart and pull and tease, let the tip of my tongue flicker and play. It's oddly delightful, having him like this. Feeling his every reaction to my touch, experiencing this power of mine to give him such pleasure. Physical pleasure, yes. But so much more as well. He could find release for his needs elsewhere if he chose. But what I give him—my presence, my love, my delight and adoration—that is for us alone. No one else can give him this, no one in all the worlds.

It does not take long. He cries out in release, and in that same moment, the intensity of his feelings shoots straight through me, making me gasp. My body lights up as though his pleasure were mine, and all around us, the crystals in the walls burst into a symphony of colors, filling my head with dancing lights and a wondrous, multitudinous harmony of song.

4

VOR

When she's in my arms, the world feels right once more.

I remember fearing a human bride would simply be too . . . small. That I'd spend all my time worried about crushing her with my great, lumbering trolde body. But Faraine, delicate and fragile though she is, fits like she was made to be here beside me. Tucked up close with her hand tracing little patterns across my chest, drawing lines between the constellations of my scars.

I tip my head, catch her bi-colored gaze. She smiles, and my heart jolts, ready to stop from pure joy. Her smile is so lovely—all the more so for its rarity on her solemn face. A man could live and die in the light of that smile and never want for any other.

And I'd thought I'd lost her. Forever.

A gurgling rumble interrupts the stillness of the chamber. "Oh!" Faraine gasps and places a hand across her bare abdomen. "Pardon me!"

I smile and run a finger along the curve of her breast finally coming to rest atop her hand. "You must be starving. Did no one think to feed you?"

She shakes her head. "I didn't want to be a bother."

I press my lips to the top of her head. "You are their queen," I murmur into her hair. "It is their honor to be bothered by you." When I look down at her again, however, her eyelashes have dropped, and all trace of that smile is gone. A shadow hovers across her brow. She pushes away from me, sits up.

She's still naked; nothing but a hank of golden hair falling across her shoulder offers any covering. She wears her pendant too, that little *urzul* crystal which I never see her without. It rests against her heart, glittering faintly.

Gods on high, but she's beautiful! I could lie here an age and simply watch her, every little movement she makes. The tilt of her head, the tension in her jaw when she swallows, the swell of her breast as she breathes. Though I wouldn't end up merely *watching* for long; other urges would soon take over, that compulsion to fill up as much delight into whatever little time we have left.

But her stomach growls again, and her gaze flicks to the food platter. "Here," I say and hastily rise to my feet. "Allow me." I don't bother to cover myself as I cross the room to fetch the platter. Lifting the cover, I reveal an assortment of fruits, mushrooms, and a small loaf of soft bread. Things I gathered from the kitchen, assured by the cook that they were imported from Gavaria to tempt the palate of my human bride.

I return to the rug with my offering. Much to my disappointment, Faraine has slipped back into the red dress I'd ripped off her. The laces are all broken and loose down her front, and the bodice only partially covers her lovely breasts. That's a blessing in any case. "Thank you," she says as I set the platter before her on the rug. She surveys the meal. "You're very thoughtful. I know you must have been terribly busy throughout the day."

"More than you can imagine." I stretch beside her on the rug once more, resting on one elbow. "But you were never far from my thoughts. It was all I could do not to run to you any spare moment I chanced to draw breath."

She takes a bite of mushroom and soft bread, chews. Closes her eyes. "Is it to your liking?" I ask.

She nods but seems to choke a little on her mouthful. "I'm sorry," she

says. "It is good, and I am ravenous, it's just . . . well, my body doesn't seem to know what to do anymore."

"It will take time to relearn everything." I stretch out my hand, trail a finger gently along the curve of her jaw. "And to learn new things as well."

She smiles at that, catches hold of my hand, and presses it against her cheek. That gesture is almost enough to make me toss that platter aside and do everything in my power to reawaken a different hunger inside her. But that would be selfish. She is exhausted. And she's already given me so much of herself. From now on her needs must be foremost in my heart.

So, I hold my lust in check, and she kisses my palm before returning to her meal. Once she's managed a few more bites, she asks quietly, "What became of the *woggha*? Was . . . was the damage very bad?"

I grimace and look away. She doesn't need to know everything I saw and heard and dealt with today. So much death and destruction. So much fear. And worse than any of these, the hopelessness which permeates the heart of the Under Realm. Mythanar has always been a bastion of strength against foes or threats. Where can the people turn if monsters so easily invade their greatest city? "It would have been much worse," I say, my voice low. "Many more would have been lost were it not for you."

Faraine shudders and sets what's left of her meal aside. I reach out and take her hand. "Faraine? My love, what's wrong?"

She shakes her head. I want to press her, to urge her to tell me, but not if she's unwilling. I bite my tongue, waiting as she touches her crystal pendant on its chain, drawing my attention as she turns it round in her fingers. There's a stain deep in its center. My brow puckers. "Was that there before?" I ask.

"What?" She looks up, surprised.

"That." I point. "That darkness."

"My crystal? No." She frowns, looking down at the stone, her mouth

pinched in a pensive line. “It seems to have gone cloudy. I don’t understand why.”

Instead of answering, I sit up and reach for my discarded trousers, tossed carelessly to one side in the heat of passion. Fishing into the pocket, my fingers close around the sharp edges of a crystal. I hold it out for Faraine’s inspection. She blinks, surprised, and plucks it up in her delicate hand. “Where did you get this?” she asks at length, lifting her gaze to mine.

I don’t like to mention Maylin. I cannot say why, but some instinct tells me it would be best to keep Faraine and the witch who is my mother as far from each other as possible. “It came from the pool,” I reply, the truth if not the whole truth. “The sacred pool in which your life was restored. I believe it is a sign from the gods.”

“What do you mean?”

I lean forward, run my fingers through my hair, pushing it back from my face. The last thing I want is to burden Faraine. Not when she is still so weak. Not when she’s already given so much. But I can’t keep this from her. “It is likely that once the price of your life is paid, the darkness in the crystal will clear.”

Her eyes widen. “What price, Vor?”

“The life price.”

She stares at me, horror slowly filling up her gaze. Then, in an accusing voice: “*Your* life?”

I rub a hand down the back of my neck. “Well, yes. I assume so.” Her gaze is so hot, so furious, I scarcely dare meet it. “I offered my life in exchange for yours. Truth be told, I did not expect to return from those waters alive.”

The rest of her meal forgotten, Faraine stands up, spilling her plate. She stares down at me for a moment, Maylin’s crystal clenched tight in one fist.

Then abruptly she turns and strides for the window. “Faraine?” I call after her. She doesn’t answer. She stands there, silhouetted by the gentle *dimness* glow, a shadow without feature. Suddenly her shoulders shake. A shuddering intake of breath breaks in a sob.

I’m on my feet in an instant, crossing the room to her. I wrap my arms around her, pull her back against me, and nuzzle her lovely golden hair. “Faraine, my love, it was worth it. It was worth any risk to bring you back. The mere chance that I might save you would drive me to far greater lengths than this!”

She shakes her head and tries to speak several times before managing, “How long do we have? Do you know?”

“I know nothing. This is all new territory for me.”

Turning in my arms, she looks up at me. Tears shine in her strange eyes, gleam on her cheeks. “Perhaps it will be me,” she whispers. “Perhaps the gods have only granted me a little stolen time.”

“No!” Wrath boils up inside me, a volcanic pressure ready to burst. “That cannot be. I made the bargain for your *life*. Not for a few days, but for a lifetime to be lived. I will settle for nothing less.”

She tips her head back, her lips parted. “Vor,” she says softly, “who are we to demand anything of the gods?”

She is right. I have no words, no contradiction I might make. But in my heart, I resist. I defy the gods themselves to take her from me.

Rather than speak, I bow my head, catch her mouth with mine. Let the inferno of my ardor overwhelm all words, all fears, all protests. And as she gives in to me, as her body once more ignites with passion, we forget all else and let this world and every other fade away.

5

FARAINÉ

When I wake to the brightening lights of *lusterling*, Vor is gone.

We did eventually make it to the bed last night. And sleep as well. But never once did we stop holding one another. When not actively making love, we would simply rest with our arms around each other, talking of little, touching, kissing. Being. As though we could somehow make the night last forever. As though we could fit an entire lifetime of love into those few, too-short hours.

But we fell asleep at last. And now, as I wake and turn to the empty spot beside me on my bed, I am filled with the dreadful ache of loss. He must have snuck out very quietly, conscious of my exhaustion, courteous and concerned as always. I wish he hadn't. I wish he'd woken me with a kiss, whispered that he loved me one more time. Though I might not have let him go if he had.

I stretch my naked limbs, still sore from my ordeal of death and reanimation, but stronger now. Opening my spirit up to Vor, receiving his emotions into me, did wonders for my healing. Memory of our time together fills my head. Is it wrong to dwell on such things after everything that's happened? All those lives so savagely lost . . . and yet somehow, amid death and destruction, Vor and I have found something beautiful together. If we don't foster beauty where we can, nurture it and encourage it to grow, what is

the point of living? Of fighting?

My body is warm and alive in all the places Vor's lips, hands, and tongue explored last night. I feel renewed—and not just by the pleasure he called to life in me, though that was certainly wondrous. But this is more than that. The connection between our souls lit me up from the inside.

My smile dims suddenly, some of the warm glow in my chest dulling. He still will not consummate this marriage. Of course, I know why. I understand the reasons and realities, everything consummation would mean. I cannot blame him for making this choice, for holding back and resisting the dangerous trap my father has laid out for him. But can I be satisfied with what we have? Knowing our marriage will have no legal standing in the eyes of either my people or his? A small part of me protests the wrongness of this. And there's the added sorrow of knowing that, so long as things remain as they are, we will never be able to create life together. Only love.

Is love enough? Is Vor enough?

These questions plaguing me, I rise from my bed and smile ruefully at the gown tossed in pieces across the room. The second time Vor tore it from my body, he'd made certain it would not be going back on again. We'd spent the rest of the night entangled in one another, bare flesh against bare flesh. It felt more right than I can express. I did not feel naked with him anymore. I felt *whole*.

Now he's gone. And I am cold. So, I venture to the wardrobe across the chamber and withdraw a trolde-style gown tailored to human proportions. It's a deep blue, trimmed in gems that burn with living fire. Worth a king's ransom in my own world. I pull it on and am just fastening the laces under one arm when there's a knock on the door. "Enter," I say, turning.

The door opens. Hael steps through, carrying a covered platter like the one Vor brought last night. "From the king," she says, her voice dull and deep.

“He has commanded that you shall eat this day or heads will roll.”

“Oh. Thank you.” I take a seat at the little table in the center of the room. Its surface is battered by debris which fell during the last stirring, but it’s still serviceable. Hael slides the platter before me and lifts the lid to reveal another human-style meal prepared just for me. I open my mouth, intending to ask Hael about Yrt, my maid. Something about her face makes me think better of my words, however. On impulse I try to reach out and touch her feelings only to be reminded that I cannot. Last night when Vor and I were intertwined, I’d started to believe my gods-gift was returning. In the cold light of *lusterling*, it would seem I was mistaken. There’s nothing there.

I bite my lower lip and study the meal before me, the fruits and pastries, the soft bread and creamy butter. Though I’d eaten little enough of last night’s fare, and my insides feel cavernously hollow, it’s hard to summon much appetite. I’m supposed to be dead, after all. Dead like Hael’s own brother. Yok. He will never again enjoy the simple delight of breakfast. Why should I?

I shake my head. It will not honor Yok for me to punish myself over the will of the gods. Steeling my resolve I pop a berry onto my tongue, roll it around, crush it with my teeth. Let the juices slide down my throat. Each sensation—taste, touch, smell—is so much more visceral than I recall from before death. I can’t even call it a pleasure, it’s so overwhelming.

“Where is the king today?” I ask once I’ve swallowed.

“Seeing to the needs of the city.” Hael stands stolidly at attention as though waiting to receive battle orders. I nod, though her answer is vague. I wish I could be out there with Vor, could help him somehow. But I know so little of Mythanar and its people, I would only be in his way.

A sick knot of futility coils in my gut. While Vor was with me, while I held him in my arms, I could ignore such sensations. Now I’m left strangely

hollow. Why would the gods send me back into this world only for me to return to this same prison-like chamber, waiting for someone else's permission to act, to live? I hate it, this inadequacy which has dominated most of my life.

But what use has Vor for a broken queen?

"Will there be anything else?" Hael asks, drawing my attention back to her. Her spine is straight as a spear haft, her face carved from a block of granite.

"No, Hael," I say softly. "You may go." She turns to leave. Before she quite makes it to the door, I call after her, "Wait."

She stops. Looks back at me with unblinking eyes.

"I . . . I know what you're feeling."

Something almost imperceptible about her expression tightens. She does not speak, merely waits, frozen. I have no choice but to continue even as I curse myself for not holding my tongue. "I lost both my sisters," I say, my voice little more than a whisper. "They were . . . they were killed. And I was not with them. I had always watched over them, always protected them. But in the end, I was not there. And they were taken from me." A tear falls from my cheeks, splashes on the table. Hastily, I brush the heel of my hand across my face. "I know what it is you're feeling. You think if you had been present, surely there must have been something you could have done to prevent his death, some way to turn back the tides of fate—"

"Have you a point to make, Princess?"

I stop, the words on my tongue cut off abruptly. Then I drop my gaze to my hands, folded demurely in my lap. "I only want you to know you are not alone."

Hael stands before me, a powerful wall of a warrior. Unbreakable, unmovable. To imagine such a woman on her knees, openly weeping is

impossible—I'm almost certain I invented that moment of weakness. At long last she draws a breath through her nostrils. "We are all of us alone. The only question is, will we be soft and weak, susceptible to the blows of pain, suffering, and death? Or will we be stone?"

With that, she turns, steps from the room, and shuts the door firmly behind her.



When Vor returns at last, *dimness* is already beginning to fall in the Under Realm. I stand in the window, watching the crystals of the cavern ceiling fade out one after the other, idly spinning my pendant around in my fingers. The door opens behind me. I whirl in place. My eyes fasten on his beautiful face.

The next moment, I'm across the room, a glad cry on my lips as he folds me deep into his embrace. He kisses the top of my head, my temple, his mouth finding its way down to mine at last. I hold him close, drink in his warmth and presence. When he draws back for air, eyes closed, he utters a deep sigh. "Ah, Faraine! Now at last I may breathe again."

I smile up at him. My head throbs a little; our kiss opened the remnants of my gods-gift, and his pain and sorrow flowed straight into me, all the heaviness of the burdens he'd borne throughout the day. It hurts. But it's a relief to know my gods-gift has not abandoned me entirely, because that means I might be able to help him in turn, might be able to alleviate some of his turmoil.

"Come, Vor," I say, taking his hand as I try to draw him further into the room, away from the door.

But Vor shakes his head. When I frown, he pulls me back to his chest, wraps his arms around me, and rests his cheek against my head. "Oh, little wife!" he murmurs. "You don't know how I long to stay here with you this *dimness*."

“Can you not?” My heart sinks.

“My court gathers tonight to honor those who died in the attack. It is my duty as king to usher their souls into the Deeper Dark and their final rest. The ceremony may take many hours. I will not be able to return to you until *lusterling*.”

“Oh.” I let him press my head against his heart once more. For a moment, I simply listen to its beating. Then my brow hardens. “And what of me?”

His arms tighten slightly. “I’ll come to you as soon as I can. And I will make it up to you. As many times as you desire.”

There’s a smile in his voice, but I press my hands against his broad chest and step out of the circle of his arms. My heart is like a stone beating against my ribcage. “You told me I am your queen.”

He frowns. “You are, Faraine. My one and only queen, now and forever. Can you doubt it?”

“Your queen should be with you. At the ceremony.”

His face shutters. Love still shines in his eyes, but now his expression is shadowed, wary.

I lift my chin, my hands forming fists. “I should be at your side, Vor. Mourning with you and your people. *My people*.” I hold his gaze, but he’s pulling away from me, leaving me adrift in a dark and dangerous sea.

“It is a precarious time in Mythanar,” he says. “There are . . . factions. Intrigues. Games being played of which you know nothing.”

“I’m not a child, Vor.” The words bite sharp, stinging my tongue as I speak them. “I am aware of the turmoil in Mythanar. I know there were those in your council who urged you to behead me. What’s more, there were some who tried to drive your hand via poison. I am not a fool. It was my life on the line, after all.”

“It is your life on the line still.”

“Yes. It is.” I take a step nearer to him. “But if I am your queen, I should stand beside you. I can help.”

“You have already helped.” He reaches out to take my hand. “You gave everything. You gave your life! You owe nothing, my love. Not to me. Certainly not to Mythanar.”

“Who said anything about owing?” Part of me wants to yank my hand out of his, angry at this barrier he’s putting up between us all in the name of love. Instead, I press his fingers. If only I could somehow force my own feelings into him, to make him understand. “This is *my* life, Vor. I spent so many years hidden away because of the inconvenience I posed to those who viewed me as weak, useless. But I am stronger than they believed. Were you not the one who said only a coward would keep such strength hidden behind closed doors?”

His eyes widen. It doesn’t take a gods-gift to read his shock, horrified at having his own words hurled back at him. I press my point home. “I am not to be wrapped in silk and stored away for safekeeping. I have proven myself.”

“It’s not so simple, Faraine.” Vor lets go of my hand, turning away from me. He paces across the room to the dark hearth, staring into the shadows of the empty fireplace. “I didn’t bring you back to life only to throw you to the devils. And that’s what I would be doing if I pushed you under the eyes of my court just now, so soon after this crisis.”

“So, you will insist on holding me captive?”

“No!” He whirls around, silvery hair wafting across his shoulders. Anguish illuminates his eyes. It’s almost enough to make me back down. But I won’t give up whatever advantage I have.

“Then you must give me the freedom of my own choice. Let me decide what risks I will take.”

He shakes his head. "I need you to trust me. A little longer. My people . . . They have no idea what you've done for them, how indebted they are to you. I hope in time they will come to understand, and you will receive the honor you deserve."

"What time?"

Silence follows my words, sharp as the falling stroke of the headsman's ax. Because we both know the truth: there is no time. His city, his world, is in grave danger. Whatever burdens he sought to carry today, they have only added to his overall hopelessness and despair, not relieved it. The magic I enacted in the Urzulhar Circle may have put a stay on Mythanar's doom. But doom is coming, nonetheless.

Vor sags. Mighty though he is, in that moment, he looks ready to break. "Faraine," he says at last, his voice ragged on the edges. "Faraine, you hold my heart, my soul. Everything that is mine to give. But I am still King of the Under Realm. I must do what I believe is right for my people, regardless of my own feelings in the matter."

"And what of me?" I persist. "Am I not queen?"

"You are my queen."

Mere hours ago, he'd declared me Queen of Mythanar. Apparently, whatever happened today was enough to make him regret those words.

I turn from him, wrap my arms around myself. A sob catches in my throat. I look around the room, this chamber which has been my prison. Last *dimness* it had become a haven, a paradise, fit for only the two of us.

But I will never be what Vor needs. Though he loves me, he will never fully choose me.

Suddenly he is behind me, slipping his arms around me, burying his face in my hair. "Faraine!" he moans. "Faraine, my heart! If I could free myself of the burden of this crown I would. But to drag you out into the open would be

to put you in danger. Would you ask that of me? Would you require me to risk what I love most in all the worlds?"

I don't answer. Because I know he speaks the truth. We are both of us prisoners in our different ways. So, I don't resist when he turns me to face him, when he cups my cheeks and kisses me. I even relent enough to kiss him back. As that vibration of souls opens between us once more, I feel again his pain, his fear. But always his love. That I do not doubt anymore.

I pull back. His feelings are too painful, throbbing against my skull. "Go," I whisper.

He shakes his head. "I cannot leave you like this."

I reach up, stroke his cheek. "I understand." My voice is heavy, but my words are true. Of course, he must choose his people, his kingdom. He could never be the man I loved if he were to choose otherwise. "I understand," I say again, more firmly this time, "and I will look for you at *lusterling*."

"Hael will stand guard over you until then," he says. "She is at watch even now. You will be safe."

"I know." I let my hand slip from his cheek to his chest, right above his beating heart. Then, tipping back my head, I grant him a last gentle kiss. "Go," I murmur against his lips. "Be the king Mythanar needs."

Though his reluctance is palpable, he lets me go and backs away. He does not break my gaze until he reaches the chamber door. There he turns at last to face the world. I have a glimpse of Hael standing in the outer passage just before the door shuts behind him.

And I am alone. Again.

"Damn," I hiss, tears springing to my eyes. Teeth clenched, I stare up at the stalactites overhead. I wanted him to choose me. Gods on high, I wanted him to see me, to know me, and, in that knowing, to choose me. To believe I am strong enough to withstand whatever fate may come.

But he cannot. The loss he experienced at my death is still too recent, and he is afraid.

I, however, am not. Not anymore. Any fear I might harbor of his court and their scorn is counterbalanced by a much worse fear of freedom lost. I cannot live this way.

My fists clench even as a rush of determination burns in my breast. If Vor is unwilling to risk my life, I will have to risk it for both of us.

6

VOR

“There you are, brother. I was beginning to fear I’d have to step in for you.”

I halt under the arched entrance of the Kathu Grotto, gazing into the dim space. I had expected it to be empty save for Umog Zu, the priestess, who waits on the edge of the pool. I was not prepared to meet my brother’s gaze.

Sul stands between me and the priestess, his face half-lit in the dim glow emanating from the small *lorst* crystals inset in the wall. His eyes are bright and a little too sharp, and his words ring in my ears. Ordinarily I would not take those words for anything serious. Now, with unrest running rampant through our stricken city, whispers have reached my ears. Whispers that old King Gaur’s half-blood son is not trolde enough to rule the Under Realm. Whispers that his full-blooded second son would make a better king in these dire times.

“You must make a demonstration of strength,” Lord Gol, one of my ministers, urged me only this *lusterling*. “Perform the *Vulug Ugdth*. Let your people see you summon the strength of your forefathers and prove your power. Open up the galleries, bring the city folk in to bear witness. They will see and they will talk, and word will swiftly spread throughout the Under Realm, putting to rest this dangerous chatter once and for all.”

“And what if I fail?” I asked, my voice cold and hard.

Gol merely raised an eyebrow. “I would advise Your Majesty to succeed.”

Easier said than done. The *Vulug Ugdth*—the Song of the Dead—is an ordeal I’ve not yet attempted. The last time this ceremony was performed in Mythanar, it was my father who took up the Death Stone. This was following the Triune Devastation, a great tragedy in our recent history. Three mighty cities were lost on the same day to the worst stirring ever to shake the Under Realm. Countless lives were lost. In the aftermath King Gaur took it upon himself to perform the *Vulug Ugdth* as a means of reuniting his people. He entered the sacred *yunkathu* waters and, before the eyes of his court, channeled the resonance of all those lost souls, guiding them to their final resting place in the Deeper Dark.

I remember how strong he looked, holding the Death Stone aloft over his head. But as the hours passed, his arms began to quake, and sweat beaded his brow. I feared he would drop the stone, and the ceremony would be spoiled, leaving all those dead souls doomed to wander the caverns of the Under Realm without rest. But in the end, the glowing heart of the Death Stone darkened, indicating the safe passage of the dead. Though Father stumbled as he climbed back out of the sacred pool, he did not drop his burden.

When Gol presented his idea, memories flooded my mind. The sight of my father’s great body shuddering under the weight of that stone. The long, aching, terrifying hours as I and the rest of King Gaur’s court listened to the endless chant of the *Vulug Ugdth*. Wondering, hoping, fearing . . .

Somehow it had not occurred to me that I might one day stand in my father’s place. That more tragedy would befall this kingdom, and I, as its king, would be required to uphold the ancient traditions and be the symbol of strength and god-ordained leadership my people need. Is it a role I can live up to? Or will my half-human blood betray me?

These fears echo in the back of my head now as I stop and meet my brother’s gaze. “What are you doing here?” I growl, the words nearly lost to

the thunder of the falls.

Sul's brow puckers, an innocent expression. "It is tradition for the king's nearest male relative to attend him at sacred ceremonies."

He needn't remind me. We both know the traditions well enough. It was Sul who stood beside me in the moments before my wedding swim as well. Of course, he should be with me.

Ignoring the knot of tension in my gut, I step into the damp darkness of Kathu Grotto and allow Sul to aid me as I shrug out of the gem-encrusted ceremonial robe. I stand with only a *pari* cloth draped about my loins, my body bare, exposed to all the waiting eyes of my court and kingdom. They must see me perform this feat without trickery of any kind. They must see that it is by my own strength I bear the deaths of my people and usher them on to their final rest.

Turning from Sul, I face Umog Zu, who stands with the falls behind her. Beyond that curtain of water awaits the great hall where my court is gathered. Lords and ladies of the realm, priests and priestesses, not to mention the city folk packed into the upper galleries.

And the dead. Let us not forget them. Hopeful, waiting. Desperate.

I cannot fail them.

My gaze fixes on the Death Stone clasped in Umog Zu's hands, held before her heart. It is a sphere of polished *urzul* crystal without blemish. In its depths shines a pale light which sometimes seems to flicker as though living. It looks so delicate, like an iridescent soap bubble ready to float away. But though the priestess stands immobile as a statue, her arms visibly strain. It is said the one who bears the Death Stone bears the weight of all the undead souls not yet laid to rest.

I moisten my dry lips. Part of me wants to turn to Sul for support. But distrust stands like a wall of marble between us. He has become a stranger to

me, all the more dangerous because he wears a familiar face. He may stand at my right hand; but in truth I am alone.

Alone . . .

An image appears in my mind's eye. Faraine. My wife. Gazing up at me with such hurt and confusion in her face. Her voice rings in my memory: "*Your queen should be with you.*" She's right, of course. And were it not for this terrible fear burning in my gut, she would be beside me even now, her hand clasped in mine. Lending me that quiet strength of hers which so many have underestimated. Was I a fool to deny her, to leave her hidden in her chamber? No, for I feel Sul's sharp eyes upon me. How could I place her back within his sights, suspecting him as I do? Until I can be sure she will be safe here in my court, I must take care to—

"*Morar-juk!*" Sul's voice hisses softly, but the stones of the grotto catch it in echo until it fills the space. "What is *she* doing here?"

I whirl in place. And gape in absolute shock.

Faraine stands in the arched entrance on the far side of the grotto. The very entrance where she, while disguised as her sister, appeared in her *wokh* gown, prepared for her bridal swim. It is no humble, shapeless *wokh* she wears now, however.

My mouth goes dry. A stone drops in my gut, turns to magma, and spreads through my veins.

She is . . . magnificent. Clad in a silver gown that hugs every curve of her body as though painted on, with a slit up the front that ventures far past the knees. A headdress shaped like dragon wings crowns her brow, and a wide collar of intricate gold work extends beyond the width of her narrow shoulders. Panniers of a matching style emphasize her womanly shape, draped with strands of gold and red gems which shimmer and glint at every move of her lovely form.

The look is distinctly troidish. A few days ago, I would have said it was too much for her, that it dominated her petite frame and swallowed her. Now nothing could be further from the truth. She holds herself with the grace and dignity of a true queen. No garments nor jewelry can overwhelm her, for she herself is too great a force. She would be a shining ornament in the court of any fae king. I have seen her unclothed, gloried in the beauty of her nakedness. But somehow seeing her like this, adorned in traditional troidish garb, is more erotic to me than any displays of mere flesh. She is a vision of heaven to which a man like me may only aspire.

For an instant I am too stunned to think, to breathe. Her eyes, blue and gold, capture me in their strange depths. My soul cries out to enfold her even as my body burns to possess her.

Sudden movement snaps me from my daze.

Sul is in motion, striding across the grotto. "*Kurspari!*" he growls. "What are you doing here? This is a sacred place." The stream of troidish words assault her like sharp stones flung at her tender flesh. She does not understand them, only the angry tone in which they are spoken. But she refuses to shrink away. She stares Sul down, chin high, fists clenched. Sul raises his good arm.

I don't know when I decided to move. There was never any conscious decision made. I am simply there, gripping Sul's forearm hard enough to crack bone. I wrench him off his feet and slam him against the wall. His pained gasp of breath hisses through my ears as I lean in hard, driving his face and body into the jagged stones.

"If you touch her," I snarl close to his ear, "I will break this arm too."

His pale eye rolls to peer back at me through strands of his hair. Pure terror sparks from its depths. Sul has never looked at me like that before.

"*Vor!*"

Faraine's voice slashes through my senses. With a painful wrench, I tear my gaze away from my brother to find her drawing near, one hand outstretched. "Vor, don't hurt him."

I draw a ragged breath. I want to tell her to look away, to close her eyes if she cannot bear to see me commit violence for her sake. I want to snarl at her: *See? This is what happens when you will not heed me! To keep you safe, I must become a monster. I must destroy that which I love for the sake of that which I treasure above all.* Is it true? Is this what I've become? Would I truly choose Faraine over everything—family, blood, history, loyalty? My very kingdom?

Hael enters the chamber, gripping the hilt of her sword in one hand. She takes in the scene, her quick gaze flicking from Faraine to me to my brother. Her eyes flash, and I wonder if she will throw herself at me in Sul's defense. Instead, she freezes, her sword half-drawn.

Sul struggles in my grasp. I meet his eye, see the fear replaced by cunning calculation. "Gods, brother!" he gasps, his mouth twisted in an unsettling smile. "I was only going to suggest your lovely bride take a seat in the gallery."

I hear the lie underscoring his words. I want to grind the truth out of him, to make him confess then and there to all he has done. But Faraine is watching, and the dead are waiting. I must, for the moment at least, be the king and nothing more.

Growling, I drop my hold on Sul and step back two paces. He lets out a gasp and grimaces, shaking his twisted arm as he rounds on me. "Well. Now that little interlude's over and done with, shall we get on with things? Umog Zu has been extraordinarily patient."

I glance at the priestess. She stands exactly as she did before, eyes closed, skin gray as stone, the crystal in her hands. It's impossible to know if she's

even aware of what just took place. I turn from her to Faraine, who has drawn near to my side. The sweet scent of her hair fills my nostrils. Though I try to stop myself, my gaze sweeps down her figure, every curve displayed to advantage in that fitted gown. My gut tightens, fills with heat. “What are you doing here, Faraine?” I demand, dropping my voice so that the others won’t hear.

Her expression is serene. She’s not flinched this whole time, not even when Sul loomed threateningly over her. “I told you,” she answers, “I will not be imprisoned. Not anymore.”

The heat in my gut is ready to burst. I don’t know if it’s lust, passion, or pure rage. I feel the watchful eyes fixed upon me, feel the pressure of my whole court, my whole kingdom, waiting for me to make my appearance through the falls. The next few hours are crucial. I will not be able to protect her while caught in the grip of the *Vulug Ugdth*. “You must go.” The words stab from my lips like sharpened spearheads. “Now.”

She looks me in the eye without blinking. “Am I your queen?”

All the air seems to rush from my lungs. Of course she is my queen. In every sense except that which my kingdom will acknowledge. But how can I bear to send her from me? To betray every vow I made when I held her, and we sat together beneath the arc of eternity?

I take hold of her bare upper arm, my fingers gripping hard. Drawing my face down close to hers, I breathe through gritted teeth, “You are the most trying of women.”

Her smile is as brilliant as the sun of her world. “So long as we understand one another.”

Jaw tight, I turn, still holding Faraine’s arm. “My wife will join you for the ceremony. Let her observe what must take place.”

Not a feature of my brother’s face moves. He merely bows, then extends a

hand to Faraine, the picture of civil formality. A shiver ripples through Faraine's body, but she lifts her chin and, without a word or a glance for me, slips free of my grasp and glides to stand beside Sul. She is so small next to his towering trolldish height, yet she holds herself straight, her shoulder's back, her head high. She will not be dominated.

Beyond the falls, a deep growl rumbles. If I didn't know any better, I would think another stirring was about to shake the world. But this is no earthquake. It's the low, gut-churning first notes of the *Vulug Ugdth*, sung by a choir of two hundred priests and priestesses in the most ancient of all trolde tongues.

"Morar tor Grakanak," they intone. *"Oagungad vulug ku-va!"*

God of the Deeper Dark. Hear the song of our lost souls.

The Song of the Dead has begun. It will continue until the souls of our dead are brought to rest. There is no stopping it now.

Wrenching my gaze from Faraine, I face Umog Zu once more. She too has begun to sing, her deep voice joining with the choir beyond the falls. *"Morar tor Grakanak,"* she murmurs. The crystal in her hand begins to glow, the deep light in its core growing stronger by the moment. I approach, stand before her, staring down into that curved, polished surface. There's so much power here, power I do not understand. The power of the *Vulug Ugdth*, beckoning souls from the endless caverns of the Under Realm, drawing them to this place. It will soon be too much for even a holy woman such as Zu to bear. It is the burden of a king.

I reach out. Take the stone in my hands.

And the world as I know it falls away.

7

FARAINÉ

The moment Vor takes that stone in his hands, I feel him torn from me.

I don't know how to explain it. It's like some door I did not realize existed has slammed shut between us. He is still present, standing there on the edge of that pool. But in a very real and terrible sense, he is gone. The body which my husband's soul no longer inhabits carries that crystal orb into the pool behind the waterfall. The pounding falls churn foam around him, but he continues walking in time to the pulsing rumble of trolde voices singing in the outer chamber. In another moment, the falls engulf his figure and he vanishes from view.

“Nurghed ghot.”

The harsh voice startles me. I turn to find Prince Sul studying me through half-lidded eyes. He speaks my language well enough, yet chooses not to. That choice communicates far more than mere words. I know he did not wish his brother to make an alliance with Gavaria. I know he is not my friend. But I've always believed him to be devoted to Vor. Does Vor view his brother as a threat to me? Should I be wary of him too?

The prince swings an arm, indicating I should walk with him. I nod once and fall into step beside him, aware of the silent guardswoman trailing in our wake. Hael put up no protest when I appeared in the doorway of my room, clad in this ornate gown. She looked me up and down once, raised an

eyebrow, and said only, “The king prefers that you remain in your chambers.”

“I am well aware,” I answered, my neck already beginning to ache from the weight of the headdress. “And are you commanded to keep me here?”

She blinked once. Then shook her head.

“In that case I will be joining him.”

Hael led the way, maintaining a pointed silence all the while. I was lucky to have her assistance; I never would have found my way back to this grotto on my own. I’m even more thankful now to have her at my back. She may not care for me, but her loyalty to Vor is indisputable. If necessary, she will protect me. For his sake if not for mine.

I walk with Prince Sul along a narrow ledge that leads around the waterfall and into the huge chamber on the far side. There I stop short, eyes widening.

The dead are here. All the bodies of the slain gathered and wrapped in funeral cloths, black gemstones laid upon their closed eyes. There are so many of them. Big and small. Some heartbreakingly tiny. Row upon row, arranged around the sacred waters, filling the floor of this huge space.

My stomach pitches. I’d known this was a ceremony for the dead. I’d not expected to see them, to be faced with their numbers. Vor had said the final death count was not as terrible as it could have been. But he was only trying to spare me from the truth. How many of these souls might I have saved had I been a little quicker to reach the Urzulhar Circle? How many lives might I have spared had I not succumbed to the pain wracking my body?

My feet have grown roots. I cannot move, cannot flee. I can do nothing but stand fixed in place as the trolde song rolls over me. Human ears are not meant to endure such songs, sung by voices so deep and so harsh. There is beauty in that sound, but it’s a dangerous, wild, crushing sort of beauty. Desperately I wrench my gaze from the sight of those bodies and fix it on

Vor. He has progressed through the falls and stands now at the far end of the pool, water lapping his thighs. He is so still, I could easily believe what I see is a stone replica of the man I love and not the man himself. It isn't just his stillness either—much more profound is that ongoing sense of being cut off from him. As though his soul has passed into another world, leaving me behind.

I cast a quick glance along the high walls illuminated by hanging *lorst* crystals. The hall is at least five stories tall with galleries overlooking the falls and the pool. Stalagmites form natural barriers between the onlookers and a precipitous drop to the cavern floor below. Innumerable faces peer over and around them, observing their king. Many of those gazes are fixed on me as well. Some with suspicion. All with curiosity. For the moment, I'm thankful my gods-gift has sunk into dormancy; I'm not sure I could bear the weight of emotion in this chamber of mourning.

Sul proceeds with dignity, leading the way through the dead to the far side of the chamber. Only now do I notice the other figures: tall, solemn trolde dignitaries, Vor's ministers and members of his court. Their eyes are closed, their hands folded in attitudes of prayer. Their skin, usually so luminous and pale, is darkened into various shades of stone gray. Were it not for their fantastic garb they would easily blend into the walls.

Gripping my skirts with both hands, I cross the chamber, weaving between shroud-wrapped bodies. Painfully aware of each and every one of them, aware of the emptiness inside them. Where are their souls? Vor said this ceremony was intended to guide them to rest. Does that mean they are now wandering throughout Mythanar and the Under Realm?

There is a place for Sul among the trolde. He assumes an attitude of prayer like the others and bows his head. Within moments his skin dulls to a dark gray, and stillness comes over him. Upon closer inspection, I recognize the

figure of his mother, Queen Roh, beside him. She is deep inside her meditative stone state, unaware of my presence. Yet I cannot help the creeping feeling that she is watching me somehow from behind those heavy eyelids.

And where am I to stand? There is no place here for me, nor have I the ability to sink into stone like these others. More reason I should have listened to Vor and remained in my rooms. If this ceremony is indeed to last for hours, how will I endure it?

With a determined set of my jaw, I place myself in front of Sul and his mother and face the pool. I fix my gaze on Vor, my anchor in this strange world of harsh song and impenetrable rock. The terrible rumble of those trolde voices calls to mind the crashing, chaotic formation of worlds—the burning life and breaking stone, colliding and creating and destroying in mere breaths of existence. Through it all, Vor stands immobile, that crystal orb held above his head. It glows with inner light, pulsing in time to the resonance of the song. Other lights have awakened within the pool itself, all those shining crystals which had lit up those sacred waters for our wedding ceremony. Now shining for the dead.

The song creeps into my bones. It hums there, a deep vibration connecting me to the stones. It's as though that song, sung by all those hundreds of voices, activates the life force within the *urzul*. I wish I understood it. It's like a language I cannot quite comprehend. If only I had someone who might teach me, who might guide me. Then perhaps I might be able to help . . .

I blink. How much time has passed? It feels suddenly as though I've been here for hours, as though the song and the hum of the crystals pulled me in deep, wrapped around me, and held me transfixed. But something startled me back out again. Frowning, I shake my head, refocus my gaze on Vor.

He has sunk to his knees.

My heart lurches. What happened? He should not look like that, like the weight of that crystal is crushing him. I look around at the courtiers lining the walls. They're as deeply sunk into their stonelike trance as ever and don't seem to have noticed. But there's movement in the gallery above, shifting bodies, flashing eyes. The witnesses are uneasy. They too know something is not right. I turn to Vor again. All around him, the *urzul* crystals in the water flicker. They no longer shine with clear, bluish-white light but a harsh, deep red. The glow in the center of the crystal he carries burns like fire.

"Vor," I whisper, my voice lost in the ongoing rumble of the trolde song. I take a step.

A hand falls on my shoulder.

"*Gurat, kurspari.*"

I tip my head back to meet Sul's terrible gaze. His eyes reflect the red glow of the *urzul* crystals. "Let me go," I say.

His lip curls. "You cannot interfere," he says, slipping into my own language. "It will ruin him. Vor must prove that he is *ttarmok*, that he may bear the pressures of the world."

I shake my head. "It's crushing him. He'll die."

"If that is the will of the Deeper Dark."

"No!" I struggle against his hold. "I will not stand by. I can help him." Resolve hardens my voice. "It is what I was sent here to do."

Sul's grip on my shoulder tightens as though he'd like to shatter bone. "*Morar juk!*" he snarls. "You were sent to be the end of him. But don't think I will stand by and let you—"

He breaks off abruptly as a large, pale hand wrenches him back. We both turn, surprised to find Queen Roh standing before us. Her stone hide has melted away, revealing once more her pale and pristine features, illuminated harshly in the glowing red of the *urzul* crystals.

She snarls in troidish at her son. “*Mar!*” he begins to protest, but she cuts him off, roughly shoving him to one side. He curses and pulls the front of his garments straight, his eyes flicking from me to her and back again. Roh ignores him, turning instead to me. I hold her gaze, my blood rushing. She is not my friend; I have reason to believe she is my enemy. She does not seek the salvation of Mythanar or the Under Realm, but rather its ultimate destruction. And she certainly does not support Vor or his rule.

She stares down at me now, a figure of both ferocious power and furious impotence. A queen who is no longer queen in a world on the brink of doom. She studies my face. Then her gaze slips down for a moment to the pendent resting against my heart.

“Go to him,” she says. Her eyes snap back to meet mine. “Do what you must, *kurspari-glur.*”

I shift my uneasy gaze from her to her son. Sul stands several paces back, his face a mask of ill-contained rage. Hael is beside him now, resting a steadying hand on his arm. I catch my bodyguard’s eye for half a moment. There’s something behind the stoic immobility of her face, a glimmer of desperation perhaps. I see it even without the aid of my gods-gift. After all, her brother was among those who died; his soul hangs in the balance here.

But Hael was there when I climbed to the Urzulhar Circle and connected to those great stones. She was there, and she saw what happened. The power that went out from me, turning the tide of destruction. She may not fully understand, but she knows enough.

For a count of five long breaths, Hael holds my gaze. Then she nods. It’s all the encouragement I need.

Turning from the three of them, I approach Vor and the pool. His head is bowed, his face mere inches from the water. If the weight of the crystal presses him any further down, he will drown. I pick up my skirts, weaving

between the wrapped bodies of the dead, ignoring Sul's voice calling out behind me. He's soon drowned out in the rumble of the ongoing song. The ground under my feet hums with all the hidden crystals brought to life in this chamber.

Aware of the staring eyes of all the watchers in the gallery, I toss aside my heavy headdress and the cumbersome ornate collar before plunging into the frigid pool. The water is nearly up to my waist by the time I stand before my kneeling husband. What should I do? I have no experience, no knowledge from which to draw. But Vor is in trouble. I can feel it. Soon his soul will crack under this tremendous weight. I must do something. Anything. Closing my eyes, I reach out and cup my hands around the sphere he holds.

Immediately I plunge headlong out of this world.

8

VOR

Mist engulfs me.

Or rather, not mist. Mist should be accompanied by a sensation of dampness on the skin. This is formlessness. Moving and ebbing, whirling. Obscuring vision only to offer brief moments of revelation.

I have stepped outside my body. I can see it through this veil, standing on the pool's edge, holding that stone. It hardly seems to belong to me, but when I reach out to it, I find I am still connected to it by a gleaming, tethering thread. If I push *like this*, I can make it move. Grinding, stiff movements, like some sort of puppet being. But it works well enough to get him—*me*—going.

He—I—that physical frame in which I have hitherto dwelled—steps down into the pool and proceeds to walk as he is meant to. Uncertain what else to do, I follow, passing through the mist and foam of the falls without sensation. I do, however, sense the *Vulug Ugdth*. The song reverberates through the crystal in his—my—hands, joined by the answering hum and harmony of all the crystals in that pool. In a strange way, I feel as though they are giving me existence. As though my being in this realm is held in place by the pulse of those stones and the drone of those voices.

So, I follow my body, skimming across the surface of the water even as he wades from one end to the other and comes at last to stand at the far side of the pool. Watching eyes peer out from the galleries overhead. I lift my

awareness, try to catch some glimpse of the onlookers. My people, citizens of my fair city, come to observe their king as he performs the sacred rites of death and soul-passing. But I cannot discern them. This roiling obscurity is too thick. Nor can I see my ministers and courtiers. Even Faraine, dear and beloved, is hidden from my eyes.

I can, however, see the dead.

They hover in the ether above their funeral-wrapped bodies. So many of them, row upon row, extending far beyond the reaches of the echoing chamber. We are all together in this space of formless endlessness, this realm of *Guralth Harred* as the priests have named it—the Waiting Place.

I gaze out across that sea of dead faces. The song of the *Vulug Ugdth* and the thrum of the crystals gives them temporary form even as it does for me. They cannot remain here. But there are so many of them, and I do not know what I am supposed to do. How am I to guide them on to rest? Their faces are long and solemn, their eyes dark pits without light or expression. Here and there as the song shifts, they waver out of sight only to return. They will only last so long as the song is sung and the Stone of the Dead remains aloft to catch the vibrations. I need to send them home. Before either the song ends or my physical body collapses under its weight.

I stretch out my hand, given shape by song, humming with life and magic. “Come,” I call, my voice strangely hollow and echoing. “Come, my friends. It is time you were at peace.”

They do not move. Those endless voids where eyes should be gape at me. The song rolls on, and the crystals pulse. Their forms begin to clarify until I can see the wounds from which they died, flesh and bone ripped, broken, and shredded. Men, women, and children all hover in the strange mist before me, filling my vision with their suffering.

My heart, somewhere beyond the veils of reality, tightens in my breast.

“Come,” I beg, holding out both arms now as though to take them all in. “Let me help you.”

But they hold back. Afraid, uncertain. Do they not trust me? Do they not believe in me, their king? I failed them in life, after all. Who’s to say I will be any use to them in death?

Then there’s movement in the ranks. Phantom people blink out of sight only to reappear a few paces back, clearing a path for one figure to pass through. Once again, I feel my physical heart leap. “Yok!” I cry and hold out both hands.

The boy is dead. Of course, I’ve known all along he must be. Not even the strongest trolde could survive a fall like that. Though the molten river would not harm his tough trolde hide, the impact would shatter his bones, leaving him to sink under the flow as burning magma filled his lungs and burned him from the inside out.

He staggers toward me now, however, a phantom figure with lumps of dried pumice falling from his ethereal limbs. The nearer he comes, the more his image clarifies, until I could swear it was the Yok I once knew standing before me. He wears his armor, polished to perfection, and his pale hair is swept back from his face and secured with a bit of black string. I can see the crooked break in his nose from a fall he took as a youngling. I can see the chip in his front tooth when he opens his mouth. What I cannot see are his eyes. They remain black pits of nothing.

My King! His voice gurgles strangely as though he drowns even now. But he goes on, and the words clarify: *My King, my beloved King!* He grasps and presses his forehead to the backs of my hands. *Why are you here? Did I fail you? Did you die too? Was it all for nothing?*

“No, Yok,” I respond at once, squeezing his hands as hard as I can. “You saved me. You are a true warrior, heart and soul.”

The boy lets out a sigh, his ghostly breath stirring the mist before his lips. When he straightens, the darkness in his eyes has cleared. For a moment he is the same earnest boy I've known since the day he was born.

"Go now, Yok," I say. Claspng the back of his head, I draw him to me, press my brow to his. "Go and be at peace, Warrior of Mythanar."

Grakul-mir, Aruk, Yok says and steps back to offer me a salute. Then he adds in a softer voice, *You will tell Hael . . . ?* He trails off, uncertain how to finish.

I nod, setting my jaw firmly. "I will tell her. I swear it."

Yok smiles, relieved. Then he sweeps forward, passing through me. I feel him against my heart for a moment. Even when he is gone, the sensation lingers, a ghostly trace which I somehow know will never truly vanish. But Yok himself is vanished to whatever rest our god has in store.

I turn to face the remaining crowd, all those hesitant, timid souls. Already my physical body tires, and my soul is strained by the unexpected pain of this encounter. But there are many more to go. And I must face them all, one after another. "My people," I say, extending my arms. "Come to me. Let me help you as I may."

Now that they've seen Yok approach and pass on, they gain courage. One by one, they draw near to me, each eager to be seen, heard, held, and blessed as they begin the next leg of their journey. Many of them ask me to promise them something or to bear a message to a loved one. The children are the most heartbreaking. They ask only, *Why? Why?* or worse still, *Where is my mar?* For them I can offer no answer. I simply get down on my knees and take them in my arms, hold them while the resonance of the *Vulug Ugdth* surrounds and creates us. Only when they choose to draw back do I let them go and look into their eyes. Eyes which do clear eventually. When I ask if they are ready to go, they nod, smile, and proceed on through me.

How does any man have the strength for this? I'm not sure I can keep going, keep facing these individuals one after the other. Perhaps Queen Roh was right—perhaps it would be better for all of us simply to go to the stone. To become hardened to the shocks of our breaking world and our own devastated hearts. To feel nothing, to experience nothing. Would this not be a sort of paradise?

But I will not show weakness to the dead. They need me strong. They need to know I am still their king and I will watch over their loved ones, carrying on their legacy in the world they leave behind.

At long last I shudder, exhausted. But I've done it. I've sent all those souls through. Turning, I peer through the hazy mist to where my physical body stands still, supporting the crystal. Part of me hates the prospect of returning to that form and all the burdens of that life. But I have proven myself a true king of Mythanar. Now I must go on proving. Until the very last breath is crushed from my lungs.

I move to slip back into that reality, then stop. My soul quickens. Something is pulling on the edge of my awareness. Something sharp, insistent. I try to resist, but it redoubles its force, compelling me to look back into the realm of obscurity. I strain my sight, strain my consciousness.

YOU HAVE FORGOTTEN US.

The voice hits me like a club across the head. In the other world, my physical body shudders. With an effort, I pull my spirit form together, draw myself up straight. "Who is there?" I call into the formlessness. "Who are you?"

No one answers. But the echoes of that voice—or many voices, spoken in perfect unison—reverberate through my soul. A terrible foreboding coils like a dark thread through my being. I take a step, then another. "Come to me," I call, holding out my arms. "If you are among my own beloved dead, let me

help you. I am your king, and I will—”

A great wordless roar shakes the sky, the ground, the reality around me, ripping the mist to shreds. The pale softness of diffused light vanishes, replaced by a wrathful pulsing glare. The dead are revealed before me.

No. Not the dead.

The undead.

They're wrapped in stone from head to toe. Layer upon layer of craggy rock, so thick it obscures their features. But inside, their souls writhe in anguish, tormented and burning. Poisoned.

I know who they are. The citizens of Hoknath. First caught in a cloud of poisonous gas that rose from the depths of the world, then trapped by the dark magic of the *va-jor* ceremony performed with the blood of an unwilling sacrifice. So they remain, neither dead nor alive, but in this state between.

There are so many of them. Hundreds, thousands. All those suffering souls, imprisoned in their madness, their rage. Horror floods my spirit. It's too much. I want to flee this realm, to hurtle through the veils of reality back into a world of physical matter where I need not be faced with such abomination. But how can I abandon them? These are my people. Citizens of the Under Realm, children of the Deeper Dark. I must help them.

Warily I approach the nearest lumpen mass. Strands of white hair brush its shoulders, the only outward sign of the living being it once was. Why do I feel as though I know her? Memory fills my mind: dark water closing overhead, manic eyes staring up at me from an otherwise immobile face. Yes, I'm sure of it—she is the woman from Lake Hoknath, the one who tried to pull Hael under. Still trapped in this stone form, still suffering the rages of *raog* poison.

I reach out, tearing at the stone over her face with my bare hands. A useless endeavor. Channeling all the strength I can from the *Vulug Ugdth*, I

pound with my fists, desperate to break through. Useless, useless! I venture deeper into the crowd of thousands, tearing at this one, pounding at that. All to no avail. The whole force of my will has no effect on this spell. A world away, my physical body bows, bends, threatens to break. My lifeforce strains, barely held together by the song and the crystal. But I cannot stop. I cannot go back to my own world, leaving these people to suffer.

Their voices creep in on the edges of my awareness. Small at first but growing louder and louder into a storm of pain and fury.

YOU DID NOT SAVE US.

YOU LEFT US.

YOU LEFT US SUFFERING.

WE BURN.

WE ACHE.

WE DIE.

WE LIVE.

All those voices in my mind, echoing and reechoing, driving out thought and reason.

WHERE WERE YOU WHEN WE NEEDED YOU?

WHEN THE POISON FILLED OUR CITY?

WHEN WE TURNED ON ONE ANOTHER?

WHERE WERE YOU WHEN WE SLAYED OUR FRIENDS?

OUR PARENTS?

OUR CHILDREN?

WHERE WERE YOU WHEN WE DIED YET COULD NOT DIE?

“I’m here!” I cry, throwing the words to the tumultuous ether above. “I’m here now! And I will help you. I will not leave you.” But my voice cannot penetrate the stone. I feel as though I’m sinking. As though the ground beneath me is slowly falling away, and I am going with it, and all those souls

of Hoknath will fall on top of me, crushing me under their terrible weight. Because I could not save them. Because I—

“Vor.”

Hands grasp mine.

I open my eyes, stare into a face so near to me. She is pale and phantom-like, a shadowy image in this world of harsh light and black stone. But I would know her anywhere, in any world.

“Faraine!” Her name bursts from my lips like a prayer. “What are you doing here?”

She smiles that small, gentle smile I’ve come to know so well. “I am your queen. Remember?” With those words, she stands, turns, and surveys the enstoned dead. “They are in pain.”

Is their pain causing her pain in turn? She told me once about the nature of her gods-gift, how the emotions of others influence her body and soul. Surely suffering on this magnitude is far beyond her ability to bear. “Faraine,” I say, my voice deep and urgent, “you must go. There are too many of them.”

She shakes her head. Stretching out her other hand, she touches the nearest of the stone figures, a massive, hunched trolde man. Vibrations ripple through her, through me, pouring out from the world where the song and the crystals reverberate together into this realm of existence. I feel the delicate filaments of my being hum and strain, ready to snap. “Faraine!” I cry. “Faraine, stop! It’ll kill you.” I try to yank her back, to wrench her away from that stone. But she will not be moved. It’s as though she too has become stone. She merely turns and looks at me. Both her eyes shine brilliant blue.

“Together,” she says.

The song of the *Vulug Ugdth* swells. I hold her tight, still trying in vain to rip her away and hurl her back into our world. But there’s no stopping this now. Her gods-gift takes the power offered by the crystal and the song,

channels it profoundly through her small frame. But it passes through me first, and I pray it will not shatter her to pieces.

“Come out!” she calls to the stone man under her hand. The reverberations intensify. This whole realm shakes, the sky above tilting wildly. The voices of the singers grow to an all-encompassing roar, and the crystals hum in many high-pitched frequencies, a dangerous harmony. In the center of all stands Faraine, my beloved, sending those vibrations deep into the stone. Hairline cracks begin to appear, not just on one stone, but on all of them, spreading swiftly through the crowd. She leans in, her phantom face serene save for the faintest puckering at her brow. The cracks spread, faster and faster.

Then they shatter.

It’s difficult to describe what happens next. Man’s perception cannot comprehend this realm of spirit. I seem to see black rock breaking into a billion particles of dust. Each particle glints and shines, an individual work of art, and I see them, every one of them, all at once.

For a moment both glorious and terrible, I feel the troldefolk of Hoknath surrounding me. Their heads are thrown back as though breathing out great lungfuls of air. Green air which bursts from their lips in a tempest exhale. Poison whirls around me, around Faraine, a maelstrom of foul-smelling malice, hiding her from my sight. “Faraine!” I try to call, desperate.

The spirits hit me. One after another, passing through me, just as the dead of Mythanar had done. But unlike those dead, they do not wait to be encouraged. They are desperate for relief and rush upon me like a hail of arrows. The impact should rip my very essence to shreds, but somehow, somewhere, Faraine holds me. Her grip on my hands channels the pulse of the *Vulug Ugdth*, keeping me together. So the dead pass through me, a whole city’s worth of spirits.

Only one spirit lingers, waiting to approach me after all the others have gone. She takes on a visible shape, and though I am stunned to my core by what I have just experienced, I nonetheless recognize her. The last time I'd seen her, she lay spread upon the ground, her body torn apart. The unwilling sacrifice whose life was violently taken for the *va-jor* ceremony.

She sways a little as she approaches. Her eyes are hollow, and her body appears as it was in the last moments of her life—cut open, entrails tumbling from her torso and trailing after her. She stops before me, her face still lovely despite the horrors she's endured, and tips her head to one side.

They believed it would save them, she whispers. The poison was too much.

I reach out, take her hand in mine. "What they did to you was sacrilege. No belief justifies such an act."

She shakes her head, delicate lashes falling to shield her empty eyes. *Perhaps if I had been braver. Stronger.*

"No." I draw her to me, wrap my arms around her, holding her tight. "You were everything you should be."

After a moment she relaxes in my arms. When she draws back at last, her eyes have cleared, and the phantomlike image of her body has mended. No more gaping wounds where sacrificial knives tore her flesh apart. *You will save the Under Realm? she asks. You will make my death matter?*

"I will save them all."

The young woman nods. Then she too passes through me. I feel her life in my chest, surrounding my heart, and gone.

I let out a shuddering gasp, drop to my knees. Part of me wants to let my own spirit go now. It would be easy; I can almost feel the way, a simple shrugging loose of these song-threads that hold me. What a relief it would be to give up this burden, this kingship.

But Faraine's voice is in my ear: "They are at peace now, my love."

I shake my head. So many were lost. I'd not protected them. I was their king, and I'd failed them.

Her hands cup my face, gentle but firm. "They are at peace," she repeats. "You have done what you must." She forces my head up, forces me to look at her. "Now come back to me, Vor."

Suddenly I'm in my own body once more, bowed beneath the Stone of Death which I still hold above my head. It feels as though it will shatter my arms. I suck in an agonized gasp of air, tilt my head back, gazing up.

Faraine is there. In the water, standing before me. Her hands clasp the crystal, and her body shakes with the force of its resonance. She gazes down into my face, her eyes shining twin orbs of sapphire blue.

She blinks.

When her lashes lift, her eyes roll back in her head.

"Faraine!" I cry, surging to my feet even as she falls into the water of the sacred pool.

9

FARAINÉ

I fall through a cloud of heat which reeks of poison.

The relentless force at the pit of the world pulls me down to it. Down and down and further down. Tumbling, careening through emptiness. I feel the skin-flaying closeness of rock walls on either side, but cannot grasp them, cannot break my fall. There is an inevitability to this plummet. A doom that cannot be forestalled.

And below me . . .

Down where the heat is most intense and the pressure enough to crush bones . . .

A great red eye opens.

It's like the opening of a world. A hellish world of boiling rage. In the center, a vast black pupil dilates, becoming a window into absolute void. My skin sears, blistering bubbles bursting. I scream, but my throat is on fire, all sound distorted and lost in the rush of my fall, the throb of my heart, the agony. Limbs flailing, desperate, useless, I plunge for that eye, plunge for that black pupil, tumble straight into it and—

Stillness.

I open my eyes.

Or rather, not my eyes. I have no body, no form. I am only an essence of being.

So instead, I open my awareness, take in the reality to which I have come. It is an endless blackness punctuated by distant stars, nebulas, planets. A slowly spinning, dancing universe of light and dark and colors beyond imagining. I am both too small to take it all in and big enough to observe immense, impossible reaches. A universe of wonder, so overwhelmingly enormous it would drive me mad were I still contained within a mortal frame. As it is, I gaze upon it with both awe and delight.

Then the music begins.

It is unlike any song I've heard before. Nothing like the instruments my gods-gifted sister used to play when she sang, still less like the growling trolde voices and the humming of the living crystals of the Under World. This is a song of spheres, too great and terrible to be heard. It must be felt, experienced. It must be lived.

I turn, seeking the source of that song. Two beings approach my little point of existence. Intertwining, parting, coming together again. Trailing their vast wings through nebulas and scattering stardust in their wake. The strange song surrounds them, infuses them, vibrates through them, shining from their inner veins so that they glow with sheer glory. They are perfect—the living embodiment of perfection. Winged and wondrous, bigger than worlds. Bigger than mere words could ever define. Shining with the light of a thousand constellations brought to life.

They dance together, both forming and formed by the song they generate. As they draw near to me, they block out the light of the stars, but they themselves are more brilliant by far. Their song ripples through me, through the stars, like my crystals all connected in one great harmony. But so much greater, so much grander.

Such beings cannot be named or ruled by any language or mortal understanding. Nevertheless, I find myself desperate to name them, to claim them. And there is only one word which might describe them. Though I have neither mouth nor tongue in this place, I pull the word from somewhere inside me and breathe it out into the universe:

Dragon.



My eyes flare open.

No! No, no, no, why am I here? Why am I trapped in a heavy, pain-racked body, my soul wrapped in slowly decaying flesh? I want to rage, to roar, to fling myself back into that boundless, celestial dance. I want to . . . want to . . .

The images in my head fade.

The glory, the song.

A mind of matter cannot hold onto such things.

I let it go. Unwillingly but inevitably. Breathe the dream out through my nostrils, breathe reality back into my lungs.

So. I'm alive. That exertion of power didn't destroy me. That's a mercy I suppose. Blinking slowly, I wait for my vision to clarify and my other senses to slowly surface. What happened? I seem to remember a splash and water closing in over me. Letting my eyelids drop, I sink back into the darkness in my head. Ah, yes. There are the memories. Of touching the crystal. Of entering that strange, formless realm. Of vibrating with that song which led me straight to Vor.

A smile plucks at the corner of my mouth. My gods-gift isn't wholly gone after all. If it was, I couldn't have done what I did, couldn't have harnessed the crystal song and channeled it to release those trapped souls. And I didn't die in the process. Which must count for something.

I try to move. A hiss whistles through my teeth at the throb of pain in my head. The usual state of things. I'd say I'm used to it, but I don't think anyone gets used to the betrayal of one's own body.

Voices rumble not far away. Vor's voice I recognize at once, speaking in harsh troldish. The other is female and vaguely familiar, though I cannot place it. I don't understand a word they're saying. I seem to recall looking into Vor's eyes mere moments before I fell in the pool. His expression was full of mingled terror and wonder, and then . . .

I groan. The stalactites overhead seem to spin slowly. That's not right, is it? I feel sick and turn away, trying to catch a glimpse of Vor. Instead, my gaze lands on a figure lying on a narrow bed not far from me. A still, haggard figure with a gaunt face.

A face I recognize.

It's him. The man who tried to kill me. Who entered my dungeon cell, dragged me out and held a knife to my throat. My body reacts, memory of terror flooding my senses as though experienced anew. But no. I didn't let myself be made a helpless victim. I'd reached inside him, taken hold of his spirit, infused his body with *calm*. And he'd dropped at my feet, inert.

Later on, Vor told me that poison drove Lord Rath to make his mad attempt on my life. I look at him now, lying there so still. To my horror, his eyelids lift a fraction. Just enough that I can see a gleam of pale eyes. His face is slack, his body limp, as though he's been given a powerful sedative. But he's aware of me. Does he still suffer under the poison's influence? Possibly. I remember how it felt inside Vor—a dark, cancerous knot of malice and rage. On impulse I reach out, try to touch him with my gods-gift. Nothing happens. I frown. After the demonstration of power in the pool, I thought for certain my gift was restored. But though I feel the energy of the crystals humming in my bones, I cannot seem to reach beyond myself.

But I won't leave this man suffering.

Vor's voice continues to growl in the background of my awareness. He would not approve of what I'm about to do. Which means I need to do it now. I push myself upright. The room pitches around me, all the narrow beds and their occupants on the verge of toppling. It rights itself, however, as I reclaim some equilibrium. Where am I exactly? Some sort of infirmary? There are many other people here, wounded and hurting, but I fix my attention on my would-be assassin. His eyes stare out at me from his pinched face. Otherwise, he lies in the same slack attitude, unable to move.

I rise. Wait again for the room to stop whirling. Then, on unsteady feet, I pick my way across the floor, using the footboards of narrow beds to support myself, all the while never breaking gaze with him. We share a strange bond, he and I—the bond of my life and his desire to end it. A desire I still see burning in the depths of his gaze. I can help him though. I'm sure of it.

Pain throbs in my temples as I make my way nearer, nearer. I don't pause, don't hesitate. Vor could spot me at any moment and jump to interfere. I grip my crystal pendant with my right hand, seeking its support. But my gods-gift has fallen numb once more save for the last humming vibrations from the ceremony in the pool. Will it be enough for what I intend to do?

I stand over the poisoned man's bed. He gazes up at me, and his slack mouth moves, just a little. Just enough for a hoarse whisper to escape his cracked lips: "You . . . must . . . die . . ."

"No," I answer and place a hand on his forehead. "You must wake up."

At the instant of contact, my gods-gift quickens. The echoing hum of the crystals in my bones awakens the tiny crystals in the stone floor under my feet and ripples to the walls, the ceiling. I take hold of that energy and send my awareness deep into this man's mind, his soul. I feel the rage wrapping around him like a strangler vine. Rage that does not belong to him, no more

than it belonged to the cave devils or to Vor. A parasite slowly killing as it drives its host to madness. But I know what to do. I've done it before. Granted I had the aid of the Urzulhar Circle the last time. But surely even in my weakened state, I can manage to help one suffering man.

Calm.

I send my gift rippling forth, down my arm, through my hand into his head. It floods him like a river of sunlit water, washing away that darkness, tearing that evil vine up from its roots. Lord Rath cries out, shocked at the suddenness of my touch. His fear and pain strike me like a physical blow. I stagger back, our connection broken just as the last of that poison in his mind is ripped away. I sway, knees buckling . . . fall . . .

Strong arms catch me from behind. "Faraine!" Vor's voice, frantic in my ear. "Gods damn it, Faraine, what are you thinking?"

I smile even as my husband's fear washes over me in a flood. Underneath that fear is the great bastion of his love. I look up into his fear-wracked face and lift one hand to gently touch his cheek. "There," I breathe. "That's done then."

Then I sink into his love, let it wrap me in comforting oblivion.

10

VOR

“Faraine!”

Her name bursts from my lips, over and over again. Deeper Dark devour me! How could I have let something like this happen? How could I have taken my eyes off her, even for a moment? I’d thought her safe in the same room as that man so long as I stood close by. But to turn suddenly and find her standing over Lord Rath, touching him . . .

Clutching Faraine against my chest, I round on my former minister. Rath sits bolt upright, pale and drawn, his face haggard with the ravages of *raog* poison. “What did you do to her?” I roar, my voice echoing against the high ceiling. “If you dared touch her—”

Rath throws his arms over his head, squealing like a mothcat. “I didn’t kill her! I didn’t! I didn’t mean to do it!”

Though she isn’t dead, though I can feel the pulse of life in her body, a cloud of murderous wrath overwhelms me. I want to lunge at the man, to take his neck between my hands and snap it like a twig.

A strong hand grips my shoulder. “Your Majesty,” Hael’s deep voice rumbles in my ear, “your bride.”

Immediately my attention snaps back to Faraine. Her face rests against my shoulder. She looks strangely peaceful, almost content. Though I hate to admit it, her color has improved since I carried her here from the Yun Falls.

Then she had looked pale as death, and I feared my bargain with the gods had all been for naught. Now she seems to be sleeping, dreaming serene dreams.

My throat tight, my heart crushed in the cage of my chest, I carry her back to the empty bed on the far side of the chamber, ignoring the watchful, wary eyes of the other sick folk as I pass. Laying her down gently, I arrange her limbs, smooth her hair, drape a blanket over her small body. Last of all, I examine her face again. Her brow is smooth. A faint smile pulls at her lips. Gently, reverently, I run one knuckle down the curve of her cheek, savoring that simple touch.

Then I turn and face Hael. “Stand guard over her. Do not take your eyes off her, not for a moment.”

Hael nods and pulls her shoulders back.

Drawing several deep breaths, I run my hands through my hair. Then I march back across the chamber to where Rath cowers in his bed, still too weak to rise. “Your Majesty!” he stammers, gripping his blankets desperately. “I swear, I never intended to do any of it. It wasn’t my fault, it wasn’t my choice, it wasn’t—”

My hand shoots out, grips him by the front of his shirt. I yank him partway off the bed. “Tell me what happened,” I snarl, dragging his face close to mine.

“Vor, really!” Madame Ar appears at my elbow. “I’d prefer you didn’t manhandle my patients.”

Ignoring her, I stare into Rath’s watery eyes. “Tell me what happened. Now.”

“I don’t know!” Rath shakes his miserable head, pulling uselessly at my grip. “I swear it! It was like a spell came over me. An idea, an oppression I could not escape. A thought not of my mind, but it felt as real as any thought I’ve ever had. It urged me, *drove* me to act! I tried to fight it, tried to resist,

but I . . . I . . .”

“That’s enough, Vor!” Madame Ar’s voice cuts through the red storm in my brain, dragging my gaze down to hers. “He speaks the truth, and you know it. The man was poisoned. His actions were not his own.”

Ar is right. I too have suffered what Rath now describes. I remember how it felt to have those feelings fill me up until I was incapable of separating them from my own driving needs. Resistance felt like resisting the urge to breathe. Under that influence, I had nearly killed Faraine. Nearly violated her body and then destroyed her. And I will never forgive myself. It takes all the self-control I can muster not to bash my minister’s miserable head against the stone wall. My arm quakes with the desire to give in to the impulse. But Rath does not deserve this rage. It is my own self I should like to punish. If *raog* turns men into monsters, I was the worst monster of all. I let it turn me against the woman I love. How could Rath’s sin compare?

With a wrench of will, I release my hold, let Rath fall back onto the bed. Turning away from his sniveling form, I look at Faraine, lying there in her bed. My breath ratchets in my chest, ragged as the blows of a pickax. I must ask the question on my lips. I have no choice. If I could, I wouldn’t ask it, wouldn’t make myself hear the answer that must come. But there’s no escaping it. Not anymore.

I meet Hael’s gaze for a moment. Her brow puckers slightly, not understanding.

Then I whirl on Rath. “Tell me the last thing you remember. Before the rage struck.”

Rath lies on his pillow, his face dazed, confused. He shakes his head. “Nothing. Nothing! I was . . . I . . .” He closes his eyes, places a hand on his forehead. “Ah! Yes, I . . . remember something. It was after the . . . the execution. Prince Sul and I were together in an antechamber, discussing what

had taken place.”

My lip curls. “And did you drink together?”

Rath blinks several times. “Yes.” He nods at last. “The prince called for *krilge* to be served. I remember he said we needed something to brace our nerves following—”

I do not wait for the rest. I turn and storm from the room, rage once more overcoming all thought. I mount the steps of the infirmary, push the door open, and emerge in the stone passage, my head down like a morleth ready to charge.

“Your Majesty!”

I stop. Shoulders hunched, I turn slowly, look back at Hael. She stands in the infirmary doorway, staring after me. “I thought I told you not to take your eyes off her,” I growl.

Hael holds herself straight and still. “Tell me where you’re going. Tell me what—”

“I’m going to do what I should have done a long time ago. But I was too much of a coward.”

Hael’s lips pinch. “You’re going to see Sul.”

“I am.”

Her face has gone a terrible shade of gray, her soft skin the same color as the *dorgarag* malformations which mar her neck and cheek. “Let me come with you.”

“No. Stay and watch over Faraine.”

Her jaw hardens. “Please, my King. Let me come with you.”

I want to command her to get back in there. To roar at her, to make her remember where her duty lies. And she will obey. She is that loyal. But I cannot ignore what I see in her: the cracks in her spirit, the fragility. She is on the verge of breaking. I guided her brother’s soul to rest but a few short hours

ago. She is a warrior, one of the strongest people I've ever met. But a loss like that will test the mettle of the greatest heart.

"You will not like what is to come," I say, my voice hard.

"No," she acknowledges. "But I must be there."

I hold her gaze for a long, silent moment. Then: "Very well. Find Lur and Wrag. Tell them to stand watch over the queen. I will wait for you here and guard her myself until you return."

Hael salutes and hastens to obey. So, I am left waiting in the corridor outside the infirmary, resenting every second that creeps by. Now is not the time for standing and thinking. Now is not the time for contemplating what I must and will do. Action is better. Let the impulse of the moment carry me through to the inevitable end. Instead, the gods have willed that I must stand here and consider the deeds before me. How I must look into my brother's eye and ask him one last time if he is the traitor I already know him to be.

This time Sul will answer truthfully.

I reach into the pocket of the ceremonial robe I wear, withdraw the object hidden there. It's the crystal. The one my mother gave to me: bright *urzul*, stained dark in its center.

"A life for a life," I whisper. It had seemed a fair enough bargain at the time. My own life, or so I'd believed. But what if the price is more? What if it's a price I'm unwilling to pay? I'd thought no price too great, no sacrifice too dire for the chance to save her. Was I wrong? Will there come a day when I will look back and realize I've gone too far?

Footsteps approach down the hall. I slip the stone back into my pocket just as Hael and two of her fellow guards appear. Lur and Wrag salute me, their faces grave. Hael barks commands, and they take up position outside the infirmary door. "You are to let no one in on pain of death," Hael reminds them before turning to face me. Her complexion is gray, her pale eyes several

shades darker than usual. But she says only, “Now, my King.”

I nod silently and turn to lead the way.



“Open in the name of the king!”

The pounding of Hael’s fist against the door echoes down the corridor, and her voice rings among the stalactites overhead. We say nothing, neither of us looking at the other. We don’t even know for certain that Sul is here, returned to his private chambers following the ceremony. For all I know, he’s out among my ministers, spreading either calm or dissension, gathering information, collecting intrigue. All for some ultimate purpose I cannot fathom.

The silence lasts no more than a few breaths. But it feels like an age. The door opens at last, however, and my brother’s face appears. “A moment, my darlings!” he calls over his shoulder, pulling a robe around his broad bare torso. “I’ll be back in your luscious arms momentarily.” Gods on high, has he dived headfirst into carousing between now and the disastrous end of the ceremony? Only Sul could be so brash. He smooths back his disarrayed hair, a smile on his lips as he turns to face Hael, standing in the doorway. His expression freezes. “Hael!” He tries to recover his smile. “Isn’t this a pleasant surprise.”

My silent captain merely steps aside, revealing me standing behind her. The luminous glow drains from Sul’s cheeks. “Vor,” he breathes. “I trust all is well with your—”

I push into the room. “Out,” I growl to the two beauties lying tumbled in Sul’s bed. They gasp, scrambling for blankets to wrap around their naked flesh, and scurry from the room, right under Hael’s nose. She stands like a pillar of granite just inside the door, her face immobile.

“Really, Vor,” Sul says, drawing his robe a little tighter, “I do wish you’d

send word of your coming in advance. A man does like a little heads-up when he's, well, you know, heads u—”

“I've spoken to Lord Rath.”

Sul stops. His whole being seems to shutter. Then, very softly: “Ah.” With that and nothing more, he turns away, marching to the fireplace where a moonfire blaze dances brightly. It highlights the side of his face. I study the lines of his brow, the sharpness of his cheek and jaw, searching for signs of guilt or sorrow or anger. But I cannot read my brother as I used to. I might as well be looking at the face of a stranger.

At long last, he draws breath. “I suppose there's not much point in denying anything now.”

“You swore to me.” The words rise from the pit of my gut. “You swore it was not you who had poisoned me. You said you would take the draught yourself first.”

“Yes.” Sul sighs. “I suppose I did.”

“You lied to me.”

“I misled you.” He turns to me then, his eyes reflecting the harsh light of the fire. “But I did so for your sake.”

“You tried to kill her.”

“She had to die.” Sul shakes his head, but his gaze never breaks with mine. “She still has to die. Or Mythanar will be brought to its knees.”

I cross the room in two strides, grip Sul by his throat, and slam him against the wall. “You tried to murder my wife!” The words rip from my throat, a roar of rage and pain no bonds of brotherly loyalty can repress.

“She's not your wife!” Sul chokes, writhing uselessly. Firelight glints in the depths of his fear-widened eyes. He tries to speak more, but cannot get the words out, cannot drag air into his lungs. He is strong, a full-blooded trolde, taller than me, broader. But in that moment, he is like a clay doll in

my hands.

“Vor!” Hael’s voice, thick with pain, growls close to my ear. “Vor, don’t do this. Don’t kill him in cold blood.”

I dart a glance to one side. Hael catches my gaze, holds it, offering me a delicate thread back to sanity. I don’t want to take it. I want to let this madness carry me away in a wave of fury. But she won’t let me go.

With a snarl, I release my hold, retreat two steps, and let Sul collapse to the floor. My brother rubs at his throat, hacking and coughing. His loose hair falls about his shoulders and half-hides his face. “She’s a witch!” he rasps. “She’s cast a spell on you. Since that first night when you rescued her from the Licornyn, you’ve been lost to all reason. She must be stopped!”

The air in my lungs burns like fire. “Why Rath?” I demand.

Sul inhales and pushes himself into a seated position, his back against the wall. He draws up one knee, rests his elbow on it, and runs a hand through his disheveled hair. “When the execution failed, I thought it best to deal with the matter as quickly as possible. Rath . . . his mind was always malleable. It didn’t take more than a small dose of the powdered *raog* to set him raving. I figured no one would think he’d done it of his own volition, and he would get off with a banishment in the end.” He lets out a huff of air, a bitter almost-laugh. “I always hated Rath anyway.”

“And where did you come by the poison?”

“An *uggrha* in Hoknath. The Children of Arraog have been working on a powdered variant for many turns of the cycle now. I have connections; it wasn’t difficult to acquire.”

Of course. Targ and his followers were against my marriage to a human from the start. “So, you are working for the Children of Arraog now,” I snarl.

“No, Vor. I am and always have been working for you.”

I lunge him again, haul him to his feet. “How dare you? How dare you spit

such bile and lies even now?”

Sul does not fight back. It would be better if he did, if he gave me a battle of strength. Instead, he stares into my eyes and shakes his head slowly. “I swore I would never betray you, Vor. If that means I must prevent you from betraying yourself and all the Under Realm, so be it. I’ll be the villain if that’s what it takes. If that’s what you need from me.”

Wrath bellows up from my gut. In another moment I would break his neck, tear his head from his shoulders and cast it into the moonfire blaze. But Hael’s strong arm wraps around my throat from behind as she hauls me back. “Vor don’t hurt him!” she roars. “If you do, you’ll never forgive yourself!”

“Release me!” I cry, and she lets go at once, but puts herself between me and my brother, who sags against the wall. I point an accusing finger. “He tried to kill Faraine! It was he who poisoned me. I would have violated her. I would have destroyed her.”

“But you didn’t.” Hael holds up both hands. “You don’t bear that guilt.”

I draw a ragged breath into my lungs. It’s true—the actual deed was averted. But the intent had been there in my heart, and that is conviction enough. I hate myself for what I almost did, whether the motives were mine or wrought by outside influence. I hate myself, and I hate my brother more. But enough to kill him?

Sul laughs, low and bitter. “What’s this? More evidence of the witch’s influence? A true trolde king would have slaughtered me on the spot!”

My gaze rips from Hael back to him. “Is that what you truly want, *brother?*”

He pulls himself up straight, still braced against the wall with one hand. His eyes are white-ringed, the black pupils fixed points of mingled ferocity and fear. “I want you to be king. The king Mythanar needs. If that means my life must be sacrificed, so be it.”

There are weapons on the walls, an ornate display of blades, clubs, instruments of hunting and war. It would be the work of a moment to swipe a sword down from its mount and run it through my brother's gut, pinning him to the wall. I draw another slow breath. "If I have you dragged before the court, and Rath gives testimony, you will face the *drur*."

"Good." Sul's eyes flash. "When all your court has gathered to see my head roll, they will first have to hear me speak. Then I will tell them the truth. I will warn them of the witch in their midst."

He truly is ready to die. That defiance in his eye is no ploy. But he knows too how my hands are bound. As my unofficial spy master, he knows every secret, every whisper of insurrection. He knows better than I exactly which members of my court seek to place him on the throne of our dead father. To have him dragged to the scaffold and publicly beheaded would be as good as offering my own head to the *drur*'s ax.

I stare into his face. The face of this man whom I once trusted with my life. And I do what must be done.

"Sul Gaurborg, king's son, Prince of the Under Realm," I say, "you are hereby banished from Mythanar. You will be escorted to the boundaries of my kingdom and sent forth into the outer worlds, never to return on pain of death."

Sul's eyes widen. He wasn't expecting this. Trial and execution, yes. Not banishment. "No, Vor," he says, taking a step toward me. "Let me have my say before the ministers. Let me face the *drur* with honor and so prove my loyalty."

"That will not be. You lost your right to any such honor when you threatened the life of my wife and this kingdom's alliance with Gavaria."

"A false wife! A false alliance! Wrought with entrapments and sealed with lies. You are a fool, my brother, to take that human whore to your bed!"

The drive for murder is strong. But I must maintain control. I turn from my brother and address Hael. “Escort the prince from Mythanar and send him through the Between Gate into the worlds beyond.”

“Which world?” she asks.

“I don’t care. He is never to return to the Under Realm. Seal the gate behind him.”

Hael looks sick. I’m well aware of her heart where my brother is concerned. But she bows her head at last. “It will be done as you say.”

With that, she turns, latches hold of Sul’s arm, and drags him from the chamber. My last sight of my brother is his wide eyes flashing as he cries out, “I will always serve you, Vor! I will always help you, even when you refuse to accept it. Someday you’ll see the truth. You’ll see the truth, Vor! I only hope it isn’t too late.”

His voice fades as Hael hauls him down the passage, leaving me in this empty, echoing chamber with nothing but the crackling moonfire and my own accusing heart.

11

FARAINÉ

I wake to the unsettling sight of a square-jawed trolde face very near my own.

I suck in a breath, and my head jerks back against my pillow. Two large, pale eyes blink one after the other from behind a pair of thick crystal lenses. “*Arh!*” a deep but distinctly feminine voice growls. “*Lar ek-yam!*”

My befuddled senses clarify, and I begin to take in my surroundings. Oh, right. I’m still in the infirmary. And this woman is the healer. Madame Ar, I believe her name is. I’ve seen her once or twice, though we have not been formally introduced. Blinking hard, I let out a breath and pinch the bridge of my nose. “What happened?” I manage to ask.

The healer growls something in trolde before answering in my own language. “You fainted, little princess. Again.”

I grimace. I seem to be doing a lot of that lately. My body can scarcely take any level of exertion without simply folding up on me. One would think I’d get used to it after all this time, yet the embarrassment still stings.

“It’s not a trolde trait,” Madame Ar continues, stepping back another pace and folding her arms across her block-like chest. “All this sighing and sagging.”

“Yes, well.” I push myself upright on the bed, grinding my teeth as the room pitches around me, and wait for my stomach to settle. “Don’t take me as your example for human woman. Most of us don’t drop to the floor at the

least provocation.”

“Perhaps.” The healer shrugs. “The last human queen was a frail little thing as well. Always in and out of my chambers, pale and limp. She got stronger though. With time.” She tips her head. “As will you, I trust.”

I frown. The last human queen was weak? Like me? I know little about her, this woman who was Vor’s mother. Only that she was unhappy in the Under Realm and eventually abandoned her child and husband, never to be seen again. Did her unhappiness contribute to the weakness Ar observed? Or was she simply a delicate constitution? Too bad these troldefolk will never know my sister, Ilsevel. She would have given them a better eyeful of human females and their fortitude. I’m a rather pathetic example.

I swing my legs over the side of the bed and sit a moment, gripping the mattress. My eyes flick across the domed room to where Lord Rath lies. His eyes are closed. From the way his chest rises and falls, he looks to be asleep. Sedated again, perhaps. “How is he?” I ask.

The trolde healer shoots a swift glance her patient’s way. “The poison seems to be gone from his system.” She eyes me again narrowly from behind her crystal lenses. “And you had something to do with that, did you not?”

I hesitate. But my powers have never been a secret. Besides, something in her expression tells me she knows the truth already. So, I nod.

“I thought as much. The last queen had a knack for treating *raog* as well. Not something the priests or priestesses could replicate, no matter how they tried.”

I gape at the healer, uncertain if I’ve heard correctly. Did she just imply that Vor’s mother had powers similar to mine? No, that cannot be. Gods-gifts are rare. I’ve never heard of the same gift manifesting twice within the same century. Of course, the former queen might very well be from a different century; time does not move at the same rate between worlds, after all. In

truth, I don't know how old Vor himself is, at least not by a human count of years. It hardly seemed to matter, trying to define him by such standards.

But what are the odds that his mother possessed this same capacity for accessing the feelings of others? It's too unlikely. I cannot fathom it, not now. "Where is Vor?" I demand abruptly instead.

"No one has seen him. Not since he went stomping off to confront Prince Sul."

"To what?"

Madame Ar answers my subsequent series of questions in quick, abrupt sentences, her voice strongly accented by her harsh trolde tongue. As I listen, my heart sinks. I'd gathered there was some strife between Vor and his brother, but I'd felt Sul's devotion to Vor. It was real and true, a vital part of his spirit. How could he have stooped so low? To try to force his brother to . . . murder me? It would have been far simpler to do the deed himself. There's something else going on here, something I don't fully understand. More imponderable mysteries.

But I haven't the time for any of them. Not now. "I need to see Vor," I say, pushing to my feet. Immediately the world around me blurs and tips.

"That's probably not the best idea." Ar's voice reaches me through the throbbing in my ears. "You've fainted twice in quick succession. You don't want to make it an unlucky third, now do you?"

But I won't sit back down. I wait until the floor steadies and my vision clarifies. Then, with brisk thanks to the healer, I hasten across the room as fast as my bare feet will carry me. Many eyes watch me warily from the infirmary beds, wounded survivors from the cave devil attack. I duck my head and hurry on. Vor needs me. I'm sure of it. He's in pain, and I should be with him. No one stops me as I climb the steps up from the infirmary's main floor to the exit. The door opens when I tug, and I face the outer passage.

Two stone-headed lances cross in front of me.

I pause, staring at those razor-sharp blades. Slowly, I lift my gaze to the faces of the trolde guards, one on either side of the door. “Vor set you to watch me, didn’t he.”

They exchange silent glances.

“I will go to the king,” I persist. “I will not be held prisoner.” With that, I grip the crossed lances and pull. There’s no chance my feeble strength will do any good against those powerful trolde grips. But the guards share another long, silent look. Then, to my surprise and relief, they straighten their lances, back away, and allow me to step past them into the shadowy passage.

Panting a little, I stride on briskly for several paces before my footsteps falter, stop. Where is Vor? Even now facing his brother? My hand almost unconsciously moves to grip my crystal, seeking comfort and possibly guidance. But it is silent in my grasp. I close my eyes, bow my head, concentrate. My gods-gift is not gone—I have proven that. It’s different than it was, but it’s still part of me. And I’ve connected with Vor before. When we made love, it was as though we shared one heart, one soul, one feeling between us. Surely a connection like that cannot be wholly erased?

There. I feel . . . something. A faint pull, drawing me inexorably.

“I know where he is,” I whisper.

Gripping the silvery skirts of my trolde gown with both hands, I hasten down the passage, the two guards falling into silent step behind me.



The gardens show many signs of the cave devil attack and the stirring which preceded it. Many of the larger stone formations which once awed me with their beauty are now cracked and crumbled. At least the mothcats don’t seem to have been harmed by the assault. They swarm in the same numbers as before, their eyeless faces and large, pricked ears a welcome sight. One of the

little beasts springs to my shoulder, purring as it rubs its furry cheek against mine and nibbles at my hair. Something about the resonance of its purr feels familiar.

“You held onto me, didn’t you?” I whisper as I stroke its head. “When I died, you kept me from slipping away. Until Vor could reach me.”

As though in answer, the creature whips its tail under my nose before springing from my shoulder. It dances among the crystals as I progress up the path. The other mothcats maintain more distance, wary of the two guards following some distance behind me. But my little friend scampers on ahead, almost as though it knows where I’m going.

I try not to let my attention turn to the Urzulhar Circle, which stands on its promontory, dominating the view. I do not want to look at it. I do not want to feel again the draw I once felt, or to remember the power which had ripped through my body and bones when I stood in its center. There will be time enough later to consider such things. For now, Vor needs me.

I find him just where I expected, on the shores of *Hirith Borbatha*, the Lake of a Thousand Lights. His back is to me. He stands with his hands clasped, gazing out across the steaming waters to the falls cascading down the craggy cliffs on the far side. Living crystals cast a whole rainbow of color through the falling water, dancing and dazzling in the *dimness* gloom. But Vor does not look like a man admiring the view. Though his shoulders are straight, there’s something defeated in his stance.

I pause, his name frozen on my lips. Whatever happened between him and his brother, I am the cause. Will he welcome me now? When I make my presence known, will he turn to me with love or accusation in his eyes?

It doesn’t matter. He needs me. That is all I know for certain. But it is enough.

I turn, glaring back at the two guards. “Go,” I say, and motion with my

hand. “Go back. Give us privacy.”

Another silent exchange of glances. Then the female guard shrugs and nods to her fellow. He raises a stony brow but turns with her and clomps down the path. No doubt they will take up a defensive position below, making certain no one disturbs their king and his strange little bride.

Drawing a deep, steadying breath, I face the lake and the intimidating figure of my husband. I make no effort to disguise my footsteps as I approach. He doesn't turn, but I can tell the instant he becomes aware of me. Something about the set of his shoulders shifts. I continue until I stand beside him on the shore of the lake. Water washes over my bare feet, warm and welcoming. Vor says nothing. He does not look at me, and I do not look at him. I wait, watching those magnificent falls. Offering him my presence.

“You should not be here,” Vor rumbles at last.

I close my eyes. “I'm exactly where I'm meant to be.”

He turns to me at last, his massive figure shifting. He's so great, so mighty, the very magnetism of his being pulls me to him. I cannot help myself, cannot resist lifting my eyes to his. There are tears on his face, but they do nothing to lessen the power inherent in every chiseled line. “Do you know?” he asks.

I nod.

He curses in troldish and lowers his head, unable to hold my gaze. “It's my fault. I knew it was him. After the first poisoning, I knew. But I had no proof and . . . I simply did not want it to be. I wanted to make the world according to my own wishes. A world in which my brother was true.”

I reach out, take his hand. In the instant our palms connect, his feeling floods through me, a complex maelstrom of guilt and sorrow and anger and fear. It hits me hard, and I cannot help the gasp that escapes my lips.

“No!” Immediately Vor retreats, wrenching his hand from mine. “I'm

hurting you. Your gift—”

I take a lunging step and catch his hand again. “Share this with me, Vor. Please.”

He could easily break my hold again. He is so vast and strong, and I am but a little mortal nothing, a spirit trapped in a body that constantly seeks to betray me. But my heart is strong. I will not be thrown off.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Vor says, his voice in agony. “I don’t want to burden you.”

“I am your wife. It is my honor to share your burdens.”

“I long more than anything to keep you near. But if I have learned nothing else in these last few days, it is the futility of my own desires.”

Another surge of pain streaks up my arm. Within that pain I sense a hardness, a firmness of purpose and resolve. It frightens me more than anything else. “Vor,” I whisper. “Vor, what are you saying?”

He meets my gaze. That same firmness flares in the depths of his eyes. “I’ve been selfish. Thinking I could keep you here in the center of imminent destruction. Thinking I could shield you.”

Ah. So this is where his thoughts are trending. Once again, he plans to send me back. To ignore my own wishes in the name of protection, to banish me from his world, from his life. And what then? Will I live out my days in exile among my own kind? Cursed with a life I never asked to have restored? A life which must be spent rather than lived, far from this man, whose very existence has become the only true home I’ve ever known.

I look into his eyes, see the conviction there. He is king, after all; he is used to his will being law. He is ready to suffer for my sake and unwilling to let me suffer for his. But I have a will of my own.

I squeeze his hand. The pain of his feelings bursts in my head, but I lean into it, taking hold of it as my right. Through the thundering pound in my

temples, I whisper, "I'm not going anywhere."

"It is madness for you to stay."

The look on his face could break my heart even as the agony in his spirit threatens to shatter my body. I lean in harder and repeat, "I'm not going anywhere."

"Faraine, Faraine!" He sighs and draws me toward him, runs a gentle finger along the curve of my cheek. "We are like children playing make-believe, telling ourselves pretty stories. But this story cannot have a happy ending. Everything will be lost. It is inevitable. Foretold by the Deeper Dark long ages ago."

"Perhaps," I admit, leaning into his touch. "And I will be with you, Vor. At the very end."

Even now he resists. His love for me is perhaps my greatest enemy in this moment. That love makes him afraid. Afraid of loss, afraid of a sundering he can neither predict nor control. "I brought you back from the dead so that you would live," he says. "Not to see you poisoned, ripped apart, or crushed to death in a cataclysmic earthquake. Your life is worth too much to me."

"And yet, it is mine. My life. My choice."

"Faraine—"

I break away from him then, whirl on heel and march along the lake shore. My bare feet splash in the shallows. There are sharp stones here, but I avoid the worst of them, putting some distance between me and my husband. I wrap my arms around myself. He isn't wrong. The danger here in Mythanar is tremendous. And inescapable. What hope is there? Neither I nor Vor nor anyone truly believes my father will send his mages to aid the Under Realm. Even if he did, what could they do against such a foe?

Dragon. The word itself is enough to turn my knees to water. I'm uncertain where the idea came from, who first told me. Or did I pick it up

myself? The evidence is everywhere—all the carvings in every chamber of the palace, on every wall. The intricate, serpentine coils embroidered on garments and woven into tapestries. The myth of the Great Dragon pervades the kingdom, the mighty being trapped in the heart of the world, sleeping . . . stirring . . . waking . . .

The Miphates can work wonders of magic beyond my small imagining. But they are nothing compared to such raw, destructive power. They cannot stop what's coming. No one can.

“Are you willing? To fight for Vor? To fight for Mythanar?”

But how can I fight? My magic, always fickle, is more unpredictable than ever now. There's nothing I can do against the forces besetting Vor's world. I am less than useless.

It doesn't matter. Useless or not, I can stand by his side, holding his hand while his kingdom falls. I can be with him. To the end. And we will walk through that realm of mist and find our way into whatever afterlife the gods have planned for us. Together.

Suddenly he's there, behind me. So close, I can feel the warmth of his breath against the back of my neck. I inhale just before his hands grip my upper arms.

“Faraine.”

His touch sends feeling shooting through my senses again. But this time not pain. No, definitely not pain.

“I'm not leaving,” I whisper.

He nuzzles my hair, presses a kiss to my temple. “Faraine, Faraine.”

“I'm not leaving, Vor.”

His mouth trails lower, kisses finding every sensitive inch of skin along my ear, my jaw, my neck. He swipes back my hair, baring my shoulder. His fingers trace down that curve, sparking sensation. I let out a shuddering

breath and lean my head back against his chest, my eyelids dropping shut.

“Faraine, you would break my heart,” he says, his voice low and husky. “You would destroy me piece by piece.”

“You cannot send me from you,” I whisper. “I won’t go.”

His hands slide from my arms down to my waist, then travel up to my breasts, massaging through the flimsy fabric of my silver gown. His thumbs tease at my nipples until they harden. My breath is ragged through my parted lips, and heat pools between my thighs. “Faraine,” he growls against my skin, “I should bind you with *hugagug* cords and have you carried from this world on the back of a morleth.”

“Try it,” I answer.

Then I turn, catch him by the back of his head, and pull his mouth against mine. I kiss him and conquer him, fighting through every defense he throws my way, tearing down all bastions of fear and fury. He may be mighty among warriors of his kind, but in this space, I am his equal. I have fought my own battles and earned my own strength. Strength I use against him now, relentless in my need to overcome this final obstacle—his own love for me.

So, I kiss him. Hard. Then I wrench free of his mouth, his hands. He seeks to catch me, but I shoot him a stare, freezing him in place. Slowly, I back away, my feet a little unsteady on the uneven shore. Looking him straight in the eye, I slip the delicate straps of my dress down from my shoulders. Let the bodice fall to my waist. With a slight wriggle of my hips, the silky fabric pools at my feet. Never breaking eye contact with my husband, I move into the water. The gentle ripples and foam churned by the waterfall lap against my ankles, my knees, my thighs. I keep backing up until I am waist deep.

Vor watches me. All fear and dread have fled his face, leaving behind only ravenous hunger. He wars with himself a little longer, but I already know. I’ve won. I am stronger here, and I have won.

Suddenly he rips off the ceremonial robe he wears and tosses it to the rocks. Water splashes and churns as he wades out to me, diving and propelling himself swiftly so that his long arms wrap around my middle before I have a chance to react. I let out a little scream and a peel of laughter just before I'm pulled under. Glittering lights dance around me, the crystals in the lake alive and flashing in an explosion of color.

We break the surface of the water, and I'm crushed in Vor's arms. He catches my lips in his, kissing me like he intends to drown me in his passion. I wrap my arms around his neck, answering his desire with equal force. His manhood protrudes sharply against me, a clear indication of his state of mind and body. I show him no mercy. Wrapping my legs around him, I move my hips, creating more friction where the heat inside me is building. I need him, want him, want this fire. And I'm not about to give him up.

Vor breaks from our kiss and presses his forehead against mine. "You will end me, Faraine!" he growls.

"Yes," I gasp. "And then I will make you new."

He carries me through the water, kissing me, touching me, licking me. I cling to him, aware as we progress to the deeper regions of the lake where my feet will no longer touch the bottom. I am no swimmer; but I trust Vor. He will not let me go.

Spray from the waterfall dapples my skin and beads like crystals in his silvery hair. Laughing, I reach out to catch some of that stream in my hand just before Vor spins me around, creating a whirlpool of foam and light and water. He hoists me up higher in his arms, and I throw my arms over my head, my wet hair whipping around me, sending an arc of flying droplets. His mouth finds my breast, and I gasp as his tongue plays with my nipple. I grip his shoulder with one hand, the back of his head with the other. Arching my back, I lean into him as pleasure bursts through my body and being. Not my

pleasure only. Every conduit between us is wide open now. I receive his delight, his lust, his hunger in great waves of sensation that light up my being, explosions of golden glory.

Why does he hold back? Through it all, through every connection, there is still that one small piece of himself he must refrain from giving, a dark mote in this dance of light. I shake my head. I cannot lose this moment. Who knows how many we have left? I won't dwell on what he cannot give, not when he is already giving so much and so generously.

With a sudden surge of his powerful arms, he lifts me from the water and sets me on a ledge beside the falls. The stones are sharp against my naked thighs, but I scarcely notice. Not when he grips my hips and pulls me to the edge. A thrill flutters in my belly as I teeter, ready to fall. But he holds me in place, and I wrap my legs around his neck as he buries his face between my thighs, seeking out my secret places with his tongue.

Moaning, I lean my head back and grip the crystal wall on either side of me. Spray from the falls pools in the hollow of my throat, streams between my breasts. I give myself over to each sensation—his tongue, his huge hands grasping my flesh, the water, the falls. All around me, crystals hum in response to the resonance of my body and soul. I feel their power mounting even as the heat mounts within me. And when my ecstasy bursts free, the whole lake beams in a million dancing, multi-colored hues, filling the garden with light.

The brilliance begins to fade at last, and the vibrations settle down to a low hum. I look down at this man, standing in the water below me. His beautiful face is upturned to mine, the hard planes of his features wet with spray, silvery hair clinging to his muscular shoulders. His lips are swollen and wet with evidence of my pleasure.

I reach out, touch his mouth, trailing my finger slowly. "I will never leave

you, Vor.” My voice is nearly lost in the roar of the falls. But he hears me; he hears my very soul. “Try to send me away, and you will fail. Bind me to a morleth, drive me from this world. I will return. I will move heaven and earth, fight the very demons of hell until I am once more by your side. For you are *mine*. No one—not even you—can tear us apart.”

He shakes his head slowly. Love radiates from his soul, pouring through every connection opened between us. Gone is the pain of loss, the fear of further loss to come. There is no room here for anything save the two of us and what we share. This is our world and ours alone.

He does not speak. Instead, he reaches up and takes hold of me, his hands strong around my ribcage, his thumbs resting under my breasts. He lowers me from the shelf back into the water where he pulls me against him. I feel his swollen need between my legs. Clinging to his shoulders, I gaze into his eyes as he lets go of me with one hand and reaches down to guide his length toward me.

My eyes widen. The hardness of him is right there, pressing against me. “Are you sure?” I whisper. He’s so large and intimidating, but it isn’t fear that makes me hesitate. I want him. I want him more than I can bear! But I also want him to know what he wants, what he needs. “You will give this to me, Vor?”

He kisses me. It’s such a gentle, sensual play of his lips against mine. Pressing and pulling, giving and taking. The end of his tongue flicks against my lip, and I groan softly. Then he leans his forehead against mine. Two fingers rest against the divot of my collarbone before trailing slowly down between my breasts. “By the seven gods,” he whispers, drawing one circle then another. “By the seven names.” He sketches a final line, binding the sacred sigil. The heartfasting sigil.

His eyes lift. There’s no veil between us now. No secrets, no shame. My

flesh burns where he drew the sigil; burns with a light of life I had not experienced when he first drew that mark in the hidden garden of Beldroth. He had not known then to whom he made those vows. Vows which were always meant for me.

He gazes into my eyes now and knows me. The true me, his bride.
Chosen. Claimed.

“I pledge my heart to thee,” he says.

Then, he enters me.

He eases in slowly, giving me time to adjust to his size and the pressure. My breath hitches. It hurts—but of course, I’d known it would, though perhaps not quite how much. The sheer vastness of his trolde manhood barely fits inside me. I cling to his shoulders, fingers digging into his flesh.

“Faraine?” Vor looks down at me and begins to draw back. “We can stop—”

“No!” I shake my head, wrap my legs around his waist, and hold him tight. “Don’t you dare stop.”

He kisses me again. Tenderly, sweetly. With care and great gentleness, he deepens the connection until he is fully inside of me, and we are joined. I blink back tears, grit my teeth, but then . . . the pain recedes. Other sensations flow, a new flood of warmth inside me. We are one—truly one. As close to each other as any two beings can be. Not just his body, but his soul as well, twining with mine. My gods-gift opens, receiving his feelings. They engulf me, and I let myself drown in his love, his passion, his longing, and this incredible oneness. All these sensations and more for which I have no name drag me deeper one moment only to buoy me to breathtaking heights the next.

I know now with certainty that nothing can take him from me. Not even death. This moment, this binding, is an eternity in itself. This small point of mere time which has drawn the two of us together will remain forever fixed.

Time is, after all, only one small facet of reality. It cannot compete with the glory of infinity.

He moves inside me, slowly at first, then with increased vigor. My body adapts to his presence, and I work my hips in rhythm with his. His pleasure vibrates in my bones, thrilling me until I feel no pain, only the joy of our joining. When the moment of release comes, he cries out, and I catch my breath, gripping him hard, pressing him to my breast. His pleasure floods me, leaves me gasping and smiling. And when at last the torrent recedes, I hold him close, and he presses his mouth against my cheek, my temple, my ear. “My queen,” he murmurs. “My wife.”

I answer by kissing him. Hard. My tongue presses through his lips, fills his mouth, as the crystals around us sing the song of our joining, and the waterfall laughs in the face of every inevitable disaster.

12

VOR

My queen and I make our way back through the garden, walking hand-in-hand. Somewhere behind us, Lur and Wrag trail at a respectful distance. I trust they had the good sense to stay away, despite my dire warnings not to let the queen out of their sights. Though they couldn't have missed that explosion of crystal light which accompanied her pleasure. The whole kingdom probably noticed that.

I chuckle softly and look down at the woman beside me. We've not spoken. Not when we left the warm waters behind and helped each other back into our damp garments; not now as we progress down the pathways through crystals and broken rock formations. Neither of us wishes to break the spell. Her hand is in mine, and occasionally she leans her fair head on my shoulder. What a glorious feeling it is to have her so close to me, her palm against mine. It would be heaven to remain like this indefinitely.

But the moment we enter the palace, the familiar pressures of kingship settle upon me like a mantle. Even with her fingers entwined with mine, I feel as though Faraine is being slowly torn from me. I've lost so much already—my father, my mother. Yok. Sul. The confidence of my court, the support of my ministers. It all feels so transient. Did my display of power at the *Vulug Ugdth* do anything to secure my faltering rule? Only time will tell. Time and, of course, my few remaining loyal ministers, who must even now be

wondering where I am. I plucked up Faraine's inert body and bolted from the *yunkathu* waters so fast, my court had not yet come back from their stone-wrapped meditation. I'll have to face them, sooner rather than later.

Faraine stumbles. I look down sharply, my brow furrowing. "You're tired."

She tips back her face, smiling impishly. "What do you expect, great king? You are rather vigorous in your attentions." The next moment, she lets out a little scream as I scoop her off her feet. "Put me down, Vor!" she protests, pressing her small hand against my chest. "It's not like I'm about to faint for the third time this *dimness*. I'm just a little worn out, that's all. It's been a busy few hours."

That it has. And if I had my way, I would carry her back to her rooms and busy her for a few hours more. "Please, Faraine, indulge me," I say, adjusting my hold against her wriggling. "If you will not let me protect you, at least allow me to coddle you. Your body has undergone a great deal of strain."

"I can't argue with that." She sighs and, relenting at last, tucks her head against my shoulder. My heart leaps at this small display of trust. In this moment, I feel as though I could carry her through any danger or darkness that might assail us. "Tell me, my King," she says, "will our joinings always be quite so . . . so . . ."

I grimace. "I was ungentle. Forgive me, I should have taken more care."

"No, no! It isn't that." She strokes my cheek soothingly, a smile in her voice. "I am very new to all this, you understand, and my expectations were . . . rather different."

"Different how?"

"I expected the pain. I did not expect to want you so much. Even through the pain."

"As I understand it, the pain will fade in time."

“And the wanting?”

“It is my intention to make certain that never fades. In fact, I hope to increase your desire with each passing *dimness*.” I kiss the top of her head, closing my eyes for a moment to savor the nearness of her. “That, however, is my concern, not yours.”

“And what is my concern, pray tell?”

“When it comes to such matters? Nothing at all. You are perfect as you are and in everything you do. You could not please me more if you studied a thousand forms of seduction across a thousand lifetimes.”

“That’s all very well, but—”

“Please, my love, believe what I say. I have no expectations. Only that you will let me learn you and test you and grow to understand you better. Only that you will let me adore you.”

She sinks into a contemplative silence as we proceed through the palace passages, keeping to the shadows and away from watchful eyes. At this hour, most of the household is asleep, and I know how to avoid those few still awake. We make it back to her chamber unseen, and I set her reluctantly on her feet before the door. She touches the latch, then turns and looks up at me. Her brow puckers slightly. “You cannot stay with me, can you.”

I shake my head. “I fled the *Vulug Ugdth* rather abruptly. There will be rumors flying. I must go and restore what order I can.”

She nods. Then, letting go of the door, she wraps her arms around me. I feel the warmth of her body, each and every curve pressing through the thin material of her gown and the folds of my own robe. How easy it would be to push that door open, back her inside, rip these garments away, and lose myself once more in the pleasures of her flesh. But a different hunger yawns within me now, greater even than the hunger for her body. For as I lean my forehead against hers, breathing in the sweet scent of her, a ripple of peace

flows through me. I do not know if it is her gods-gift at work or simply the rare beauty of her being. All I know is I never could have believed such a feeling was possible following the blows I bore today. The broken trust between my brother and I, his banishment, the terrible yawning void of defeat and devastation . . . all these fade to nothing while I share her atmosphere. To tear myself from her side is to lose that peace, that calm. I can hardly bear it.

A great sigh eases through my lips. “Word of my brother’s banishment will get out,” I whisper. “I hope to keep it quiet for a little while at least. If nothing else, I must prevent my stepmother from finding out. She’s in too deep with Targ and his disciples. It won’t take much to stir them into trouble.”

“I understand.” Faraine nods, her brow moving against mine. For a moment, I fear she will insist on joining me, on facing the ministers at my side. To my relief, however, she backs away and looks me in the eye. “I will wait for you. This time.”

I bend to kiss her, allowing my lips to linger against hers for a few heartbeats before drawing back. “I’ll return as soon as I can. Shut and bolt your door. Lur and Wrag will stand watch over you until Hael returns.”

“I don’t need a guard.” Her eyes flash in the light of the nearby *lorst* stone set in the wall. Even now she fears being made a prisoner.

“Please, Faraine,” I say, “humor me. Let me take this one precaution, but with the understanding that you are always free to come and go. I will leave strict orders for the guards never to interfere.”

She considers this but finally nods. A last kiss, and she opens the door and steps into her room. “Good night,” she says softly.

“Good night, Faraine,” I answer, turning to go. Wrag and Lur stand at the end of the passage, their faces shadowed, their eyes downcast. I take three paces toward them, commands on my lips, ready to be spoken.

“Vor!”

I stop. Turn. Look back to the open doorway and the figure of my wife standing there.

“Vor, I . . . I love you.”

My face breaks into a smile. I cannot speak, not even to return the words. I’d thought I’d reached the very heights of heaven when her naked body was entwined with mine in the waters of the shining lake. Yet not one of those pleasures could equal this. In this moment, I could tear apart the whole world and make it fresh and new. Just for her. Just for us.

She feels the sudden burst of my love rippling out from me. Her gods-gift receives it, and her face lights up in an otherworldly glow shining from her strange, bi-colored eyes. How long we stand there, gazing at each other, I cannot guess. It might be minutes. It might be hours.

In the end, she backs up, shuts her door. And I turn to face the world once more, flames of triumph burning bright in my chest.



“But where *is* Prince Sul?”

Lady Parh, my minister of war, pounds a fist on the stone table, sending hairline cracks running across its surface. My other ministers and their deputies fix their gazes on me, awaiting my answer. I found them minutes earlier congregated in my council hall, discussing the events of the *Vulug Ugdth* in heated tones. The moment I entered, their voices silenced. They rose from their seats and watched me cross the room and take my place at the head of the table.

“Good,” I said. “You’re all gathered. We have much to discuss.”

Some had protested my brother’s absence. While several of the members present make no secret of their outright loathing for Sul, his position as prince and my right hand is uncontested in court. I know exactly which of

them were part of the initial insurrection that sought to place him on my throne following our father's death. I keep them close, seated at this table with me. So long as they feel their voices are heard, perhaps they will keep their words of rebellion to mere whispers.

Lady Parh's voice still rings against the crystals hung from the ceiling, and her eyes snap in the *lorst* glow. I face her calmly. "The Prince will not be joining us this *dimness*."

"And why not?" Parh persists. "Because you banished him?"

A sharp intake of breath from several members present. Lady Sha places a hand against her parted lips, blinking fast.

I hold my minister of war's gaze. "As I said, the prince will not be joining us. He has taken leave of Mythanar for the foreseeable future."

"Then it is true," Lord Gol mutters, running a hand down his face.

"What is true?" Lord Brug crosses his arms across his vast chest and leans back in his seat. "Can someone please speak in plain troidish? Is the prince banished or not?"

I would have preferred to control the manner in which this information leaked. Most likely one of Sul's lovely paramours stood outside the door of his chamber and listened in, knowing she could make a tidy profit for knowledge gleaned from keyholes. I should have made Hael stand outside to protect our privacy.

I rise to address the gathering, taking care to measure my tone. "Prince Sul has been proven guilty of treason against the crown on the testimony of Lord Rath." My ministers exchange wary glances. Even Parh looks unsettled. "He has been banished forthwith and will not return to the Under Realm."

"Has the queen been informed?" Lady Sha asks.

It takes me a breath to realize she's referring to my stepmother, the dowager. My jaw hardens. "She has not. I will speak to her myself come

lusterling.”

“That’ll be a pretty sight,” Lord Brug rumbles, shaking his heavy head. “She’ll have those damned Children of Arraog up in arms by lunch!” The others murmur and mutter, afraid to speak out loud and yet unable to hold their tongues.

I raise a hand. “*Gurat!*” I growl. Instant silence falls. Slowly, I look around the table, meeting each of their gazes in turn. “Sul is my brother. My blood. It is my right and duty as king to pass sentence on members of my own house.”

Lady Parh mutters something low. My eyes fasten on her stony face. “Would you like to say that again, Parh? Louder this time, so the rest can hear you.”

She looks up, lips drawn back from her teeth in a snarl. “He should have had his day in court. He should have been given a chance to make his defense.”

I open my mouth to speak, but Brug interrupts. “*Morar-juk!* Are you mad, woman? That would be playing into the rebels’ hands! They’d make a hero out of him, a martyr. With the city in the state it’s in, something like that would be just the tool needed to tip us all over the chasm’s edge.”

None of them argue. Regardless of their true loyalties, they all know what such violence would mean for Mythanar. We cannot afford to be reckless.

“Brug is right,” I say at last. “We must do everything we can to unite Mythanar and the Under Realm at this time. Lord Gol?” My minister raises his head. He looks older, more stone-hardened than before. “In your estimation, was the *Vulug Ugdth* received well by the people?”

He draws a deep breath before answering. “It remains to be seen, Your Majesty. The preliminary results are, I would say . . . interesting.”

“Interesting how?”

“Everyone agrees that you, Great King, met your ordeal with courage and strength. It is believed the souls of our dead were laid to rest as they should. But . . .”

“Yes, Gol. Continue.”

“There is talk. Concerning your human bride.”

A stone drops in my chest. How could there not be talk? Onlookers from the gallery had witnessed Faraine entering the *yunkathu* pool. It is not unlawful for the queen to assist in the *Vulug Ugdth*, but Faraine has never been crowned or claimed by the Under Realm. She isn't their queen.

“What talk?” I demand, my voice edged.

Gol exchanges glances with several of his fellows. “Rumors,” he admits, dragging his gaze unwillingly back to mine. “Rumors and whispering. Rippling through the city faster than anyone can quash them. They're saying the *Almuth tor Grakanak* has returned.”

I frown, the strange title echoing in my head: the “Fist of the Deeper Dark,” a figure from ancient myth, one I learned about while still in my cradle. The prophecy of some great savior sent by the gods from beyond the boundaries of the world to rescue Mythanar in her hour of need. It's obscure, mentioned only in a few of our more ancient prayersongs, rarely depicted in stone carvings or reliefs.

Something about this isn't right. Something doesn't fit.

“Returned?” I echo. “What do you mean, returned?”

Yet another exchange of glances. Gods, I'm getting tired of this! Were Sul here, he'd threaten to crack their skulls. Only Lady Sha, who is the nearest to me in age, seems as confused as I. “It would seem my ministers are more interested in myths and legends than in serving their king or their nation,” I growl, leaning back in my chair and narrowing my eyes at the lot of them. “Out with it. Why are these rumors spreading and how do they matter to the

issue at hand?”

“It is what they once called your mother,” Lady Parh says.

“What?” Nameless dread fills my chest at the mere mention of that woman. “What are you saying?”

“It’s true.” Brug nods solemnly and turns his small eyes my way. “There was a time when she—a stranger come from beyond the boundaries of this world—was seen by many to be the embodiment of the *Almuth tor Grakanak*. It was widely believed she would—”

The door of the council hall opens, breaking off whatever Brug might have said. All eyes turn to see the figure of Chancellor Houg hastening through, dragging her crimson robes behind her. I rise, and my ministers follow suit. “Houg!” I growl. “I gave strict orders this meeting was not to be disturbed.”

My chancellor makes a deep bow, the long sleeves of her robe pooling on the floor. “Forgive me, Your Majesty. But I must inform you and your wise council at once—the envoy from Gavaria has arrived.”

No sooner have the words left her lips than a loud voice speaking the human tongue echoes down the outer passage: “I say, it’s gloomy as a crypt in here! I don’t know about you lot, but this place gives me the absolute shivers. Glad it was a Shadow *King* in need of an alliance, not a queen, ‘cause if father tried to marry me off, I’d have told him to shove that pointy crown of his where he’s unlikely to forget it!”

A flood of ice ripples through my veins. I know that voice. And I know what’s about to happen. It’s as though I can see the future unfolding before me. Not just the next few moments, but the hours, days, weeks to follow.

My council is watching. And through their eyes, all of Mythanar. I cannot be anything less than a king in this moment. No faltering. No fear. Nothing but absolute conviction.

“Send them in,” I say to Houg.

My chancellor bows, steps back through the door, and beckons. She just has time to announce, “Prince Theodre of Gavaria, my King,” before a familiar figure bursts past her and strides into the room. Two others follow in his wake, clad in dark gray, their faces somber, but the foremost man cuts a splendid figure in gold embroidery, a great plumed hat, and a bejeweled sword and sheath banging against his hip with every stride.

“Ah! Vor!” Theodre cries, his voice ringing in the abrupt silence of my hall. “There you are. It’s been a damnable time getting here. All your riverways seem to be blocked, did you know? Hell of a way to manage a kingdom if you ask me. You really ought to do something about it. And what was with that ghostly town just on this side of the gate? Not exactly a warm welcome, let me tell you.”

“Prince Theodre,” I say. “What are you doing in Mythanar?”

“Oh, isn’t it obvious?” The prince swipes the hat from his head and toys with the wide brim. The feather flutters against his knees. “Father sent me. He needs you back in Gavaria. Some tricky business with the fae raiders as I understand it, though he doesn’t let me in on any of the more important bits. All I know is he needs you and your warriors. At once, as it were.”

Tightness constricts my throat, an invisible cord woven of pure magic. I know what this is: the written spell of the contract I signed. A contract signed with my own name mark. A contract which, in order to be made legal, required the consummation of my marriage to Larongar’s daughter.

A contract which, by force of the magic infusing those words, I cannot break once sealed.

I am aware of all eyes fixed upon me. My ministers, my guards, my chancellor. Every one of them, waiting for me to inform this posturing human that the King of the Under Realm cannot leave his kingdom at this time. That

he still requires Larongar to send his mages before he will devote warriors to fight in a stranger's war. That the alliance was rendered null the moment a false bride was sent in her sister's place.

But the compulsion of magic holds me in its sway. I can do nothing but open my mouth and let the words come. "Lady Parh?"

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"Muster my forces. We ride for Gavaria at once."

13

FARAINÉ

I shut the door and lean against it, pressing my forehead to the cool stone. Gods above, how my heart pounds! Is it strange that I found it so terrifying to speak those words out loud? I've known for some time now what I felt for Vor, admitted it in the privacy of my own head. But somehow actually giving voice to my feelings felt bolder even than stripping away my clothes and giving my body over to his hands and lips and tongue. Which is foolishness, of course. What did we need of words? Surely my actions spoke loudly enough. Were not our two bodies, entwined together in the foam beneath the falls, confirmation of the love we share?

Then again perhaps not. Beautiful as that moment was, the physical act itself would mean nothing on its own. I cannot imagine what it would have been like if my marriage with the Prince of Cornaith had proceeded as planned. What was sacred in Vor's arms would be profane with anyone else. The mere act of joining wasn't enough. Not without love.

And now I've said it. Spoken it out loud. And somehow, it's more real. Everything is more real now that Vor has given himself to me.

I turn and lean my back against the door, tilting my head. My pulse races, and my body, though exhausted, is still warm and alive in all the places he touched and tasted. A little sore too if I'm honest. I smile ruefully and push away from the door, stepping into the dimly lit room.

My heart jumps.

Someone is seated in the chair drawn close to the dark hearth. A faintly glowing *lorst* stone illuminates the edge of a hood and a small, hunched figure.

“Who’s there?” I demand.

The figure in the chair leans forward. In the same moment, the *lorst* stone brightens, lighting up her face.

“You,” I breathe. I know that face. I don’t know how I know, but she’s familiar to me. A figure from a dream. Her features are handsome, lined with age, set with a pair of sharp, golden eyes.

Those eyes take me in now, slowly roving up and down my disheveled figure. “My, my,” the stranger says, raising one brow slightly. Her voice drips with derision. “Aren’t you looking . . . troidish.”

I cross my arms over my exposed bosom, suddenly aware of how very little fabric makes up this gown. It’s one thing to wear it among the troldefolk, paired with the elaborate collar which covered much of my flesh. Stripped down to nothing but the silky under dress, I feel almost naked standing before this woman. This *human* woman.

“Who are you?” I demand. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to see you, of course.” The woman tilts her head a little to one side. “I’d hoped you would seek me out right away. It would seem you’ve had other things on your mind.”

I shake my head, ignoring the blush stealing up my cheeks. “Why should I seek you? I don’t know who you are!”

“Oh, is that so? Have you forgotten our conversation already?”

“What conversation?”

“Our little chat on the edge of death.”

As she speaks those words, she touches one of the many strands of crystals

hanging from her neck. A stone lights up—an *urzul*, pulsing a deep purple hue. It draws my eye, and, as I look at it, it seems as though clouds in my memory part suddenly. Images come into focus, accompanied by voices which start out garbled and unfamiliar but slowly transform into recognizable words.

“You think driving a few woggha from the streets will do any good in the long run, child?”

“Make no mistake, little princess—Arraog, the Fire at the Heart of the World, is stirring.”

“But you’re not just anyone, are you? You’re gods-gifted. Bestowed with divine blessings intended for divine purpose . . .”

It all floods back, everything I’d forgotten. I stare at the woman before me. “I . . . I thought I’d dreamed you.”

“Dreamed me? Oh, no. The dead do not dream, you know.” The old woman rises. Her clothes are just as ratty and worn as I remember, and her many strands of crystals clink delicately against one another as she moves. From the shadows beside the chair, she produces a crooked walking stick and leans on it heavily as she approaches.

I back up a step, but my heel hits the door. I brace myself, lifting my chin. After all, she is just a little old woman. “You still haven’t told me who you are,” I say.

She shrugs. “Eh, it doesn’t matter, does it? What matters more is what you promised me.”

“And what is that?”

“Why, to face the dragon, of course.”

My eyes widen. “I made no such promise.”

She snorts and taps the end of her stick sharply against the floor. “Damn. I’d hoped you wouldn’t remember that part. You do recall what I told you

about Arraog, don't you?"

I hesitate a moment before finally nodding. I don't want to remember. But the knowledge has haunted me ever since I stepped from that pool, ever since Vor carried me back to Mythanar. In my mind's eye, I see again that dream of mighty beings twined in a vast celestial dance. "You said she is waking. That she wishes to destroy this world. But you couldn't say why."

"*Why* doesn't matter all that much. What matters is that it *will happen*. Is in fact *happening*. And you need to stop it."

I should shout for the guards Vor promised would be posted outside. But I can't. Something whispers in the back of my head, saying it would be unwise to draw attention to either this old woman or myself. Dangerous even. But that doesn't make any sense.

My eyes narrow. "Are you preventing me from calling the guards?"

Both brows shoot up the old woman's forehead. "What makes you think that?"

I don't answer. Because now that I've spoken the words out loud, they seem very foolish, embarrassingly so. But even those feelings don't seem as though they belong to me. Grinding my teeth, I frown at the woman. "I don't know what you're trying to accomplish by sneaking into my chambers and . . . and working magic on me. There's nothing you can do or say that will make me into something I am not."

"And what do you mean by that, child?"

"I mean there's no way I can stop a dragon from destroying the world."

"Not at the moment, no. But with a little training."

She's mad. It's the only possible explanation for this whole insane conversation. I toss up my hands. "It doesn't matter what you think! No training in the world will make any difference. Besides, my powers are not what they used to be."

“Really?” The woman takes an eager step forward, her gaze sharpening. “In what way? Explain.”

I open my mouth, but no words come. How can I express to someone who has never felt it, that strange absence inside me, that empty space once filled with the emotions of others? Yes, making love with Vor reawakened some of that former sense. So had the crystal song of the *Vulug Ugdth*. But it’s not the same. “It’s just . . . gone,” I say softly. “Not entirely, perhaps. But it isn’t as strong anymore.”

“Ah, yes.” The old woman’s face wrinkles in a smile, displaying a shocking set of strong white teeth. “Yes, it can take you like that when the shift is happening. At first, it’ll feel almost as though you’ve lost it entirely. But you haven’t. Trust me, child. Gods-gifts don’t come and go like that. They’re given for a reason. And your reason, like it or not, is to kill Arraog.”

Shaking my head, I force a small laugh between my lips. “I’m sorry. Even if my gift was as strong as before, it was never that kind of gift. I couldn’t harm a fly, much less kill anyone.”

“Not up until now, no,” the old woman acknowledges. “But you don’t understand what your gift is. You’ve spent your whole life trying to *manage* it. To control it with that little stone I sent you.”

“*What?*” Hastily, I grip the pendant around my neck. It lies dead and still in my grasp, but the contours are so familiar. In the years since my gift manifested, this stone has become part of me. Sometimes I’ve wondered how exactly I came by it. Initially I’d thought it was a gift from my mother, but how could she have known that a gemstone from a distant world would help calm the ravages of the gift breaking me apart from the inside out?

I stare at this woman, her words ringing in my ear. Rather than answer my blurted question, she touches the *lorst* stone on the end of her walking stick. It blazes brighter, fully illuminating her face. I look at her, really look at her

for the first time. To my surprise, I recognize her. Or rather, I recognize the reflection of her which I have seen many times in a face far more beloved. That set of the lips, that shape of the brow, the slope of the cheek and temple.

“You’re her,” I whisper. “You’re Vor’s mother. The queen.”

The woman smiles again, and it’s a smile I know. Altered, yes, to fit the face of an elderly human as opposed to the flashing brilliance of a magnificent trolde king. But I’d know that smile anywhere. “I am Maylin,” she says. “Once upon a time, I was a queen. Now I’m just the old witch of the Upper Lands.”

“But . . . but you left. You abandoned Vor and fled this world, and . . . and . . .” I run out of words. The truth is, Vor told me very little of his mother. I assumed she died ages ago, having returned to her own world and the mortal air that would soon sap her body of youth and vitality. I never dreamed she’d remain so close, her life prolonged though apparently not protected against aging. “Does Vor know?”

“Of course. It was he who brought you to me, he who begged me to tell him how you might be saved. So yes, Vor has known for some time. Though he declined to pay me a visit until recent events drove him to my doorstep. He still hasn’t forgiven me for leaving his father. He didn’t understand. He was too young.”

“I don’t understand.” The words bite harshly through my teeth. “Why did you leave him? And . . . and how could you possibly . . . ?” I grip the stone around my neck, far too many questions crowding my head at once.

Maylin eyes me, her expression hooded. “I sought long and hard for another gods-gifted,” she says slowly. “I knew you would appear one day. It was foretold, was it not? But it took generations for the gods to bestow your unique gift again. In the meanwhile, I could not let myself die. So, I clung to this world and the immortality its air affords, only venturing back into our

world periodically to continue my search. Many's the time I nearly gave up, convinced you would never be. Then one day . . . there you were." Her eyes glitter, strange embers in their golden depths. "Your gods-gift came upon you in such a flood of power, it positively sang out from every stone in this world!"

I shake my head. My breath is caught in my throat. "How could you have known? How could you find me?"

"Because I knew what I was looking for. Because I alone in all the worlds was best prepared to recognize it."

The old woman lifts the strands of necklaces around her throat. They light up at once, dozens of brilliant colors, each unique and gleaming from multifaceted surfaces. A low hum vibrates from their centers, creating a harmony which shivers across my senses, straight to my bones. "You are not the only one to bear your gift, Faraine Cyhorn of Gavaria," she says. "I too am gods-gifted. I too receive the emotions of others, feel the energy of their spirits. I too once lay in torment, battered to the brink of death by energies over which I had no control, my mind and body slowly breaking. But I learned. By the grace of the gods themselves, I was brought here and instructed by the priests of the Deeper Dark. They taught me to channel my power through the *urzul* stones of this world and so much more besides."

She lifts one strand of crystals. The long, irregular stones gleam pale blue one moment before transitioning to a rich, warm gold. I stare at them, strangely mesmerized, like a moth enthralled by the candle flame.

"It has been many long years since I stood in your shoes," the witch continues, her voice softly blending into the crystal hum. "But I remember. And I will teach you."

Something warm buds and blooms inside me, a feeling of calm and certainty, followed soon after by eagerness which in turn builds to hunger. I

gaze at those stones, every sense in my body and mind attuned to their vibrations. I want to take hold of them myself, to draw their energy into my body. To let the sound, the pulse, infuse me. I take two steps, stretching out both hands, before I realize what I'm doing. With a gasp, I wrench back. Something is wrong. This thrum inside me, this ache in my blood and bones . . . it doesn't belong to me.

"What are you doing?" I demand, tearing my gaze from the crystals and meeting the witch's gold eyes. "Are you manipulating my feelings? Feeding me emotions?"

Maylin's white teeth flash in the light of her *lorst* stone. "Surely you've already realized you can do the same, have you not? It is the first and easiest trick to master."

"No!" I shake my head, appalled. Backing away several more paces, I press against the wall. "I would never do that. I would never violate another person in that way."

"Really?" The old woman tilts her head, looking at me from under her wrinkled brow. "Think again, little princess."

And I do. I think of my sister, kneeling with her head in my lap. I can feel how she shakes with hunger and fear. I remember how her skin felt as I brushed my fingertips across her forehead and let a thread of calm pass from my heart to hers.

But surely that's not the same thing! I didn't manipulate Ilsevel, merely eased her anguish. It was only then that she could be convinced to honor her familiar obligations, to agree to a marriage she abhorred, to accept a husband she feared.

"Oh." I let out a short breath through my lips. "I didn't think . . ."

"You young people never do. It is the great curse of youth." The witch sighs and lets her necklace fall back among the others. All the little lights

flicker out, leaving only the glow of her *lorst* stone. “But I can teach you. I was brought to Mythanar to hone my skills, and hone them I did. Now I will teach you.”

My head throbs, pounding with too many thoughts and ideas. There’s a cold, empty space in my core where my own feelings ought to be and aren’t.

“It’s a lot to take in, I know,” the old woman says, turning her crooked staff slowly in both hands. “I’ve waited a long time for your arrival, Faraine. But you’re here at last, and we have so little time left.”

I lift my head, look the old woman in the eye. “How could you know I would come? How could you know your son would seek among humans for his bride? How could you know he would journey to Gavaria and . . . and . . .”

The look on her face is as clear as a written confession. My words trail away as I read the truth wrought in those lines and wrinkles, those shrewd, snapping eyes. I can almost see history playing out in my mind’s eye. The little hunched and hooded witch slipping through the shadows, implanting feelings in the heads of certain key members of Vor’s court. In Vor himself. It wouldn’t take much. Even the heaviest boulder can be made to roll if the right leverage is applied.

“He chose my sister.” The words blurt from my lips, a desperate protest against the reality I now face. “He chose Ilsevel. Not me. Your plan, whatever it was, didn’t work.”

“Didn’t it?”

“He would have married her! She was killed on her Maiden’s Journey, but he would have married her instead.” A horrible thought coils in my gut. My heart jumps to my throat. “You . . . you didn’t . . . ?”

“What? Murder the girl to remove an obstacle?” Here the old woman laughs outright, a dangerous, dagger-edged sound. “No need, I’m glad to say.

The gods themselves arranged that bit of fortune. They have a way of seeing to it their gifts end up where they belong. You were meant to come to Mythanar, my girl. I was merely an instrument used to guide destiny along its way.” The old woman takes another step forward, gripping her walking stick in both hands. “No one can gainsay the will of the gods. You are here. And you will be the Under Realm’s salvation, one way or another. But not until you learn your true strength.”

Every step she makes is like the approach of doom. I want to flee, but where can I go? I could still open the door and call for the guards, but something prevents me. Is it the witch, confusing my reason? Perhaps. But it doesn’t feel that way.

It feels like *hope*.

Hope that the pain I’ve experienced for so many years might serve an ultimate purpose.

Hope that I’m not a liability, but can truly become something more, something strong. Something powerful.

Vain wishes! Who am I fooling? These are the dreams of an ignorant child. I’ve experienced too much to be so easily taken in.

“I’m not what you think I am,” I say at last. “I used up all the power the gods gave me just to turn back the cave devils. I channeled energy from the Urzulhar Circle, and it nearly killed me.”

The old woman snorts. “It *did* kill you. Let’s not mince words. But I can teach you to protect yourself from your own power. Watch.”

She pulls back the draped folds of her sleeve, exposing her forearm. For a moment, nothing happens. The *lorst* light plays across her crepey skin, revealing each and every liver spot. Then something begins to happen. My eyes widen, and I step nearer, all caution vanishing in wonder.

Her skin transforms before my eyes. Hardening, thickening. It’s like the

dorgarag, the malformation that mars Hael's skin. Only this is not gray, dull stone. It's crystal. Pure, shining crystal. Faceted and gleaming with inner light, covering her arm, her hand, each gnarled finger. It's beautiful. And terrible.

Maylin lets out a gust of air like she's been holding her breath. The crystals sink inside her, melting away to be replaced by thin, blue-veined human skin once more. But when her eyes flash to meet mine, they glow brighter than the *lorst* stone.

"I don't understand," I say, gaping at her. "My powers are nothing like that."

"Your gift is far greater and more nuanced than you've yet bothered to imagine. What you need is training. And practice. This little trick? It is but an outward sign of inward power. The true power lies here." The old woman thumps a fist against her shrunken chest, rattling her necklaces. "Tell me, child, where does your heart lie?"

I'm silent for a long moment. But the truth can't be denied. "With Vor. Always with Vor."

"And you want to help him, do you not? You want to save him."

"Yes."

"Can you do that? Is this person you are right now what Vor needs?"

What's the use in answering? We both know the truth. I am a liability not an asset to Vor and his rule. Where is he now? Somewhere dealing with his court, seeking to undo the mess I created by inserting myself into matters I don't understand.

"I thought not." The witch smiles mirthlessly. "You must become more, Faraine. You must become stronger, harder, if you hope to save your husband and this realm. But you'll need to access your true power. And that's where I come in."

She turns abruptly, weaving between articles of furniture as she crosses the room to the window, which stands partly open. She pushes it wider and steps onto the balcony, which stands many stories above the courtyard. “Where are you going?” I demand. There’s no way out that direction, not unless she can fly.

The witch looks back over her shoulder. Her *lorst* stone flares brighter than before, highlighting her face in a harsh, white glare. “I’ve said my piece. It’s up to you now. Make up your mind, and when you’ve done so, meet me at the Urzulhar Circle two *dimness* from now. Your training will begin then.”

Before I can speak a word, the light goes out. The sudden darkness is so profound, it seems to cut off my voice, my very breath. For some moments I can do nothing but stand immobile, my lungs crushed inside my chest.

Then my heart throbs. I gasp a painful inhale and stumble across the room, fumbling for the nearest *lorst* stone. “*Hira!*” I whisper, a troidish word of command. The crystal answers, glowing softly. I hold it out in front of me as I search the room, the balcony, every shadowy nook and cranny.

But the witch is gone.

14

VOR

It is nearly *dimness* the following day before I finally make my way back to Faraine's room. Every part of my body and soul is exhausted. I've not had a spare moment to breathe since beginning the preparations for the journey to Gavaria. There have been more meetings, both public and private, than I care to remember. A great deal of shouting and long, cold silences. I've had ample time to regret every choice I've ever made in this life.

But the future cannot be forestalled. I and my forces will ride for the human world tomorrow *lusterling*. We will fight for Larongar, fulfilling the bond of magic to which I put my name. Leaving Mythanar and the Under Realm without a king to guide and protect it.

Many times throughout those seemingly endless meetings, my hand found its way to the pocket of my robe, touching the crystal hidden there. *A life for a life*. That was the bargain I made. Will payment for that bargain finally come due? Will I march for the human world never to return?

Hael stands watch outside Faraine's chambers. The sight of her sends my heart plummeting. Her expression is harder than usual, almost as though the *dorgarag* covering her neck and creeping up her cheek now spreads across the rest of her features. This woman has been like a sister to me for as long as I can remember. Now she has become something unfamiliar. Not an enemy, not a friend. Just stone.

“Has Sul gone from Mythanar?” I ask when I am near enough to drop my voice.

She does not turn to greet me or offer a salute. She merely nods. We are both silent for some moments. She loved him. I know it well. I never liked it, never encouraged it. But I couldn't stop it. He loved her too, I believe. In his way. Possibly not in a way that would have ever brought them mutual happiness, but it was no less real.

“You have heard about Prince Theodore's arrival?” I say at last.

Hael maintains her silence but nods. Once.

“*Juk*,” I whisper, the curse bitter as poison. “I have no choice. I put my name on that damned piece of paper. The magic is binding.”

She doesn't meet my eye. I can almost hear her thinking the same thought which will soon echo through every living soul of this world: *You did have a choice. Right up until the moment of consummation. You didn't have to go through with it.* What defense can I make? How could I begin to explain to Hael or my ministers or any of my subjects? How can I tell them that rejecting Faraine, that sending her back to her world would be like tearing my own heart from my breast? None of them would understand. Because I am their king. My heart is Mythanar. My body is the Under Realm. I am not a person, not an individual. I am an idea. A symbol. But in a moment of weakness, I forgot all this and became nothing more than a man in love.

Will it cost my people everything?

“We march for Gavarria tomorrow *lusterling*,” I continue, my voice empty of emotion. “We will rout Ruvaen's forces within a month and return to Mythanar with the Miphates. Then we will see what the power of mortal magic may do for us.”

Here at last, Hael turns. The deadness in her eye shocks me like a cold blade through the gut. She does not blink but holds my gaze long and hard.

“No one can stop the dragon, my King,” she says coldly. “The fire at the heart of the world will rise, and all that is not stone will break and burn.” Then she turns away from me again and sinks back down into her rock-clad stillness.

I draw a deep breath, hands slowly fisting. “You will remain here,” I say. “You will guard my wife in my absence.”

Her eyes flare a little wider.

“I need someone I can trust to protect Faraine. You will do this for me, Hael. Won’t you?”

A muscle in Hael’s jaw tightens. “I believed I would march with you.”

I shake my head sadly. “I would have preferred to have you at my side. But I cannot leave Faraine unguarded. Will you do it?”

“I will serve as needed,” she answers shortly. And I know from the finality of her tone that I will get no further words from her this *dimness*.

Turning away, I approach the door to Faraine’s room, knock softly, and enter. The chamber is deeply shadowed. No lights are lit, neither a moonfire blaze on the hearth nor any of the *lorst* stones in their holders. All is still, quiet. My heart constricts. Then I spy her lying on the bed, sound asleep, and my breath eases once more.

I step into the room, shut the door softly behind me. On silent feet I cross to her bed and gaze down at her. She lies with one arm tossed back over her head, her face tipped a little to one side. Her lips are parted, and her chest rises and falls with the gentle rhythm of her breaths. She is so lovely—I could stand here until *lusterling* admiring every aspect of her face and form and never once grow weary. Once I wondered if I could learn to find her beautiful. The truth is, I always did. I simply wasn’t ready to admit it. Hers is a beauty that cut me to the quick from the first moment I saw her.

Guilt coils in my gut. I cannot help the love I feel. I would die for her. I

would kill for her. But now I must send others to their deaths for her sake. Who can absolve me of this sin?

She stirs, her brow knotting as though even in sleep she feels the tension in my soul. It is unfair to her and her gods-gift to bring such terrible emotions here. And we have so little time left.

I drop to my knees beside the bed and gently run one knuckle down the length of her arm. She shivers a little, turns toward me. Her eyelids move, flutter, then blink open. For a moment, confusion mars her face. She blinks again, and her vision clarifies. Her mouth breaks into a smile that knocks the breath from my lungs. “Vor!” she whispers.

The sound of my name on her lips is more than I can resist. I bend over and kiss her. I couldn’t stop myself if I tried. She wraps her arms around my neck, pulls me down to her, and I let all thoughts, all fears go. I will not dwell on the news I’ve come to share with her. Let us once more enter a world that belongs only to the two of us and forget all other worlds exist.

So, I kiss her. Again and again. Kiss her until her eyes close, and her mouth opens, and her whole body gives over to my lips, my touch, my urgent craving. It is the work of a moment to pull her nightgown free of her shoulders, to tug the fabric away from her trembling flesh. I run my hands over her breasts, her hips, slip my fingers between her legs. She gasps for air, her beautiful breasts, so perfectly formed to fit the palms of my hands, rising and falling alluringly. I cannot resist the temptation, and bend to kiss them, suckling at her nipples while she laughs and runs her fingers through my hair. “Oh, Vor! I could have sworn I was dreaming! But this is really you, isn’t it?”

“What do you think?” I murmur the words against her skin. “Is the Vor of your dreams as skilled as I?”

She shakes her head, catching another breath as I lick and tease her. My

fingers part her tender flesh, bringing heat rushing at my command. She's so responsive to my touch, like a fine instrument perfectly tuned. Every movement of her body excites me. It's more than I can resist to venture between her legs and taste her eagerness. And when she cries out in ecstatic release, pure joy rushes through my soul. I never would have thought such joy could be mine. Not until I met her. Not until I knew her.

When her shivering pleasure subsides, I kiss my way back up her abdomen, between her breasts, nibbling at her neck and ear as I stretch myself alongside her on the narrow bed. She lies replete in my love, her face flushed and shining and so very beautiful. I run a finger along the curve of her breast and hip until she rolls toward me, hooking her leg around mine, pressing her body flush against me. "I feel I am at a disadvantage," she says, toying with the laces of my shirt. "You appear to be wearing a great deal more clothing than I."

I smile and rest my head against her forehead but grip her hand tight when she begins to pull at the ties. "Vor?" Her brow puckers against mine before she draws back. Something in my soul communicates to her, and a dart of pain flashes across her face. "Vor, what's wrong? Something just *shuddered* through you. Something bad."

I sigh and squeeze her hand a little tighter. Then, pushing away, I swing my legs over the edge of the bed and rest my elbows on my knees, head hanging. She sits upright. After a heartbeat's hesitation, she rests her hand on my shoulder and gently pushes back my hair. "Vor, talk to me."

I don't want to. I don't want to tell her what's happened. I don't want to bring the knowledge of our imminent parting into this space. But I cannot keep it from her, no matter how I wish to. "Your brother is here," I say heavily.

A confused silence lasts for the count of three breaths. Then she gasps,

“Oh!” and retreats from me. Her loose nightgown is still bunched up around her waist. To my sorrow she unconsciously draws the sleeves back onto her shoulders, covering her nakedness. “My father has summoned you to battle.”

I nod.

“And you will go?”

“I must.”

Another silence. We both know what we did last *dimness*. We both know what the consummation of our marriage means for me and my people.

Faraine shakes her head, her fair hair tossing about her shoulders. “I will go with you.” I bite back a smile. “Why do you laugh?” she demands. “I will go with you. I will stay with you, care for you. Serve in whatever capacity I may.”

I can almost picture it: Faraine astride a morleth, riding in formation beside me, adorned in child-sized troidish armor. Stolen moments tangled up together in my tent, the stink of battle and blood surrounding us as we try to make each other forget all we have endured. It’s a tempting fantasy.

“Faraine,” I say, my voice low, “how can I commit myself to the fight, to the leadership and protection of my warriors, if you are with me? I will be first and foremost concerned with you, with your safety.” I touch her cheek, run my knuckle under her chin and tip her face back, forcing her to look at me. “Perhaps you would prefer to wait out the war in Beldroth. You should be safe there.”

“Safe? In my father’s house?” Faraine shudders. We both know Larongar would like nothing more than to have my wife in his clutches. No doubt he would soon recognize the feelings which have blossomed between his ally and his daughter and work to leverage our love to his advantage. She would be no safer in Beldroth than here in Mythanar, impending apocalypse notwithstanding.

“Hael will remain,” I say, changing the course of conversation. “I’ve commanded her to watch over you. And, while I don’t know what good it will do, Theodore is to stay as well.”

Faraine’s eyebrows knit. “Why would Father send Theodore here? He is the crown prince.”

I shrug. “Perhaps the prince is proof of intent. Insurance that Larongar will honor his part of our agreement.”

She shakes her head. “Something doesn’t feel right.”

She’s not wrong. But what can we do? Nothing will change the magic binding which even now drives me to ride for her world. I feel it choking, pulling, every moment, every breath. Until I have fulfilled the agreement, I will never be free.

I press her hand against my heart. “I’ll return in a month, my love.”

She meets my gaze, smiling softly. “And you think Ruvaen will be so easily put to flight?”

“Ruvaen does not have my motivation to succeed.” I lift her hand to my lips then, kissing her knuckles. “I will bring the Miphates back with me. They will use their magic to put an end to the stirrings and save Mythanar.”

“You mean for them to slay the dragon?”

I stare down into her wide eyes, shimmering blue and gold in the low light of a single *lorst* stone. She knows about the dragon? Who told her? It is not something we speak of openly. To name Arraog or even to reference her is, according to tradition, to summon her. To wake her. Thus, though she is everywhere throughout our world, carved into our walls, embroidered into our garments, infusing our very dreams, she remains less than a whisper. A shadow on the edge of conscious awareness.

“Hush!” I say at once and wrap a hand around the back of her head, pulling her to me, pressing her to my chest. “Do not speak of it. Do not think

of it. It's better if you don't. Trust me, please." I cup her face then, guide her lips to mine. Kiss her with tender ferocity, as though I can kiss all dark thoughts or fears from her mind. "We will have a life together," I growl when I pull away at last.

There are tears caught in her lashes as she strokes my cheek. "It is a beautiful dream," she murmurs.

"I will take any dream you like and forge it into reality."

She doesn't answer. Am I hurting her? Is this proximity, this shared touch between us, causing her gods-gift to react with pain? I start to withdraw, but she catches hold of me, drags me to her, and kisses me deeply. While her lips hold me captive, her hands venture down my torso, yanking at my shirt until the laces come undone. Then she slides the straps of her nightgown from her shoulders, presses her naked breast against mine, and I forget everything—all wars, all bargains, all dragons. There's no room in my heart for anything but her.

15

FARAINÉ

Everything happens so quickly.

One moment I'm safely encircled in Vor's arms, tucked away in the privacy of my chambers, far from intrusive eyes. It seems as though I've scarcely blinked . . . and suddenly I'm standing on the great front steps of the palace, watching as Vor speaks final words of instruction to his ministers. He's arrayed in battle armor, spiked and terrifying. It makes him look like a monster from a fairy tale—a true troll. I can scarcely recognize the tender form of my lover, my husband, beneath those dreadful lines. My heart tightens. Will I ever know that version of Vor again? Were those stolen moments last *dimness* to be the end of our story?

Was our story ever even real?

That thought intrudes despite every effort to bar it behind slammed mental doors. How can I not wonder? How can I not question whether Vor's feelings for me were his own or implanted in him? I felt what it was to have Maylin's power working in me, filling me up with emotions not my own. Vor couldn't fight against such manipulation, unaware and unsuspecting as he was.

I grip my own forearms, shivering, though it isn't cold. I'm clad in scarlet, a color not at all suited to my complexion. Another gown made for my sister rather than for me. But it is a regal garment, fit for a queen. I've donned the headdress of dragon wings once more as well, and hold myself straight and

tall, aware of all the wary trolde gazes fixed on me. And not me alone. My brother stands three steps down from me. I cannot see his face from this angle, hidden beneath the brim of that ridiculous hat. He raised a hand in greeting when I first appeared and opened his mouth to speak but had the good sense to shut it again when I shook my head. Just now, in full view of Vor's court, it wouldn't be wise for my brother and I to be seen chatting comfortably with one another. Not when the king is about to march off to fight our father's war.

So, I am silent and alone as I watch the final preparations. My head throbs a little, residual pain from Vor's emotions when we parted hours earlier. He'd tried so hard not to let his feelings affect me, all to no avail. It's worth it, though. Even if the final feelings shared between us are anxiety and dread, it's still worth it.

Vor barks orders to the company of morleth riders gathered in the courtyard. They are but a small part of the five hundred strong who will ride with him into Gavaria. The rest are already mustered in the lower city. Five hundred warriors seemed like an impressive number when Vor told me last night. Even now, with only a fraction of them on display, they are a splendid sight. But I cannot help wondering if such a force will be of any use against Prince Ruvaen? Memory burns in my head of the ferocious fae riders who attacked the carriage carrying my brother and me down from the mountain convent. Astride their flaming unicorn mounts, they looked like demons, totally lost to their own bloodthirst and the sheer joy of slaughter. Had Vor and his people not arrived when they did, Theodre and I would not have survived.

A hideous shriek rips across the courtyard.

I spin on heel. A figure appears behind me at the top of the stairs, framed in the doorway. It takes me a few startled heartbeats to recognize Queen Roh,

clad in nothing but a ratty shift, her hair straggling about her shoulders and down her back, her face riven with fury. I've never seen her like this. She has always presented herself in splendid trolde raiment, a glorious picture of queendom. Now she looks like a wraith. Or a lunatic.

Hael's broad form steps between us, blocking Roh from my sight. But the queen is not interested in me. She cries out again, troldish words ringing against the surrounding stone walls. She holds out one finger, pointing straight at Vor. "What's happening?" I whisper, tugging unobtrusively at Hael's sleeve as the queen descends the steps and approaches Vor in the courtyard below.

Hael draws a breath through her flared nostrils. "Queen Roh accuses our king of betraying his people. Of abandoning them in their suffering."

A chill grips my heart. I peer out beyond Hael's arm, seeking Vor's face. He has not yet donned his helmet and stands with his head back, his jaw set, his eyes fixed on the queen. It's difficult to discern anything through that mask of stern, kingly calm, but I watch Roh's words strike home. *He believes her.* The thought intrudes against my will. I try to shake it away, but it persists. *He does not blame me. But he believes what we did was wrong, that we should not have been together.*

When we joined in the crystal-lit waters, we connected as profoundly as any two living beings can. In those moments, I received the whole of his feelings: the joy, the glory, the ecstasy. But also the underlying throb of guilt. Shame. It is those feelings—so dark, so insidious—which pulse in his soul now.

Roh reaches the base of the stairs and continues advancing. Guards step in to waylay her, but Vor motions them back. The dowager queen draws near enough to stand face-to-face with her king. She is as tall as he, but otherwise they share no similarities. Vor is shining and powerful in his armor, while she

wears rags and looks as fragile as a doll. He could reach out and snap her neck without a thought. Yet she looks him in the eye, spewing her vitriol. When she is done, Vor responds coldly, a single, short sentence in trolde.

There's a murmur of reaction among the onlookers. Hael catches a breath. I look up at her in time to glimpse a flash of fierceness in her eye. "What just happened?" I ask. "What did he say?"

My guard's jaw works. "His Majesty has asked the queen if she and her pet priest seek to be banished like her traitor son." The words are like rough-hewn rocks falling from her lips. Even without the sensitivity of my gods-gift, her feelings are painful. I take a step back.

Roh speaks again in a vicious hiss. Suddenly she raises one arm. I choke on a scream. She brandishes an *urzul* crystal over her head. I want to cry out, to warn Vor, but cannot seem to form the words. Rather than attack her stepson, however, the queen slices her own palm. She holds her bleeding hand high, fist clenched. Blue blood drips through her fingers, into her hair, spattering her face, her bosom. Slowly, she turns, speaking to all those watching, her voice carrying across the yard.

"What is she saying?" I whisper, unsure Hael will hear me.

But my bodyguard answers softly: "The Deeper Dark will not be mocked. Not by any paltry efforts to appease or control it." She shakes her head, blinking hard, as though coming out of some trance. Then: "She says if the king wants to spill good trolde blood, he should spill it where it matters. Where it will make a difference."

My stomach knots. I know what the queen is referring to. Memory of a pitch-black chapel vibrating with *urzul* resonance fills my head. Worshippers of the dark, kneeling, wrapped in stone. A deep voice chanting, pulsing power from blood-fed crystals. The ceremony of *va-jor*, intended to bring trolde souls and trolde bodies into a state of true stone. But the ceremony

lacked one key component, or so Vor had informed me. The magic of *va-jor* could only manifest via the blood of sacrifice. *A willing sacrifice.*

Is that what Roh is implying? That Vor should sacrifice himself to aid her own mad plan for Mythanar's redemption? I cannot tear my gaze from her face, from the mad light in her eye. Absolute conviction shines through the veil of blue blood trickling down her features.

Vor signals. Guards hasten forward, take hold of the dowager queen, and drag her away. It's too late. The image is already fixed in the minds of all who observed the exchange. How many of these people surrounding me share Roh's belief and secret hope? How many see their king as she sees him: a traitor to his kind?

Vor's face is harder than I've ever seen it. The face of a stranger. I want to call out his name, to beg him to turn to me, to meet my gaze and, even for a moment, transform back into the man I love. But I dare not. He must be a true trolde king now. Fixed in purpose, strong as bedrock. Even as the compulsion of mortal magic drags him from this world.

When the queen is gone, Vor dons his helmet and mounts his morleth. Now the transformation from husband to warrior is complete.

"Drag-or, ortolarok!" he cries.

The company responds, every rider raising his or her fist: *"Rhozah! Rhozah!"*

Only as he turns his mount's head toward the gate does he shoot me a last look. For an instant, our eyes lock across the distance. In that instant, I feel as though my powers have sprung back to life. The ground beneath my feet hums, the very walls of the palace, the city, the cavern . . . all seem to vibrate with my bones and blood as that rippling connection between us bursts through my heart. I feel his love. His guilt. His fear. It hurts, but I want it. I want to feel it. Because it is his, and he is mine. I don't flinch, I don't try to

hide. I let it flow through me, shuddering me to my core.

Then he faces forward and rides across the courtyard as his warriors fall in behind him. Once beyond the palace walls, they rise into the air, flying out in a long dark stream over the city, over the chasm, and away.



“I say, Faraine, you’re looking well.”

I blink. My vision is somewhat dazzled by the *lusterling* light of the cavern, and I find it difficult to adjust to the world nearer to me. Apparently, the rest of the court has already dispersed, leaving me alone to watch the departure of my husband and his riders. I’d been so caught up trying to hold onto that last glimpse of Vor, I’d not noticed their going.

Neither had I noticed when my brother climbed the last few steps to join me. His arms are crossed, his hat tilted back from his exquisitely sculpted face. I meet his gaze coldly. This is the first time we’ve been alone in each other’s company since he brought me back from the Convent of Nornala so that I might impersonate our dead sister and fulfill Gavaria’s contract with the Under Realm. “Do you mean I’m looking like myself again?”

Theodre grimaces. A faint blush stains his cheeks. “Um, yes. That too.” He rubs the back of his head, fluffing the delicate lace collar so that it stands upright. “I suppose the Shadow King wasn’t too upset by our father’s little sleight of hand, eh?”

I swallow back bile and answer only, “Not too upset. No.”

“Well, good.” Theodre lets out a sigh and smiles. “I’ve got to say,” he continues brightly, “maybe I’m just a romantic, but I did sort of wonder if you and Vor had something of a connection going on. That ride to Beldroth—gods! I’d never heard you prattle on as you did then! And then, you know, you danced together that one night.”

I raise an eyebrow, surprised. Even Ilsevel, with whom I’ve always been

close, had missed the spark ignited between Vor and I after our first meeting. I wouldn't have expected my self-absorbed older brother to notice anything beyond the brim of his perfectly molded nose.

Choosing not to answer, I turn and enter the palace. Theodre hastens after me. The tall heels of his boots echo loudly across the polished floor. "I say, this place is a lot bigger than I ever expected!" he declares. "All the caverns and stalagmathingies, sure, but whole cities and palaces? And on such a scale? It's impressive. The riverways were quite interesting too, did you notice? Not terribly well directed, but I hear there's been some earth shaking putting things off their regular course, and—"

I stop abruptly. "Theodre, why are you here?"

"What do you mean?" His complexion is pale in the *lorst* light, faint shadows ringing his eyes.

"Why are you here? In Mythanar. Why did Father send you of all people to deliver his message?"

His brows knot. "I'd like to think it's because he trusts me. I am the crown prince after all."

"Right. You're the crown prince. You're the last person Father should be sending."

"Hang on, I don't think that's altogether fair—"

"How can you not see it?" I shake my head. Could he really be so dim? "Vor chose Ilsevel as his bride because everyone knows she is Father's favorite. Ilsevel was not only meant to seal the alliance but also to ensure that Father would honor his part of the bargain."

"Yes, well?" Theodre looks uncomfortable. He rubs at his collar again. "I suppose everyone felt that, when all is said and done, maybe . . ."

"We all know *I* am no insurance. Father will not do anything that inconveniences himself for my sake."

Theodre shrugs. “I mean, if you don’t want to put too fine a point on it . . .”

“But that doesn’t explain why *you* are here.”

Yet again my brother stares at me blankly.

“The alliance is sealed,” I persist. “In its entirety.”

He blinks.

“It’s *consummated*.”

To my surprise, a blush steals up Theodre’s cheeks. “My dear sister, we don’t need to go into all that now, do we—”

“The moment the marriage was consummated, the alliance was clinched,” I continue, interrupting his nervous blather before it gets away with him. “The binding of the written spells holds Vor to his promise. No matter what.”

Theodre lets a blustering sigh through his lips. “All right!” he confesses. “So, no one was certain the magic would actually work, that he would—that you two would—that everything would be—”

“Consummated.”

“Yes. That. The last we’d heard, Vor was going to send you back unless the Miphates were dispatched to Mythanar right away. That’s why Father decided to send me. He figured if the Shadow King had the crown prince in his possession he would look on it as a sure sign Gavaria intends to honor the alliance.”

“Father won’t honor the alliance.”

“Sure he will.” Theodre crosses his arms over his embroidered gold doublet. “If he doesn’t, then I won’t . . . I mean, I’m *here*, aren’t I?”

“My point exactly. We both know our father will never send the Miphates. They are his most powerful weapon, the means by which he holds onto his throne, his lands, his very life. Why would he risk sending any of them into another world? He might have done it for Ilsevel. I’m not convinced he

would for anyone else. Not even for you.”

Theodre’s mouth downturns at the corners. “Not for me *personally*. But you know Father’s obsessed with continuing the family line and all that. Establishing his legacy for generations to come.”

“Are you quite certain you’re as valuable as you think you are?”

“I say, Faraine, when did you get to be so petty? I’m trying not to be offended here, but—”

“It’s not pettiness, Theodre! You may not be shackled or held behind bars, but make no mistake: you’re a prisoner here just the same. If Father doesn’t send the Miphates—”

“He will!”

I shut my mouth tight. What’s the point of continuing? We’re talking in circles. I don’t know what to believe in any case. Perhaps I’m simply not seeing the whole picture clearly. I let out a deep sigh and look down at my feet. Delicate beaded slippers peek out from under the embroidered hem of my red gown. The embroidery is patterned in a series of scales. Dragon scales. Of course.

“I say, is that the girl who was there that night? The night the unicorn riders attacked us, I mean.”

“Girl?” I look up, curious to see who Theodre could be referring to. “Gods, Theodre!” I gasp when I discover where his gaze is turned. “Please, don’t let her hear you call her a *girl*. She’s Hael, captain of the king’s guard. Or at least, she was. She’s now my personal bodyguard.”

“Really?” Theodre whistles softly, his eyes traveling up and down the mighty lines of Hael’s battle-honed physique. “I’d give a great deal to have a woman like that guarding *my* body.”

My lip curls. Without a word I turn and stride on up the passageway, in and out of the patches of light cast by hanging *lorst* stones. Theodre utters a

yelp and hastens to keep pace with me. “Where are you off to in such a hurry?” he asks, a little breathless. When I don’t bother to answer, he continues, “We’d probably best stick together, right? To be safe? I mean, we’re the only two humans in a world full of trolls—”

“Trolde.” I come to an abrupt stop and round on him again. “They are the *troldefolk*, Theodre. They are not nor have they ever been *trolls* and prefer not to be referred to in such offensive language.” I cross my arms, fixing him with a stern stare. “And just because we are the only two humans, doesn’t mean we’re required to spend time in each other’s company.”

My brother blinks, surprised. He opens his mouth to offer more arguments or excuses, but I haven’t the patience. I’m not the meek little shadow princess he once ignored or pushed around according to his whim. I turn away, intending to leave him there. But I’ve not made it more than ten paces before he barks after me: “Faraine!”

I stop.

“About . . . about that night.” He clears his throat softly. I hear the scuff of his bootheels against the paving stones. “The night the trolls, erh, *troldefolk* came to Beldroth. You remember?”

I grit my teeth. “Yes, Theodre. I remember.”

“I didn’t mean to abandon you.”

A rod of iron rams down my spine. I remember all too well how it felt when my brother sprang free of our carriage. First the burst of relief to my senses when he took his terror out of my vicinity, giving me a chance to breathe again. Then the rush of horror when I realized he’d left me alone and completely defenseless as our enemies closed in. My hands clench into fists. I draw a slow breath.

“I couldn’t very well swing a sword inside that closed space,” Theodre continues, the words rushing from his lips. “I thought I’d best get out and

make a stand of some kind. But I'd no sooner emerged than I was knocked off my feet and sent careening downhill. By the time I got myself oriented, things were . . . well, mostly over and done."

Excuses. Excuses which may or may not be grounded in truth. I don't know. In this moment, I don't care.

"Tell yourself what you must, Theodre." I look back, facing him one last time. "But know this—you must tread carefully. If you're knocked from your feet again, you cannot count on anyone else to ride in and rescue you." I lower my voice, holding his gaze intently from beneath my lowered brows. "We are alone in the Under Realm, brother. So watch yourself."

My words linger in the huge emptiness of that hall as I gather my skirts and leave my brother where he stands. Hael falls into step behind me, a silent shadow at my heels.

16

VOR

The journey to the Between Gate is far longer and more difficult than the last time I came this way. The riverways suffered under recent stirrings, diverged in some places, entirely blocked in others. We are obliged to take our morleth via indirect routes. These also show signs of damage, but we eventually emerge into Durgorim Cavern.

I ride Knar up to an outcropping above the town to observe as the riders form up along the banks of the river. My heart is heavy. Not long ago, Durgorim was a prosperous town. The nearest settlement to the Between Gate, it served as a point of congress between our world and others. Under the leadership of Lady Xag, it was a jewel of my kingdom. Now it is a crumbling ruin of phantom memories. I can almost hear the screams of the townsfolk who fell prey to *raog* poison. I can almost see their frenzied bodies hurtling through the streets, driven by rage and despair. A great chasm opened in the center of their town, and they cast themselves and their children into it, desperate to escape their pain.

The poison has long since dispersed. But I make my riders wear their *miraisis* masks as a precaution. They look like strange monsters on the backs of their dark steeds, eyes wide and pale above the long, pointed beaks. Lady Parh refuses to wear hers as she guides her morleth up to the outcropping where I wait. Her face is so hard, so set in stone, it's difficult to imagine *raog*

having any effect on her.

I tip an eyebrow as she draws near. “No, mask, Parh?”

“I hate the stink of *miraisis*,” she growls.

“You’ll hate the stink of *raog* more.”

She makes a face which expresses her derision more eloquently than words and pulls her morleth up beside mine. When I ask if the riders are ready, she grunts. It’s as good an acknowledgement as any. I turn Knar’s ugly head about and ride on up the incline, into the forest above Durgorim. Since the last time I was here, many of the towering mushrooms have been crushed under falling stones. Where once this forest pulsed with the life-light, now there is nothing but a dull, sickly glow. Yet another of the Under Realm’s natural beauties destroyed.

The tall arch of the Between Gate comes into sight at last. I breathe a sigh of relief. At least it has not been crushed. While there are other gates across my kingdom leading from this world into others, this is our quickest route to the human world. I beckon to one of my lieutenants. He dismounts and stomps heavily to the dial, grunting as he turns it.

“What is your plan, Your Majesty?” Parh asks as we watch the stone-hided warrior heave at the resistant mechanism. She looks back at the long line of masked riders stretching behind us through the forest. “Will you send them over all at once?”

I shake my head. “Lur and Wrag will join me as I cross over first and speak to Larongar. When I send word, you will lead the rest through.”

Parh grunts. “I don’t like it. You are king; I am your minister of war. Let me go first.”

If I trusted her, I might. As it is, I don’t dare send her through and let her decimate the alliance with a few choice words and, most likely, sword strokes. Besides, Theodre’s message was clear: Larongar awaits me on the far

side of this gate. He expects to see me, not some “great troll slab,” as the crown prince so colorfully put it. While I may not care for the pejorative, it is a rather apt description of my war minister.

“No, Parh,” I say firmly. “I will speak to the human king. You will remain here and await my summons.”

Parh growls, but signals for her aide and grinds out orders to be carried back to the squad commanders. I beckon Lur and Wrag to my side. It’s not the same as being flanked by Hael and Sul, and I feel the lack of my brother and best friend keenly. But these two riders have been my loyal companions through many an adventure. I trust them. Which is more than I can say for Parh.

The gate dial grinds to a halt. The air beneath the arch shimmers as the veils between worlds thin. A blast of wind whips through the opening, wafting across my face. I grimace. Human air is so stale and deadening. Their world is located too far from the *quinsatra*, the source of all magic, and their atmosphere feels thin to those born of Eledria. Still, by arts and secret means, mortal mages have learned to draw and channel magic on a scale beyond the imagining of fae-kind. Mortals may be fragile and rather short-lived, but they are formidable in their own right.

The swirling under the arch begins to clarify, offering a murky glimpse of the landscape on the far side. I set my shoulders. “Ready yourselves!” I bark and urge Knar through.

To step from one reality and speed through innumerable others is like submitting oneself to a thousand razor-edged blades, each of which cuts away a tiny portion of your existence. Your essence is then reassembled on the far side with a million tiny silver pins. It hurts. But I’m used to it.

What I am not used to, however, is the absolute shock of finding myself emerging once more under that arc of terrible sky. The glare of the hideous

orb star which illuminates this world blasts my eyeballs. My innards tumble, my whole body braced to lose my grip on Knar's saddle and fall up and up and up into that endless blue void. It wouldn't be so bad if there were at least some cover. Instead, the Between Gate opens onto a wide open plain. There is no shelter to be had save for the gate itself and the wall which extends on either side of it as far as the eye can see. Otherwise, the world is featureless save for a distant haze of mountains on the horizon.

I shudder as Lur and Wrag emerge behind me. The last two times I came this way, we arrived at nightfall. The dark, star-filled sky of this world is reminiscent of *lorst* stones gleaming from the cavern ceiling back home, offering a modicum of comfort to troidish sensibilities. This arch of blue and that single blazing star, however, are enough to drive even the most rational man mad. No wonder humans all seem to exist on the brink of insanity.

I take a moment to let my body adjust. Knar growls and tosses his head, snorting sulfur. The glare of direct sunlight is too much for him; he can scarcely hold onto existence here. Hastily, I dismount and let the poor beast snap out of this world back into his own dimension. He'll return at my summons after nightfall. Lur and Wrag follow my lead, allowing their morleth to vanish as well. Then the three of us turn to face the small party approaching through the glare. I can see little but pick up a faint impression of an encampment close by.

"Larongar!" I call out and raise a hand in salute. "I have come to honor our bargain."

The foremost of the hazy figures draws to a stop a few paces away from me. My dazzled vision begins to adapt, and I discern the rough, bear-like form of Larongar Cyhorn. His one good eye studies me cautiously, but I fix my gaze on his empty eye-socket instead. He is on horseback and swells his chest as though trying to intimidate me from his lofty height. "Well, my son,"

he says, his deep voice rumbling through the thicket of his beard. “I must say, it’s good to see you.”

My hackles rise. After the lies and tricks he played, for him to address me in such familiar terms is an insult. “Indeed,” I reply with a curl of my lip. “We came at once. According to our agreement.”

Though my words are respectful, my tone is all subtle threat. Larongar is not insensitive to it. His good eye widens slightly. While the terms of our written contract protect him, he is not invulnerable. He coughs and shifts uncomfortably in his saddle, which creaks beneath his weight. “Come, we’ll let bygones be bygones, shall we, boy? You understand how desperate times will drive a man to desperate measures. Faraine is a good girl and will give you no trouble. She’ll make you a dutiful wife. Judging by the promptness of your arrival,” he adds with a smile that’s close to a leer, “you’ve not been *disappointed*.”

I don’t respond. Any reply would somehow dishonor my wife. I will not give Larongar that satisfaction.

“And how is my boy settling in?” the king inquires. There’s a slyness to his words that sets the hairs on the back of my neck prickling.

“Prince Theodore will be treated well in my absence.”

“Good, good.” Larongar shakes his head and snorts derisively. “Wouldn’t want the little popinjay to be stripped of his creature comforts, now would we?” With that, he dismounts at last. His four escorts remain in their saddles, hands resting lightly on the hilts of their swords, but Larongar approaches me and claps me on the back, leading me deeper into his world. “It’s good you’ve come as quick as you did. Ruvaen’s forces have besieged the Citadel of Evisar. Do you know it?”

I shake my head.

“It is one of the great centers of Miphates learning, or so my man Wistari

informs me. All books and scrolls and scholarly writings. I don't pay much attention to these things. Magic and the like give me the creepings. But one must protect one's assets, mustn't one?"

"What does Ruvaen want with a Miphates center of learning?" I ask. The fae cannot wield or even comprehend human magic. The spells contained in those books and scrolls would be gibberish to his eye.

"Who knows what that mad fae bastard wants?" Larongar growls. "Destruction and mayhem and hell on earth. Perhaps he thinks he can cripple my mages if he destroys their writings."

"Can he?"

"Quite possibly. Wistari claims there are a great many spells contained within those tomes, some of them dating back to ages before the Miphates Order was established. There are copies at other strongholds, of course, but nothing matches the power of the original spell." Larongar heaves a great sigh. "All I know for sure is that Ruvaen has focused the majority of his force on this assault. I've lost a lot of men trying to meet them in battle."

I frown. "Is the citadel difficult to access?"

"Now there's an understatement!" Larongar tosses back his head, uttering a big bray of a laugh. He's led me a good twenty paces away from the gate and now, applying pressure with one hand, turns me to look back at it. Lur and Wrag stand on either side of the arch, their faces carved from marble. Like me, they feel the horror of the open plain and endless sky. It is testimony to their courage that they stand so still.

"See there?" Larongar says, indicating the gate.

I nod.

"Not the gate itself. What's through it."

I frown and peer beneath the arch. Just now there is no ripple of the veils between worlds. All is still, affording a clear view of the landscape beyond.

A stark landscape which, to my trolde eyes, appears very like the one in which we now stand.

“That,” Larongar says, “is the way to the Kingdom of Cruor.”

The name is familiar to me, though I cannot immediately place it. I wait for the king to continue.

“It wasn’t long ago,” he says, “that a whole nation of you fae folk dwelt just on the far side of that wall. Not full-blooded fae, of course. These were *ibrildians*. Half-breeds. The offspring of invaders who ravaged our villages and left their seed in the wombs of our women. Many of the creatures born from such unholy unions were killed at birth, but some women proved too tenderhearted for their own good. Thus, many a bastard survived. And then more and more, propagating their kind. This was all long ago by the history of our world. Second Age stuff, though I’m no historian.”

The ledge of his brow deepens over his empty eye socket. “What I do know is they had the gall to make themselves into a nation. A whole bloody kingdom of *ibrildian* half-breeds. And they plopped it down right there, just on the far side of that gate.” He turns his head, glancing up at me with his one red-rimmed eye. “It’s gone now. The kingdom, such as it was. We took care of that a while back. Can’t leave the tumor to fester, eh?” He grimaces then and returns his gaze to the land beyond the gate. “But after the dust settled, things went . . . a little strange over there.”

“Strange how?”

“Hard to describe. Something you have to experience for yourself.”

Larongar shrugs. “Suffice it to say, humans don’t last long in Cruor. Miphates come and go well enough; they have their little ways. But it takes magic to navigate on the far side of that gate. Ordinary men such as I don’t stand a chance.”

I frown. “If that’s the case, why build a citadel?”

“Oh, that was done long before the fall of Cruor. There was a time our people and theirs were allies. Kings of old thought it best to befriend the wolf on the doorstep. And those *ibrildians* had methods of accessing magic that were mighty tempting to the Miphates, or so Wistari tells me.”

“So, your mages have maintained their citadel on the other side all this time. And now Ruvaen wants to take it.”

“He bloody well wants to level it,” Larongar growls. “He’s not had much luck as of yet; the mages are not without their defenses. But they’re running through spells quickly. They need reinforcements before their wall is breached. That’s where you come in.” He turns that leer of his up to me, revealing every one of his sharp yellow teeth. “Your troll boys with their tough hides and monster steeds will no doubt stroll right through Cruor. You’ll turn up at Evisar fresh as daisies and ready to brawl.”

I’m not entirely certain what daisies are. They don’t sound like brawlers. I fold my arms and take a step away from Larongar. “You will send Miphates to guide our way.”

“Of course!” Larongar replies. “There are outposts between here and Evisar as well. Your people can make the journey in stretches and have a chance to . . . recover.”

Recover from what? What is he not telling me? I study his face, but it gives me nothing. It’s possible he doesn’t know, that whatever terrors lie on the other side of that arch are beyond his comprehension. I don’t like it. While I doubt any half-breed fae are a match for my *ortolarok*, I don’t care to march into enemy territory without complete information.

My throat tightens. Even at that slight hesitancy, the power of the written agreement threatens to strangle me. I cannot deny Larongar aid. “I will need to speak to your Mage Wistari,” I say. “After that, the morleth riders will venture into this land of Cruor, march upon your citadel, and put Ruvaen to

flight. And then”—I turn to face Larongar, holding his one-eyed gaze—“you will send your Miphates to aid the Under Realm.”

“Can you doubt it, my boy?” Larongar smiles. “You rid me of this fae pestilence, and I handle your little problem. We have an agreement.”

I stare into the eye of this man, this liar, refusing to back down. But he knows the stranglehold he has on me. I could reach out with one arm, snap his neck without a second thought. Yet it is he who issues the commands.

“Lur!” I bark. “Bring word to Lady Parh. The *ortolarok* are to begin the crossing. They will assemble on the field here and be prepared to ride at nightfall.”

17

FARAINÉ

“Meet me at the Urzulhar Circle two dimness from now. Your training will begin then.”

The words echo in my head over and over.

I stand on my balcony, leaning against the rail, and look out across the city below me. The lights in the distant cavern ceiling are beginning to darken as Under Realm night sets in. The streets and dwellings fall into deeper and deeper shadow and will soon be entirely obscured from sight.

But my gaze is drawn elsewhere. Toward the palace gardens. Particularly to the circle of tall crystals standing on their high promontory, gleaming softly with their own living light.

My fingers play with the pendant hung on its chain around my throat. Part of me knows I shouldn't even contemplate venturing out to the garden at this hour, searching for some mad old witch among the stones. In the full light of *lusterling*, her wild proclamations bear a stain of lunacy. Who's to say she is who she claims to be? I admit, it would be difficult to manufacture such a striking likeness to Vor. But I myself have worn a false face. I know better than anyone how easily it might be done.

Still, what if she is who she says she is? And what if the rest is true as well?

What if I am destined to save this world?

This is folly. All these wild ideas and imaginings, nothing more than my own foolish desires trying to mislead me. I hate being left behind while my husband marches into unknown dangers. I hate being useless, listless. What I wouldn't give for some great purpose upon which to fix my whole heart and being! What I wouldn't give to be . . . *more* . . .

My pendant hums.

I catch my breath and look down at the stone. It's been so still since my return to Mythanar, I've ceased to expect anything else. But it hums in my palm now, a gentle, soothing sound. Then it gives a sharp *pull*. I gasp and stagger, my hipbone hitting the balcony banister. My gut churns as the courtyard and the whole city below me seem to pitch and spin. I push back, choking on a scream. My back hits the window frame, and I stand there, frozen, while my heart throbs ten painful beats.

Slowly, I look down at my pendant again. The dark in its center whorls, then goes perfectly still. Did I imagine it? Before the question has even fully formed, another pull yanks at me. I grip the window frame with one hand, refusing to let myself be moved. I've felt this before—this insistent tug on my spirit. It wasn't long ago I followed it through the palace down into a dark chapel where the *va-jor* ceremony was performed. Not an experience I wish to repeat. Targ and Roh had seemed to wield some control over the *urzul* crystals in that chapel. What if they are sending out this pulse? What if they are trying to lure me back into that place of darkness? Now that Vor is gone, they must think I'm vulnerable.

But this doesn't feel like Roh. Or Targ. I can't say how I know, but the vibration is off. It's like listening to a familiar song sung by an unfamiliar voice.

A third pull. I open my eyes, and my gaze flicks to the Urzulhar Circle. It's calling me. I'm sure of it. Which means . . .

“Maylin,” I whisper.

She’s there. Just as she said she would be. And growing impatient.

Hastily, I send my awareness down inside myself, searching for any implanted feelings that don’t belong to me. I detect no outside influence, just my own fear, anxiety, stubbornness. And curiosity. Yes, plenty of curiosity, which intensifies with every passing moment. When the pull comes again, I don’t hesitate. Stepping through the window back into my bedchamber, I cross to the door, yank it open.

Hael is there. Standing directly across from me.

I catch a breath. My mouth opens, ready to mumble some explanation for my sudden appearance. Then again, why should I? I’m not a prisoner. I’m free to come and go as I wish. Is it a queen’s duty to explain her every move to her bodyguard? Closing my mouth, I tuck my chin and hasten into the passage without a word. Hael falls into step behind me. I don’t bother looking back. I’ve learned the halls and corridors of this wing of the palace well enough by now and don’t need to depend on someone else to guide me. I descend a winding stairway and emerge in the hall below. It’s busier than I like with troldefolk coming and going.

Everyone stops when I step into view. Numerous pale trolde eyes fix intently upon me.

I freeze, teeth grinding. But I won’t be shrinking and timid. I won’t give them that satisfaction. Lifting my head, I gather my courage and keep going. The long train of my skirt whispers on the floor behind me. My tread is steady, dignified, as befits a queen. I force myself to meet the gazes of those I pass. Some deign to bow or drop curtsies. Others merely stare. I offer no more than a short nod to each.

It’s a relief to reach the gardens at last and step out among the crystal formations. No one else is here save for Hael, trailing in my shadow. But the

mothcats come leaping like dogs to a whistle, their whiskered muzzles sniffing, their large ears twitching. Though they all look very much alike, I recognize one little beast which leaps to my shoulder, purring and rubbing against my cheek.

“I think it’s high time I gave you a name,” I say and scratch its dainty chin. “What would you like to be called?”

With a little chitter and a piercing *cheep!* it springs from my shoulder to the top of my head then down to the other shoulder. Its long tail wraps around my neck, the tip flicking under my nose. I laugh and push the tail away. “All right! Until I think of something cleverer, *Cheep* it is.”

The creature seems pleased. It rubs my cheek again, its whiskers tickling my ear. A bubble of laughter escapes my lips. In that same moment, my crystal gives the sharpest *pull* yet. I gasp. Cheep’s little body freezes. A shiver runs from the tip of its pointed nose to the end of its fluffy tail. When another *pull* comes hard on the heels of the first, the mothcat leaps from my shoulder to the nearest stone outcropping and vanishes. The other mothcats hurry after, disappearing in a flash. I frown. I knew the mothcats were sensitive to crystal vibrations, but this reaction? It’s hard to misinterpret. They’re afraid of whatever calls me. They’re afraid of the witch.

But I can’t turn back now.

I continue my ascent into the higher reaches of the garden and finally step once more into the circle of those great stones. They pulse gently in greeting. Though my hand trembles, I reach out and touch one of them. There is none of the terrible power which had rippled through them the last time I stood in this place. They seem almost gentle.

“So, you’re here at last, are you?”

I press my lips together, determined not to show surprise. Instead, I turn my head slightly, watching as the hooded figure steps out from behind the

farthest stone and into the circle. Her hood and robes look particularly threadbare in the luminous glow of the Urzulhar, but the crystals on her many-stranded necklace gleam like stars. She stalks toward me, her crooked stick clacking. When she reaches the center of the circle, she pushes back her hood. Once again, I'm struck by the incredible similarity between her and Vor, though I've certainly never seen such a look of disdain souring Vor's features.

"Took you long enough," she says.

I don't answer. My attention fixes on the pulse of her small stones. They vibrate in syncopated rhythm with the stronger pulse of the great stones. "Did you send that . . . that summons?" I ask.

"I did. You obviously weren't motivated to move on your own. Have I failed to impress upon you the urgency of our situation? You have much to learn and very little time in which to learn it." She sneers, leaning heavily on her stick. "Young people always think they'll live forever, despite all evidence to the contrary."

"How did you do it?" I persist. "How could you *summon* me like that?"

She shrugs. "I'll teach you. Now that you've finally deigned to show your pretty face. But not yet. There are other things you must learn first."

To my surprise, the crystals on either side of me go suddenly still. I turn sharply. One moment they were alive with energy, and now? They're just like rocks from my own world. Hard, cold. Dead? I can't say for sure. "What happened?" I ask, running my hand up and down the smooth surface of the nearest stone, searching for something and not finding it. "Where did . . . where did the life go?"

"Nowhere." The old witch takes a few steps forward until she too can reach out and touch the crystal. "It's as alive as ever it was. You're the one who's changed. Whatever control you thought you had over your gift has

slipped. But don't worry. We'll soon put you to rights. You'll be stronger than ever."

Dropping my hand away from the crystal, I take several steps back. "I'm not sure that's possible."

"Don't be dense, girl. Didn't you hear a word I said the other night? Your gift is undergoing its natural progression, getting stronger, fuller. Closer to what it will be when it reaches its peak. But you and I are going to need to speed that process along. Mythanar cannot wait."

"But how do you know? How do you know I have this potential? How do you know you can train me, and—"

"Because I used to be you."

I blink several times, shocked both by the statement and the vehemence with which it was spoken.

Maylin drops her hand from the great stone, totters over to one of the smaller crystals, and perches on its jagged surface. How her bony backside can find a comfortable seat is beyond me, but she rests her hands and chin on the end of her walking stick and peers up at me. Her lined face looks suddenly older than ever, and her eyes gleam softly.

"In my day," she says, "gods-gifts weren't something bestowed upon king's children. It was a sacred event, granted only to those devoted to the temples and the gods themselves. I was prepared from infancy for my dedication at the altar of Nornala. Before memory or knowledge of self were part of my identity, hands shaped me to bear my gift. But as you know from experience . . . some gifts are received with greater joy than others."

Her gaze slides from mine, blue eyes circling the stones slowly, one after the other, as though taking their measurements. Finally, she sighs. "The pain of our particular gift is indescribable to those who have not experienced it. I suffered mine without comfort or relief for many long years. There were

times when I begged the priests to put me out of my misery. But they were too afraid of offending the gods. They kept assuring me my gift must have been given for a reason.

“In the end my only recourse was total isolation, far from the constant assault of other people’s emotions. So, I became an anchoress. Walled up in a windowless cell high in the Ettrian Mountains. It was accessible by nothing but a narrow track, often cut off by ice and snow. Only a few of the most faithful dared climb to pay homage and leave food at the small trap opening atop the domed roof. Otherwise, I was alone. For three agonizing years, I was alone.

“Then he came.”

“Who?” I whisper.

“His name was Zur.” Maylin tilts her head. The necklaces around her neck clink and clatter, their inner glow pulsing a bit brighter than before. “He told me he was trolde. Brother to the Shadow King, an emissary from the Under Realm. I didn’t much care and told him to be on his way. What business had I with trolde after all?

“Away he went. But he was back the next night and the night after. I felt his approach from a long ways off, so sensitive was my gift. But his trolde nature made his spirit less offensive to my sensibilities, and I found I could bear his presence, at least for short periods. I grew to look forward to his visits, though I never would have admitted as much to anyone. After three years of isolation, to hear another voice, even one so harsh and growling, was heaven to my starved soul.

“He told me about his people. Their ways, their religion. Their God of the Deeper Dark, whom we know as Lamruil, but whom his people call *Morar tor Garkanok*. He told me tales of their heroes, their monsters, their mighty deeds. Of cities built in the darkness below the surface of the world, lit up

with *lorst* lights and living gems beyond the imagination of mortals. In my dark cell, where the few candles remaining to me had burned down to mere nubs, my skeletal frame wrapped in furs, my spirit shriveled to a thread of nothing, his words came alive. They played out in the shadows around me, across the domed mud and wattle walls.

“Eventually—not at first; he was afraid of frightening me—but eventually, he told me of the *Athtar-garag*. That is the Song of Fire and Stone. It is an ancient trolde prophecy, foretelling the end of their world when the Living Fire would wake and rise, breaking their realm apart.”

“The dragon,” I breathe.

She nods slowly, though otherwise she does not seem to be aware of me anymore, lost as she is in her tale. “The *Athtar-garag*, however, contains a single verse of hope. A forestalling of the inevitable doom. It goes as such:

*“Kurspari-glur, almuth tor Grakanak
Hirak Arraog nar ek-yam!”*

The troldish words rumble in her chest as naturally as though she were born to the language. I recognize only one word—*kurspari*. I’ve been called that myself.

“What are you saying?” I ask, frowning. “Why would an ancient trolde song speak of a . . . human?”

“Not just any human.” For an instant, one of the old witch’s eyes seems to flare with golden light. But she blinks, and it’s gone. Two clear blue eyes stare back at me. “*Kurspari-glur* is the Woman of Crystals.”

“And the rest of the line?”

She tips her head to one side. “Have you not bothered to learn troldish yet, girl?”

“I can say *hello, goodbye, and horseshit*. I’m still learning.”

Maylin snorts. “Well, as long as you’ve got the basics.” She shrugs and sits up a little straighter on her crystal seat. “The verse roughly translates to something like: ‘The Woman of Crystals, Fist of the Deeper Dark. Behold! The dragon waketh not.’ Though trolde speak is hardly so flowery.”

Her words roll around inside my head, trying to find a place to settle. Before I can begin to make sense of them, however, Maylin continues her tale. “Based on this little bit of ancient verse, the priests of the Deeper Dark agreed that doom could be forestalled in the Under Realm by the hand of a mortal woman blessed by the gods. Gods-gifts, as you know, are not bestowed upon the fae, who are born with magic in their blood. The gods hand out their gifts only to we lesser creatures, who need all the help we can get.

“In those days, the stirrings that now beset the Under Realm were not so terrible. But they were increasing in frequency, enough that King Gaur was deeply concerned. So it was that Zur, the king’s brother, was sent into the mortal world in search of this Crystal Woman. It was believed her gift was sent from *Grakanak* himself, intended to save the Under Realm.

“When Zur told me his story, I did not see how it applied to me. What had I to do with crystals? It was a pretty tale, and nothing more. I told Zur I knew of no gifted who matched this rather obscure description, but suggested he visit the temple to inquire. He claimed he had . . . and it was they who directed him to me.

“I laughed then. Bitterly. Because I knew he would be disappointed and, in his disappointment, would leave. He must, after all, continue his search. Once he knew how badly misled he’d been, why should he continue bothering with one foul-tempered anchoress hidden behind mud walls? I did not care for him to know the sorrow the prospect of his departure instilled in

me. I laughed at him. I jeered. I mocked him for the futility of each footstep which brought him up the mountain trail to me. I told him of the sad joke the gods had made of me. The uselessness of my gift. The pain. The isolation. When I was done, I told him to go. Go and take his foolish hopes with him.”

Her eyelids slowly fall, the faint remnants of lashes fanning her wrinkled cheeks. “The next night, he returned. This time, he sat on the roof of my cell and told a story of a trolde prince and his true love, of the trials they faced in their *marhg*—the courtship hunt, you understand. The night after, he told of a trolde hero who bested a demon by putting rocks in his soup so that the old monster broke his teeth. Night after night he came with more stories and sometimes songs, all growled and grunted in that terrible voice of his. Sometimes I spoke back, laughing at his tales. Sometimes I kept silent, tears streaming down my cheeks, holding my breath until he left again.

“Finally, he told me this was his last visit. At dawn he would return to the Under Realm and inform his brother the king that his mission had failed. I would not hear him again. I took care to disguise the sob choking my throat when I told him good riddance, I’d had about enough of his nuisance.

“He was silent for so long, I began to fear he had gone already. Then I heard a small tapping at the hatch overhead. He had something for me, he said. I told him I never opened the hatch when someone was waiting on the other side. It hurt . . . far too much.

“He grunted. Then he asked me to make this exception. Just once. As we would never see one another again.

“‘We’ve never seen one another to begin with,’ I answered dryly.

“‘Hear one another, then,’ he said. And, to my great downfall, he added: ‘Please, Maylin.’

“I was not made of stone. Not then at least. And despite all the pain I’d endured, three years starved of contact with other living souls will make

anyone desperate.

“So, I cracked the hatch. And there was this great pale hand before me. In the palm of that hand rested a crystal stone. ‘Take it,’ Zur said. ‘A token to remember me by.’

“‘I have neither need nor liking for sparkly things,’ I muttered. At his insistence, however, I took the stone, and when I did . . . my finger brushed against his . . . and something wonderful happened . . .”

Her voice trails away. I wait, my heart in my throat, caught in the spell of her words. In that moment, I don’t care if these feelings of suspense and eagerness are mine or implanted in me. I simply want to know what happened next between the lonely anchoress and the trolde king’s brother. When she doesn’t continue, I open my mouth and say, “What—”

“It became clear to me,” the old witch cuts me off abruptly, “that the stone’s innate properties influenced my gods-gift in ways I’d never known were possible. From that moment on, it wasn’t difficult for Zur to convince me to go with him. I had to venture to this Under Realm of his, had to find out everything I could about my powers and how they connected to the crystals of his world. To discover if there was indeed any truth to this wild story of prophecy and doom and a mortal woman at the center of it all.

“I won’t bore you with the details of our journey nor my first impressions of Mythanar. I was welcomed by the priests and priestesses of the Deeper Dark. They had long anticipated the arrival of their supposed savior. Poor fools. But once they learned of my connection to the *urzul*, they were eager to teach me all they knew about its properties.

“The trolde, of course, are born with magic in their blood. It resonates with the crystals of this world in a manner not unlike what you and I experience. But their magic is nothing compared to the gifts of the gods. Take how you turned back the rabid cave devils for example. Such a feat would

have required a hundred priests chanting for three days on end to generate enough resonance for such a working. But you did it alone. Without any training, without preparation. Yes, it killed you . . . but you did it. Imagine what might be done once you've learned the proper methods.”

She rises from her seat and totters to the far end of the circle, standing between two great stones and looking out across the garden. “I scarcely thought about the dragon. Back then—nearly two hundred years ago as mortals count time—the stirrings were not so frequent. We believed we had time. I honed my skills, endured the growing pains, mastered both my emotions and the emotions of others, all channeled through *urzul*. At first, I struggled to see how it would be possible to use such power to slay anything, much less a dragon.

“Then I learned about *jor*.”

She rolls back one sleeve of her robe, extending an arm so pale and so slender, it looks almost skeletal in the crystal light. As I watch, crystals form, jutting out from her skin so that the flesh seems to rip and fall away, leaving behind jagged, hard edges. I suck in a breath. “Don't look so horrified!” Maylin laughs, twisting her arm. Light bounces off the faceted surface. “This is but the first step. But it is the most vital. You cannot hope to slay a dragon if you yourself are too weak and vulnerable. Look what happened simply turning back those *woggha*! No, you must make yourself harder. Stronger. Strong enough to reverberate with the great crystals on a deeper, more profound level.”

“How?” The word slips softly from my lips, small but suddenly eager. Something about her story has struck a spark inside me. “How can I do this? It's so unlike anything I know.”

“Is it?”

Almost unaware of what I'm doing, I reach out, let my fingers hover

above the witch's arm. There's something there, I think. Something familiar. Reminiscent perhaps of the dark resonance I'd experienced in that chapel when I stumbled upon Roh and the other worshippers. Something had happened to me then—the sensation of stone wrapping around my heart. This is like that. And it's horrible.

I step back quickly. "I'm not . . . I don't . . ." My voice falters, uncertain what I'm trying to say.

"You will have to go deeper." Maylin's eyes bore into mine. Her black irises are ringed in shining gold. "You will learn to cover yourself in stone. Not just your body, but your soul. A crystal casing stronger than any force in this world, stronger even than dragon fire and dragon poison. When you have done that, I will teach you what you need to put an end to Arraog. You won't merely forestall the doom of the Under Realm. You will save this whole world."

My heart beats wildly, a maelstrom of fear and hope and longing and terror and so many other feelings. "Did you ever try? To kill the dragon?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"I failed."

A world of meaning laces those two words. They strike me, a reverberation that reaches down even to my subdued gods-gift. Shuddering, I back away yet another step, ready to flee the circle, to flee this woman and the destiny toward which she beckons. There's so much more to this story, so much she isn't telling me. So many secrets, each darker than the last. How can I trust her?

"I sense the questions in your spirit." Maylin stalks toward me, one tottering and yet inexorable step at a time. "I will answer them all. But for now, we cannot dillydally. There's far too much to learn and far too little

time in which to learn it. Are you willing to do everything it takes to save Mythanar?"

Unable to bear the intensity of her stare, I look around at the towering crystals. Darkness churns in their hearts as well. Just like the darkness in my own pendant. Perhaps I'm imagining it. But I cannot help feeling it's Maylin. That her energy pours into the stones, changing them according to her will. If this is magic, it is black magic. And yet, what if there is truth in what she's saying? What if the woman of this prophecy is real?

What if she's me?

"Very well," I say at last and turn to meet the old witch's eyes. "Show me."

18

VOR

The Miphato assigned by Larongar to serve as our escort is a man named Artoris. He is unexpectedly young. If memory serves, the three Miphates I met on my visit to Beldroth were all much older men. Even the youngest of them sported gray at his temples, a sure sign of human aging.

By contrast, this Artoris has yet to see his thirtieth year. Still more unexpected, he is built like a warrior, lean and hard. Everything I've learned about Miphates has led me to expect anemic individuals, more suited to pouring over scrolls and dusty tomes than the battlefield. Has Larongar been building a force of battle mages of which I knew nothing? An intriguing thought, one I will contemplate more closely.

Nine other mages join our ranks as well, all of them too lowly to merit the title Miphato. They are grim and anxious, six men and three women. Mounted on nervous horses, they take up positions among my ranks, with the last of them bringing up the tail end of the party. Mage Artoris rides vanguard with me and Lady Parh.

We assemble in formation, preparing to pass through the gate arch. Larongar, mounted on his great black charger, watches from a distance, flanked by his own warriors. It is difficult for me to discern expressions in human faces, but my time with Faraine has taught me to read nuances I might otherwise have missed. There's something in the eyes of the king and his

men that unsettles me—some nameless fear which they themselves don't seem to understand.

What exactly are we riding into? Larongar is a man of many faults, but cowardice isn't one of them. What terrors does the Kingdom of Cruor hold that would make this battle-hardened king afraid to enter even with the full strength of his fighting force behind him?

I turn in my saddle, inspecting the long line of dark riders extending across the plain behind me. It took the better part of what remained of the human day for all of them to cross into this world. Many had never world-traveled before and took the crossing poorly. Between the aftershocks of feeling their very essences torn apart and stitched back together again and the horror of the open sky above, they struggled. But each member of this mighty company is a warrior to the core, from the most hardened commander to the youngest message-bearer. They are ready now to ride.

Pulling the visor of my helmet down, I angle Knar's head toward the gate. The morleth submitted to returning to this world after nightfall, but they don't love the light of that garish moon overhead. Knar puffs streams of smoke from his nostrils, his cloven hooves shifting uneasily. The little gray horse Artoris rides rolls its eyes and sidesteps, fearful of the predator at its side. A wise beast; Knar could easily turn and rip out its throat were I not holding him fast.

The mage adjusts his grip on his reins and scowls up at me. He wears a deep cowl, but his face is lit up from below by a small vial of some shining liquid, which hangs on a chain around his neck. "Remember," he says, "once we are through to the other side, your riders must stay between the wayposts. They mark safe passage across Cruor. To stray from them is perilous."

I nod and raise an arm, signaling the host. Behind me, the barking voices of my commanders respond, readying their men and women. My arm drops,

and I spur Knar forward. The gate is broad enough that Lady Parh and the mage may ride at my right and left, but I pass through the rippling air beneath the arch first. The effect is . . . strange. It's nothing but a faint echo of the pain that usually accompanies journeys through the Between Gates. A mere rippling across my flesh, like a few layers of skin have just been sloughed away. When I am through, the landscape does not appear to have changed. The world beyond the arch is the same moonlit plain. Is the Kingdom of Cruor part of the human world or not? Yet another answer neither Larongar nor his mages were able or willing to give.

The wayposts are obvious enough—tall white pillars, at least ten feet high, carved in five smooth, flat faces that taper to a sharp point. They look ghostly and incongruous in the otherwise desolate space. I guide Knar toward them, and my people follow close behind. They pass through the gate three at a time and fall into formation at my heels. We move like a great winding snake beneath the eye of that hideous silver moon.

“We would be better off flying,” Lady Parh growls. “We might follow these posts easily enough from the air. It would save many hours.”

“Fly at your own peril,” Mage Artoris replies darkly. “Without the waylights, you won't make it far.”

“What lights?” Parh cranes her head, studying the twin rows of white pillars. They line each side of the path, staggered at twenty-yard intervals. Her question is valid; though the white stone reflects the moonlight, it offers no illumination. Certainly nothing compared to our own *lorst* stones.

Artoris sneers, his lip curling beneath a trim mustache. “You'll see,” he says and nothing more.

We ride on in silence. This is the most challenging part of any campaign. Not the fighting itself, not the battle and blood and terror. In those moments, the pulse is pounding, and instinct takes over, driving every action, be it to

glory or to death. But this? This long, slogging plod across strange and inhospitable territory gives a man too much time to think of home. Of all he misses and all he might never see again.

I peer up at the distant sky spangled with stars overhead. And suddenly, I remember the first time I gazed at such a sky—the night I met Faraine. It feels like an age ago, but in truth it's been no more than a few short weeks. She sat before me in Knar's saddle, her small body cradled against my chest. How slight and delicate she had seemed. Yet it was she who gave me strength that night. She who noticed the terror coiling through my spirit when I looked upon that vast expanse of space and darkness overhead. She'd touched me then, imparting calm into my soul.

Though I didn't realize it at the time, it was that moment I fell in love. Fell in love with the mortal woman who could ease my fears with a single touch, imparting me with courage and strength. She made me whole. Surely such a love is worth every sacrifice, every price.

Something shudders overhead.

A strange rippling, there and gone again.

I blink, frown. What did I just see? It comes again in the next breath, a multi-pronged lash of black, deeper than the void of night. It branches across the sky in an instant before vanishing again, leaving an unsettling afterimage emblazoned behind my eyelids. Shouts of surprise erupt behind me. Morleth toss their heads, jangle their tack, and armor creaks as riders seek to control their mounts. "What was that?" I demand, yanking Knar to a halt.

The Miphato tosses back his cowl and stares up at the sky. One hand grips the vial around his neck. Another branch of darkness appears, and he spits a curse. "It's the black lightning," he says, swinging down from his saddle. He cups a hand around his mouth and shouts, "*They're coming!*"

"Who are coming?" I demand, but the mage does not answer. He sprints to

the nearest waypost, ripping the vial from around his neck. He mutters something, pouring the shining liquid onto his fingers, and proceeds to write a series of characters into the post. They glow for a moment, holding their shape, before breaking apart and spreading across the pillar. It begins to shine, brighter and brighter.

Other pillars farther back along the path light up as well, as his fellow mages mimic Artoris's action. Artoris sprints to the next waypost, where he performs the spell again before hastening on to a third. The light expands, covering us all in a shimmering, silver haze.

I exchange glances with Parh. Her eyes are wide, her brow stern. She is as baffled as I. Twisting in my saddle, I look back to Lur and Wrag, who ride behind me. "Send word down the line," I say. "Everyone is to remain between the pillars. Stay in formation and don't leave the—"

Darkness.

I was born underground. I've lived my life in caverns illuminated only by crystal glow and pale fire, my own shadow my nearest companion. I've ventured into regions unsullied by light, the true pitch dark of the deeps. I've learned to love it. Never have I feared it. It is impossible for a trolde to be afraid of something so much a part of their very nature.

But this.

It's like even the memory of light has been stripped from my mind.

I struggle to suck in a breath, but there is no air to breathe. Only darkness, which flows up my nostrils and fills my lungs. I try to yank the reins, to wheel Knar about and ride him out of here. But my morleth is gone. So are Parh, Lur, Wrag, the Miphato. My entire company. They're gone. Like they never were.

I am alone in this darkness. I've always been alone in this darkness. There has never been anything but—

“Oehrea leawae! Aed aewaemem!”

The words burn through my head like flaming arrows, leaving scorch marks in their wake. I cry out but open my eyes. And I'm astride Knar again at the front of my host. The strange pillar lights frame us on either side, glowing so bright it hurts the eyes. I put up a hand, shielding my gaze as I peer between them, trying to glimpse the moonlit landscape of Cruor.

It's gone.

That darkness, which had held me momentarily in its grip, now claims the land beyond these pillars. I can see no moon, no stars, no sky, no sweeping plain, no distant hills. There's nothing but absolute black. Absolute nothing.

“Artoris!” I twist in my saddle, searching for the mage. He is coming back from the pillars. Their glow casts eerie shadows across his strained face. He grips the little vial, now nearly empty, in one hand. “What is this?” I demand.

The Miphato gives no answer. Instead, he goes to the first of the pillars, rests his hand against it, and murmurs strange words in the ancient tongue of spells. A pulse of brilliance surges up the pillar, and I realize how dull it had become. He goes on to the next one, performing the spell of rejuvenation again, all without once glancing my way.

I turn to Parh. She looks haunted. I've never seen my ferocious war minister like this. She hunches in her saddle, clinging to a handful of coarse morleth mane. It wouldn't take much to make her bolt. But where to? There's nowhere to go beyond the pillar light.

“Morar-juk!” Wrag's voice growls close by. “What is that?”

Between the two nearest pillars, the darkness swells like a bubble on the verge of popping. Something moves inside it, something I cannot see but feel

with a horrific, crawling sensation in my gut. Suddenly that darkness doesn't look like shadow so much as membrane. Thick, glossy, viscous.

Fear rises in my gut like bile.

A shout down the line. A cry, a shriek. Then another and another.

"Ortolarok!" I bellow. "Stand firm!"

The Miphato staggers to the pillar nearest that swell, mutters his words of power again, sends another surge of magic up the pillars. The darkness retreats from the pulse of light but remains close on the other side.

"Your Majesty!"

I turn in my saddle. A young warrior urges her morleth between Wrag and Lur's mounts. She gazes at me, her eyes so wide, they might dart from her face. "Your Majesty, Commander Ursh has been taken!"

"Taken by what?" I demand.

The words have scarcely left my mouth when Wrag screams. He falls from his morleth as though yanked off and skids across the ground like a man being dragged to hell. I'm in motion before my thoughts have time to catch up. I leap from my saddle, fall to my knees, gripping his outstretched hand, and hold on with all my strength. His feet are close to the barrier light, inching backwards, though I cannot see what pulls him.

"Big King!" he cries desperately, kicking against the grasp of empty air. "Don't let me go!"

My body lurches forward as another tug drags him further between the pillars. "Help me!" I cry through gritted teeth. Parh, Lur, and the messenger appear on either side of me, gripping his other arm, his armor, his belt, anything they can get their hands on. It makes no difference. He is dragged relentlessly further and further, his great body digging a furrow in the dirt. Now he is between the two pillars. Now I am, and Wrag's legs vanish beyond the range of light. He screams and twists, his body, his face contorting

unnaturally. I fight to maintain my hold on him. “Wrag!” I shout. “Hold on!”

The weight of his bulk suddenly lessens. It’s so abrupt, Parh, Lur, the messenger, and I all tumble backwards. I’m still holding Wrag’s arm, and when I bolt upright and stare down into his face, his eyes meet mine, shot through with horror.

The lower half of his body is gone.

Parh and Lur drop their hold. The messenger screams and covers her face. I grip him a moment longer, gazing into the face of this man who was my friend, realizing he’s already dead. Then, with another sharp yank, he slips my hold and disappears between the pillars, out beyond the light. Into that darkness. Into that empty nothing.

“No!” I shout and stretch an arm out, trying to catch him, determined not to let him go. The tip of one finger extends beyond the light.

Time is . . . absent.

I don’t know where I am. Who I am.

There is only darkness. Endless. Inescapable.

There has never been anything but darkness.

Then . . .

I blink. High above me there are lights. A dazzling array of crystals.

No, not crystals. Those are stars.

With a ragged inhale, I sit upright, my eyes darting to take in the turmoil of the world around me. Lur kneels at my right hand, tears staining her pale cheeks. She seems to be saying something, seems to be speaking earnestly to me, but the roaring in my ears drowns out her words. Behind her stands Lady Parh, swaying heavily, her helmet gone, her hair in wild disarray. The little

messenger lies curled up in a ball at her feet. Beyond them, the morleth riders fight to control their stamping beasts. All is uproar, mayhem.

But I can see stars. And between the fading pillars' glow lies a flat, featureless landscape.

I get to my feet, locking my knees so I don't immediately collapse again. When I am certain I'm stable, I whirl on the Miphato, who stands close by, holding his horse's reins and stroking its broad cheek soothingly. "What in the nine hells was that?" I growl.

The mage, his cowl once more pulled across his face, turns to look at me. His eyes glitter in the depths of his hood. "No one knows," he answers coolly. "Neither what it is nor why it comes. It takes who it can and then it goes."

"Goes where?"

Artoris shrugs. "Who can say? The waypost lights keep it at bay. For the most part. But if someone is marked for culling, they will be taken. Nothing can be done about it." In a smooth, easy motion, he mounts his horse. The beast is unreasonably placid compared to the frantic morleth. Perhaps he put a spell on it. "Would you like to continue now, Shadow King?"

I stare up at the Miphato, so calm in the aftermath of terror which has left the rest of us shaken to our core. A rush of intense loathing floods my veins. It's all I can do not to wrench him from his saddle and pound that tranquil face of his into the dirt.

Instead, I turn and march between the wayposts out into the landscape beyond. "Your Majesty!" Lur shouts after me, her voice nearly drowned out by Lady Parh's barked, "Don't be a fool, Vor!"

I ignore them both and continue out into the moonlit plain, following a distinct trail of drag-marks carved into the dirt. I follow them at least forty yards from the path until I find what I seek.

Wrag. Lying face up, mouth gaping in a leer of horror.

I stop. My stomach pitches.

He's fully intact. There's no bloody torso spilling intestines. His body is whole, still clad in his armor. The only thing missing is his helmet.

And his eyes.



Wrag's body is divest of its armor, wrapped in a cloak of *hugagoug* silk, and bound to the back of his morleth. I issue commands for Commander Ursh and all the other riders lost in the event to be similarly prepared for travel. It is difficult to find volunteers willing to venture beyond the wayposts into the moonlit landscape to search for their remains. Only a handful join me, scouring the countryside for our missing dead. But I will bring them safely home to Mythanar. I will see their souls sent to rest with the Deeper Dark.

Only when every missing person is accounted for do I nod to the Miphato. We ride on. A silent party, following the path delineated by those white pillars. The mage leads the way, and I ride behind him. Parh no longer keeps to my side but hangs back several lengths. So, I am alone.

There is no further sign of black lightning. Not yet at least.

We have ridden some time before my hand seeks the little pouch strapped to Knar's saddlebag. I reach inside, grip the crystal hidden there, and withdraw it. It pulses softly with inner light, but in its heart, that dark stain churns. Will those who died tonight count toward the debt I owe the gods?

But the crystal is unchanged. Which means the price for Faraine's life is not yet paid.

19

FARAINÉ

“Who is it you meet at the circle?”

It isn't until the sixth *dimness* since Vor left the Under Realm that Hael finally gives voice to the question which has no doubt been brewing in her mind for some time. These last five days she's said nothing. During that time, I've slept from *lusterling* to *dimness*, risen to eat whatever meal has been brought for me by some unseen servant, and made my way to the gardens once more. All the while my bodyguard has held her tongue.

This *dimness*, when I emerge from the room, I find Hael standing in her usual place against the wall across from me. She's always there. I don't know when she rests or refreshes herself. Perhaps her strong trolde body doesn't need sleep and food and other basic necessities. I haven't asked. We've scarcely spoken since my last fumbling attempt to offer her sympathy. Silence is better between us. Safer.

But there's a sharpness to her gaze just now which hasn't been there for some time.

I freeze in place on the threshold of my chamber, one hand still gripping the latch. “I, um . . .” What point is there in denying it? While Hael keeps well out of sight, she must have seen the strange little figure who joins me among the *urzul* stones. A figure who is not part of the palace household, who certainly doesn't belong in the palace gardens. It's a wonder my

bodyguard hasn't had her seized and thrown from the premises long ago.

"She is helping me," I say rather lamely. "The, um . . . the witch. From the Upper Lands. She's helping me with my powers."

Hael's pale eyes narrow. For a long time, she studies me in silence. I begin to wonder if I should hasten on my way. At last, however, she says: "You died."

A shiver runs down my spine. "Yes," I answer flatly. "I know." It must seem strange to her that I would return to the scene of my death night after night. "I need to understand." Letting go of the door latch, I wrap my arms around my middle. "I have much to learn. About the crystals. About what they are and what they mean. I would prefer not to die if I should ever need to use them again."

Hael is silent once more. This time it's such a deep, such a final sort of silence, I have no choice but to mutter a little, "All right then," and turn to go on my way. She follows several paces behind me. I can get no sense of her feeling. Five days of training with Maylin, and my old power has yet to resurface. Sometimes I think I can feel it deep inside me, that sensitivity and heightened awareness. But when I reach for it, it retreats. I cannot use it now to try to decipher this solemn, stern woman at my back.

Perhaps it's time I tried more traditional methods.

Pausing at the top of the stairwell, I turn back abruptly. Hael stops. Her brows rise. "What is it?" I demand. "Tell me. Please. You've not said a word this whole time. Why this sudden curiosity? Have I done something? Because if I have, I don't know what it is, so you're just going to have to speak up."

Hael drops her gaze. It's the only reaction she makes, but on her granite face, it's tantamount to a confession. She has seen something. Heard something. And it's made her uneasy about me and my doings. She draws a slow breath.

Then: “Have you heard of the *Athtar-garag*?”

I frown. It’s the prophecy. The ancient trolde song Maylin told me about, the one which sent King Gaur’s brother scouring the human world for a gods-gifted woman. Until now, no one else has mentioned it to me. Pinching my lips together, I nod.

“There are whispers,” Hael continues. “Whispers and rumors throughout the palace, throughout the city. They are saying that you . . . *you*, Princess Faraine, are the *kurspari-glur*.”

The Woman of Crystals.

My heart throbs once against my ribcage and catches there. But it makes sense, doesn’t it? If rumor has spread about my part in stopping the *woggha* invasion, that would in and of itself be enough to inspire ideas. And how many people stood in the gallery above the sacred pool when I gripped the crystal in Vor’s hands and helped him ease the dead to their rest? I have been declaring myself all along. Whether or not I intended to.

“Are you?” Hael persists. A strange earnestness laces her words. “Are you she of whom the song speaks?”

I swallow and take a step back into the shadows of the stairwell. “I don’t know.”

The light from the nearest *lorst* stone plays strangely in Hael’s eyes. “Princess,” she says, “I must tell you—”

“Gods save me, Faraine, is that you? Dear sister, I’ve been looking for you absolutely everywhere! I began to think you’d been eaten or lost in one of these infernally twisting caverns.”

A figure in a plumed hat appears behind Hael, striding up the hall. Hael swiftly moves to one side, blending into the stonework. Or nearly.

“A very good evening to you, Captain Hael!” To my horror, Theodore sweeps that awful hat from his head and performs an elaborate bow which

includes a delicate sweep of his foot and a flourish of one hand. I'm almost certain I hear Hael's teeth grind. "You are, as always, a sight for beauty-starved eyes." He straightens, beaming his smile at her with the full force of his gods-gift.

Hael sends me a sideways glance. "I will be on hand, Princess. Should you need me." With those words she steps away, striding back down the hall and vanishing into a convenient shadow.

Theodore watches her go, his handsome brow sadly puckered. "Gods, she's the most terrifying creature I ever beheld! Do you think she could break my spine with one hand? I rather suspect she could."

"Yes," I answer with conviction. "She absolutely could. And will if you keep trying to flirt with her."

"Flirt with her? Is that what you call the little scene you just witnessed? Oh, dear sister mine, you have not seen your brother yet in his true and most charming form!" He sets his hat back on his head, tossing the plume over one shoulder, and casts me a devilish half-smile. "The ladies of the Under Realm aren't ready for it. Trust me."

"Leave the ladies alone, Theodore. All of them. Especially Hael. You've got no chance with her, believe me."

He sighs again. "I'm sorry, Faraine. But I've not yet forgotten the exquisite thrill of riding with that woman's arms around me that fateful night."

"As I recall, you complained bitterly the entire way to Beldroth."

"Give me a little credit." Theodore adjusts the set of his gem-buttoned doublet. "While you may have enjoyed being swept off your feet by a mighty warrior, I've seen a thing or two during the last couple of years. War with the fae will make a fellow less willing to simply hand himself over to one of their kind, ally or otherwise."

I don't bother to reply but turn and descend the stairway without another word. My brother hastens after me, muttering curses about how damned dark it is with every step. He continues to follow me through the palace halls, drawing stony and unpleasant gazes from the troldefolk we pass. I keep my head high and hold tight to my dignity. It's best to ignore Theodore. Eventually, he will get bored and wander off.

But he's like a determined stray puppy today, clinging to my heels. "Where are we going?" he asks, trotting a bit to catch up and walk at my side. "Busy day planned? Or is it night? I confess, I find it very difficult to tell the difference."

"It's *dimness*," I answer coolly. "And I am going for a walk. In the gardens."

"They have gardens here? With plants and shrubberies and the like? How do they grow? I'm no expert, but I'm fairly certain greenery requires sunlight and—"

"Theodore." I stop, turn, and face him. We are nearing the garden entrance now. The last thing I need is my brother trailing me all the way to the Urzulhar. "Where I go and what I do are none of your concern. You must find your own ways of passing the time. Not," I add with vehemence, "wooing trolde ladies! Not if you wish to keep your head on your shoulders anyway."

"Oh, come off your high horse, Faraine." He rubs a hand down his perfectly sculpted face. "How's a man supposed to occupy himself in this dreadful place? I'm about to go blithering mad with boredom!"

"That is neither my concern nor my responsibility. You are being treated well, I trust?"

"Well enough. I won't sing any praises for troll hospitality. But they feed me. Otherwise they ignore me. I mostly wander about the palace wondering

if the statues I'm passing might actually be living trolls. I'm never quite sure. They don't talk to me in any case."

"Trolde," I correct softly.

Theodore continues without pause. "I don't *seem* to have an official guard, but I could swear I'm never truly alone or unobserved. If I'm wandering somewhere I'm not supposed to, a big slab of rock-person will suddenly appear in front of me, obliging me to turn round and head back the other way. It's unsettling."

My mouth twists, not quite a sympathetic smile. "It won't be for long. You must only bear it until the king returns."

"And do you think your husband and his impressive force will be able to rout Ruvaen in a timely manner?"

"I have every faith in Vor."

Theodore tips his head to one side, peering at me from under his hat's brim. "Hmmm. Maybe it worked out for the best, then."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Father and his little"—he waggles his fingers—"scheme. You don't seem to be languishing here in your magnificent palace, surrounded by priceless gems at every turn. And that husband of yours cuts a fine figure, doesn't he?"

I narrow my eyes.

"You seem . . . I don't know. Happy here?" This last is spoken like a question.

"My feelings have nothing to do with the matter." The words burst from my lips, sharp as knives. "I was sent here under false pretenses. Vor should not have been manipulated and lied to. Not by our father. Not by you. And not by . . . by . . ." I can't even speak this last awful truth. Instead, I finish with, "I should not have been so weak."

"Whoa, sister." Theodore holds up both hands, backing up several paces.

“Don’t spit your venom at me. We were both of us Father’s pawns.” For once his face loses some of its golden shine. “Sometimes I wonder if I even have it in me to be a man. My own man, I mean. Oh, I know how to get under Father’s skin—a little gambling here, a few debts unpaid there. I’m not stupid enough to think such antics *do* anything. Other than reinforce Larongar’s disappointment, that is. Maybe it’s just easier to prove him right than to try and prove him wrong.”

This is unexpectedly insightful coming from my brother. Despite the carefree smile he insists on smearing across his perfectly-formed lips, there’s a glimmer of what might be pain in his eyes. An unwanted surge of compassion rises in me. I chew the inside of my cheek. Am I going to let a few moments of sincerity undo the carefully erected walls between us?

“I must go,” I say abruptly and take several steps back. “I’m meeting someone.”

“Can I come along?” He sounds like a child and knows it. A flush stains his cheeks. “Really, Faraine, I’ve had such a dull time of it! I feel I’ll go mad.”

I shake my head. “This is a private meeting.”

“I won’t be a bother. I’ll hang back like your Captain Hael. In fact, isn’t that an idea? Why shouldn’t I act as another bodyguard? I mean, it makes sense. I am your elder brother. I ought to have some sort of protective role or . . .”

Of everything I’d dreaded concerning my long separation from Vor, the prospect of spending that time with Theodore was not high on my list. There are some torments one cannot imagine until one is plunged into the mire of them.

“Theodore,” I say, my voice as stern as I know how to make it, “let me be plain with you. I do not want you trailing my footsteps. I will not have you

interfering with my affairs. And do *not*”—I emphasize with a vicious jab of one finger against his chest—“bother Hael.”

He gapes down at me. Before he can muster a reply, I turn on heel, gather my skirts, and hasten to the garden, refusing to look back.



Maylin is waiting among the Urzulhar when I arrive. She sits in the center of the circle, cross-legged, her back to me. Her crooked stick lies across her lap, balanced on her knees, and her hands are extended to either side, palms out, as though receiving vibrations from the great stones. She does not move or give any sign of hearing my approach. But she knows I’m here. She always knows. Her power over the stones is so finely-tuned, I suspect she could spy on me in my chambers if she wished. Perhaps she does.

Rather than speak to the witch, I take a seat in the circle behind her, my back to hers. I assume a similar position, crossing my legs and extending my arms, palms out. I am learning to reach the crystals without direct touch, to feel their pulse at all times, even when I am not near them. In truth I’m never truly far from *urzul* in this world. It’s embedded in every wall and stone, in the ground underneath me and the cavern ceiling overhead. Tiny flecks, invisible to the eye, have the potential to channel the same power as the great stones if I can only learn to access it.

I reach for those vibrations now. My own crystal pendant lies against my breast, as unresponsive as ever. But the large stones whisper softly to my senses. Not the intense thrum I would feel if I were to make physical contact, but a potent promise of the power within. Power just waiting to be tapped.

“Your brother has turmoil in him.”

I startle, surprised by the sharpness of Maylin’s voice behind me. “Theodore?” My concentration broken, I turn my head slightly. “He won’t be a problem. He’s harmless really.”

The old witch grunts. “His emotions are carefully trained to float at the surface of his being. But the turmoil remains, nonetheless. Deep inside. It could prove dangerous.”

My lips quirk. I’m not convinced Theodore has any depths to him. Even when my gods-gift was sensitive to the feelings of others, I never detected anything beyond pettiness, frustration, and flashes of temper. “Don’t worry about my brother,” I say. “He’s a nuisance, but I’ll make certain he keeps out of the way.”

Another grunt. “Show me what you’ve learned.”

Six days have given me time to adjust to Maylin’s abrupt ways, so this change of topic does not throw me off balance. I turn and face her, shivering a little under the frosty intensity of her blue eyes. I hold out my arm and roll back my sleeve, revealing the prickle of crystals encrusting my skin. It’s still strange to see, to look at that arm, at that hardness, and know it is a part of me. But I’ve learned much under Maylin. I’ve learned the emptiness inside me—the absence where all those feelings once whorled, causing me storms of pain—that space, that hole, is the source of all new possibilities. It’s a relief not to feel the pain of others. After so many years of battery and blasting, so many years of struggling to know which feelings were mine and which belonged to someone else, so many years of carrying weight that wasn’t mine to bear . . . I need not feel anything. Not with a cold, crystalline crust to protect me.

This is freedom. Freedom I never knew I wanted. Freedom I’m beginning to crave.

Maylin takes my arm in her withered hands, turning it this way and that to inspect the crystals. “Good, good,” she says softly. Her eyes flick to meet mine. “But you’re still holding on too hard. Your brother. You’re worried for him.”

“No,” I protest. “He’s an annoyance. Nothing more.”

The witch narrows her eyes. “Always trying to carry the feelings of others. Their worries, their fears, their petty regrets. You must let go. Let it all go! None of it belongs to you. It only gets in the way.”

I drop my lashes. The crystals along my arm sink back into my flesh, a shivering sensation like melting ice. I shudder and cradle my arm against my chest. “I told you, I don’t feel the feelings of others,” I whisper. “Not anymore.”

“That doesn’t mean you’ve ceased trying to carry them.” The witch shrugs. “It’s an instinct. One you must learn to suppress if you’re to have any hope of success. That empathy of yours will not defeat the dragon.”

I blow a blustering breath through my lips.

“Out with it,” Maylin snaps. “I feel the resentment stirring through you. Might as well say it as not: you don’t believe me. Even now you doubt everything I’ve told you.”

“It’s just . . .” My words trail off. I turn my gaze up to the crystals surrounding me, taking in their contours, feeling their subtle vibrations. “You’ve taught me incredible things, Maylin, and I am grateful. But I don’t understand how you expect me to defeat a dragon.”

“I expect you to put the dragon into *va-jor*.”

All the air seems to leave my lungs. In a flash, I’m back before the altar to the Dark, surrounded by a deep, chanting drone. The blindness was so deep in that place, but a pulsing red aura filled my senses, creating a kind of sight, revealing the worshippers all partially turned to stone. And Queen Roh. Giving her blood to feed the crystals. To feed the magic as it rippled over the throng.

“Vor told me about *va-jor*,” I say softly. “It’s black magic.”

“It is a trolde religious practice,” Maylin replies. “Only without a gods-

gift, they cannot perform it to its full potential.”

I push to my feet and back away from Maylin. She tips her head to one side, blinking blandly up at me. “It’s evil.”

“Is it?” Another blink. “How so exactly?”

“Turning people to stone?” I indicate my arm, warm and alive once more. “It’s one thing to put a crust over the flesh. But *va-jor* is complete enstonement: mind, body, and spirit. It’s not a covering, not a shield. It’s everything.”

The witch shrugs. “And? Stone is the natural state of troldefolk.”

“People are meant to feel! To live and breathe and hurt and know.”

“Such a human perspective. Though I suppose I shouldn’t expect any different.” Maylin climbs slowly, aching to her feet. “Trolde are ever seeking to return to stone. It is their ultimate purpose. But”—she holds up a hand to stop my protests—“we are not here to debate trolde theology. The point is, *va-jor* can be used against the dragon. If she can be rendered stone, her wicked dreams will cease, her stirrings still. She will feel no more pain, no more rage. And she will not rise.”

“It would kill her.”

“Yes. Before she wakes and *destroys this entire world*. What are you failing to grasp here, girl?” She steps forward and raps my forehead with the end of her stick. “Time to get your head on straight! It’s all well and good for you to offer that terrifying empathy of yours to cave devils. But let’s not forget you *died* while setting them free of their pain. Such will always be your fate when you open yourself up to pain on that scale. You simply aren’t built to contain it.”

She sighs then and turns from me, tottering to stand between two of the great stones. Her view extends over the garden out to the city itself. She leans heavily on her stick. I’m struck again by how small she is. What must it have

been like for her, brought here all alone to accomplish an impossible feat? Yet she strove with everything she had to make herself stronger, to make herself more. All to fail in the end.

But she hasn't failed. Not yet.

Not while she still has me.

"There you go again." Maylin turns, fixing a glare upon me. "You say you can no longer feel the feelings of others. Yet even now you're trying to feel mine for me. Don't think I haven't noticed! I've been at this far longer than you realize." She lifts one hand from her stick, pointing a withered finger at me. "It's not enough. You cannot be this compassionate, pathetic creature. The dragon must die. Do you understand? She must die, and you are the only one who can kill her. *Listen to me, child.*"

She totters toward me, eyes blazing bright gold. Little crystals erupt from her cheekbones and jaw, transforming her face into something grim and unyielding. "Vor doesn't need a simpering, wide-eyed doll. He needs a warrior. A woman who can harden herself. Who can become a pillar of strength to uphold this entire world. So, you must make yourself stone. Not just this outer body—your heart and soul as well."

I draw back, raising my arms defensively. I scarcely notice the crystals hardening across my skin, protruding from my fingers, my elbows, my shoulders.

"Have I upset you?" The witch stops within a pace of two of me, her lips drawn back from her teeth in a snarl. "I feel it all, everything roiling inside you. Weakness and foolishness and inadequacy. Everything that tells me you aren't enough. Not until you're willing to let go."

She takes hold of my wrist. Only then do I realize that she's gripping a handful of crystals. They cut into her flesh, and blood runs down the hard edges. I feel the weight of every word she's said, feel the ultimate failure

which has defined both my life and my death. What good was accomplished by sacrificing myself to free the cave devils? It wasn't enough—a temporary stay, buying a little time. Who did it save in the end?

Useless.

Images fill my head. Trolde cities crushed under rock, filled with molten fire. Other images as well. My own world. Villages burned, people scattered. Children starving as raiders pillage and rape across the land.

I could have prevented it.

It was my fault.

And everything that is coming?

My fault as well.

“Go deeper, child,” Maylin growls. “Let your *jor* sink beneath these petty ideas. Who cares for fault and guilt and blame? These things will not serve you. You must become impenetrable.”

How can I? I'm not strong enough.

“Not yet you're not. But you can make yourself stronger.”

What about Vor?

Maylin snarls, flashing her teeth. “Vor needs a warrior, not a shrinking flower. Make yourself into what he needs. Something new. Something dangerous.”

I'm afraid.

“Fear will not serve you. You must not feel. No fear, no hope. No love. Wrap yourself in stone, child. Heart, soul, body, mind. Go deeper and deeper, then deeper still.”

Blood runs along my arm, drips down my gown, pools at my feet. The Urzualhar stones respond, vibrating with a low pulse that throbs red in my head. I grab hold of that pulse, pull it inside me, down into places I've scarcely dared venture before. I feel as though my flesh is parting, my own

blood pouring out, running down planes of faceted stone. Still, I keep pulling down, down, down to my own shining core.

Suddenly, I gasp.

My eyelids are weighted stone. I open them slowly, heavily. When I peer out, the world is shining and somehow distant. Multi-faceted. Cold.

I look down at my body. Covered in crystals. Every inch of me, from the top of my head to the soles of my feet. I can scarcely move, not like this. It takes all the will I can summon just to lift my head, to face Maylin.

Her eyes shine like two bright suns. “Impressive,” she says, clenching her bleeding hand tight. Then she reaches out, taps me on the head with her stick once more. It makes a bright, ringing note, which reverberates through my skull and echoes among the Urzulhar.

Though my face is hard and fixed, my mouth slowly curves in a faint, triumphant smile.

20

VOR

Magic stains the horizon, like smoke rising from a great conflagration. All the hues of this world and others beyond the range of mortal vision whorl in a display of light and chaos, thickening the atmosphere above the distant ruins of what was once the City of Evisar.

“The city itself was long ago abandoned.” Mage Artoris stands beside me on the ramparts of the fortress in which my people have taken shelter. He and the other mages will not ride with us at nightfall to face Ruvaen’s forces. Instead, he offers me what advice he can from the safety of these walls. “It was once the capital of this gods-blighted nation. But when the river dried up, the people dispersed, leaving it to decay. That was nearly a century ago. The citadel which Ruvaen now besieges lies on the far side of the city, built in the shelter of a great mountain.”

“And what defenses has Ruvaen placed within the ruins?”

“Hobgoblins.” Lines of disgust deepen on either side of Artoris’s mouth. “The savage brutes run wild. No organization, no leadership that I can discern. It’s like Ruvaen set loose a pack of rabid dogs. Only these rabid dogs are impervious to both iron and mortal magic. They’ll swarm a man and skin him in moments, then keep him alive for hours after, dragging out his death for their pleasure.” He shudders. “Nasty blighters.”

I nod coldly. “I am familiar with hobgoblins.”

Artoris raises an eyebrow. “Indeed? Well, I hope you’ve got some miraculous means of breaking through their line. We lost a lot of good men on our first approach. And our second. We hadn’t courage enough for a third.”

“What about air defenses?” I ask, scanning that tumultuous sky. It’s difficult to imagine flying through such a storm, but it’s not impossible. “Has Ruvaen a flying force?”

“Not that we’ve encountered. But there are Orrian Lancers, mercenaries from Lunulyr. And reports speculate between three and five hundred Noxaurian foot soldiers, all mad on *virulium*.”

The news just keeps getting better and better. *Virulium*, known by some as the Demon Kiss, is a powerful drug, commonly used to inspire Noxaurian forces to berserker rages. They must either kill or die—the rage demands blood one way or the other.

“But worst of all,” Artoris continues relentlessly, “are the damned Licornyn Riders.”

I shoot him a sidelong glance. “The Licornyn are here?”

“Yes. They run rampant across Cruor.” Artoris leans his elbows against the battlements, gazing out across the landscape. “Like us, Ruvaen’s people are prey to the black lightning and what it brings. They have developed their own paths for crossing this blighted land but travel them with dread. The Licornyn, by contrast, seem to be immune to the culling. They roam at will.”

I wear a deep hood to protect my eyes from the glare of the afternoon sun overhead. Even so, it beats down on me from its blue oblivion, filling me with terror I dare not acknowledge for fear it will take over my mind and steal my reason. Three days and three nights have not dulled me to the horrors of this realm. I would not dwell in such a place if it were the last haven offered to me. The troldefolk would rather be crushed in the rising

doom of Arraog than choose such a fate.

Yet the Licornyn live here. Even under threat of that hideous darkness. Perhaps it is theirs. Perhaps they summon and control it in some way. It was once believed unicorns could not be ridden, but the Licornyn mastered and tamed them. Who's to say they cannot perform worse deeds?

To the mage I say only, "I have faced Licornyn before. And vanquished them."

"Then you have not faced Licornyn here in Cruor," Artoris answers darkly. "They are stronger on this side of the wall. And their leader—their *king*, as they call him, though he's little more than a tribal chieftain—is as vicious a brute as you can hope to meet anywhere in the worlds. Even the Noxaurian berserkers are meek by comparison."

"I welcome a challenge."

Artoris snorts. "If it's a challenge you want, I can readily supply it. My latest intelligence from the citadel is that Ruvaen has grown tired of trying to blast through the ward spells. He's brought new reinforcements through from Eledria. *Cyclopi*."

"What?" I turn sharply, fixing my gaze on the young mage's profile. "He brought those monsters *here*? How? No man alive could manage such a feat!"

"Ruvaen is not like other men." Artoris raises an eyebrow, shifting his glance my way. "Still keen for a challenge, King Vor?"

I grimly face the horizon again, that twisted, tortured sky which only hints at the battle awaiting. We've encountered horrors enough already on this mad journey. Of my five hundred riders, I've lost more than a dozen, all seasoned warriors. Their losses are gaping holes in the ranks, and we've yet to face a single foe.

The sun has begun its slow descent. Across the battlements, wayposts light

up, brighter and stronger than those which marked the path we traveled. No black lightning can penetrate the spell of light which surrounds this human fortress. But we will leave the safety of this shimmering shield and ride without protection across the open plain. Deeper Dark spare me! I would rather face whatever monstrosities Ruvaen has managed to dredge up from across Eledria than spend one night under the open sky of Cruor.

But we are not escaping this place until my pledge is fulfilled.

“We ride at sunset,” I tell Artoris, my voice firm as bedrock. “We will face Ruvaen and we will triumph.”

Artoris chuckles mirthlessly. “I wouldn’t be so confident. The citadel has been under siege for the better part of a month now.”

My teeth flash in a snarl. “It ends tonight.”

21

FARAINÉ

I come to with a gasp, clutching my bedclothes and struggling against some unseen foe. Terrible images flash in my head—images of war and death. Of hideous monsters swarming, mutilating, devouring. Of great giants crushing and grinding.

And Vor. In the midst of it. Weaponless and alone, valiant against impossible odds.

Vor facing down his doom.

The trapped air in my lungs won't release. Darkness creeps in on the edges of my vision before I'm at last able to let out a long exhale. I'm seated upright in my bed, and the room is gloomy with *dimness* shadows. A shudder creeps down my spine. Sagging against the hard stone wall, I relish the feel of cold rock against my fevered flesh. Yet it cannot drive out the clamor in my head.

What is happening to Vor? Does he even now battle for his very life? Or does he already lie dead and bleeding in the midst of some horror scape? Did he think of me before he died? Did he regret every choice which led him down this road to destruction? Did he . . . does he . . . ?

"Damn!" I snarl, biting the word as it leaves my tongue. Before I can reconsider, I reach for the small fruit knife lying on the bedside table. I've taken to keeping it near me just in case need arises. Like now.

With a quick flick, I run the blade across my thumb and watch blood well. Closing my eyes, I press the blood into the wall and concentrate. Concentrate on all those little pinpoints of life vibrating within. Drawing those vibrations to me, I channel them with the resonance of my blood, pull them closer, wrap them around me. Blocking out my fear, my dread, my anxiety until there is no feeling left. Only hard, stone calm.

Slowly, my eyes open. The world around me is faceted and gleaming once more. I look down at my arms, covered in crystals which jut from every joint in jagged protrusions. It's become so much easier over the last three days to summon my *jor*. After that first success in the garden, I've replicated it multiple times, strengthening with each iteration. But there's still so much to learn.

I rise, moving stiffly. My limbs are heavy and feel foreign as I adjust to this version of myself. By the time Vor returns, I expect to have mastered the transformation. By the time Vor returns, I will have made myself into the queen he needs. No more useless, shrinking shadow princess. I will be a weapon. I will be a warrior.

Out of habit I splash water on my face from the stone washbasin. Droplets hit my hard features without sensation. Huffing a laugh, I close my eyes again, draw a long breath . . . and let go. As the air eases from my lungs, the crystals retreat, fading back into my body. Soon I am flesh and bone to the naked eye. But inside, my heart remains safely stone-wrapped. For now.

I'm not hungry. A meal has been left for me, but I ignore it. I don't need food. I need more time. More instruction. I need to continue exploring and deepening these skills.

Eagerness pulses in my veins as I don my cloak and hood and step to the door of my chamber, but the sound of voices on the other side stops me short. Frowning, I press my ear to the panels.

“You know a gift of beauty can be a curse in its own way, if you think about it.”

Theodore. Gods blight him, he’s out there yet again. He’s taken to haunting the passages around my chamber with irksome persistence.

“We have a legend in our world,” he says, his voice slightly muffled. “The Tale of the Peerless Beauty and the Dreadful Beast. Have you heard it?” Nothing but cold silence answers, yet he continues with undaunted enthusiasm. “I’m not much of a storyteller, but the long and short of it is the Peerless Beauty ends up captured in the Beast’s enchanted castle until such a time as she can break his curse. It all turns out right in the end, with the Beast revealed to be a prince in disguise, and everyone lives happily ever after. Still, I always rather felt for the Beauty, don’t you know? That’s a lot of pressure on her to figure out the curse-breaking business.” A longsuffering sigh. “I relate to her more than ever now. Imprisoned in a strange palace, far from my home and family . . .”

“How did the Peerless Beauty break the curse?” That’s Hael’s voice, a rumbling growl.

“By falling in love with the beast, naturally.”

“And who do you see as the dreadful beast in your version of this tale?”

“Oh, well.” Theodore clears his throat uncomfortably. “I don’t know if there’s a *dreadful* beast, as such, or really any beast at all. I mean it’s not a point-for-point comparison or . . . or . . . that is to say, I mean . . .”

Deciding to have mercy on my brother, I fling open the door. Theodore, who had until that moment been leaning languidly against the wall, startles upright. A look of absolute relief floods his face. “Oh, thank the gods! I was beginning to think you’d never emerge.”

I shift a frigid stare from him to Hael. My guard stands on alert, her expression as fixed as ever. She does not return my gaze but focuses intently

in front of her. I return my attention to Theodre. “What are you doing here?”

“Waiting for you, of course.” He smiles charmingly. “I thought we might breakfast together. You know, for old time’s sake?”

“It’s evening.”

“Is it? It’s so damned hard to tell.”

“And we’ve never breakfasted together. Not once. In our entire lives.”

“Surely we ate together in the nursery, didn’t we?”

“You did not share a nursery with Ilsevel, Aurnae, and me.”

“Didn’t I?” Theodre scratches the back of his head. “Can’t say I recall all that much of our childhood. But I could have sworn you and I were quite close once upon a time.”

“No.”

“Well, no time like the present to strengthen those familial bonds, eh?”

My lips thin. I don’t have the patience for this. With *jor* stone still wrapped around my heart, I find it difficult to feel any sympathy for my idiot brother.

“I have business to attend to this *dimness*. I will thank you not to bother me or my bodyguard again.” With those words I sweep past him and proceed down the passage. Hael falls into step behind me, and I don’t bother looking back to see Theodre’s expression. At least he’s not stupid enough to follow, I’ll give him that.

I make my way swiftly through the palace. My routine is well known to the household by now. I recognize more than a few of the faces I pass. Everyone pauses long enough to offer me a silent curtsy or bow to which I respond with curt nods. Their staring eyes follow after me, but no one tries to speak or interfere with my progress. I’m like a ghost haunting this world—my presence makes the living uneasy, but they’ve learned to adapt and make the best of it. And I am grateful for their pointed disinterest in all my comings

and goings.

I turn into the last passage leading to the gardens only to stop abruptly. Two figures stand between me and the arched opening. The first is the huge, stone-hided form of Targ. I would know the priest anywhere by his massive physique and the straggling white hair hanging lank across his naked shoulders. He looks more troll than trolde, but somehow retains his otherworldly beauty. His soul radiates an emptiness that once struck me as awful, terrifying even. Now I recognize it for what it is—layer upon layer of *jor*, carefully wrapped around his heart. Built up over decades until it finally reached the very core of his being. He is as close to true stone as any living, breathing creature may come.

Roh stands beside him, tall and graceful and draped in fine black garments that display her figure to perfection. Her soul is much less carefully protected, but I sense the effort, however imperfect. She turns her beautiful head slowly. Her pale eyes brighten at the sight of me. There's a flash of some emotion I might once have been able to feel but which now I must guess at. Surprise, yes, but something more. Something unsettling. Something like . . . eagerness? No, that can't be right. Roh has always hated me. Yet, I cannot ignore the smile that curves her lips. It's a snake's smile but not unwelcoming.

"Princess," she says, then shakes her head and corrects herself. "*Aruka*."

I recognize that word. It means *queen*. A title Roh has never before conferred upon me.

The dowager approaches along the passage, Targ following in her footsteps like a living mountain. Hael appears suddenly at my back, warm and solid, and I am thankful for her presence. The queen stops several paces from me. Much to my surprise, she drops a graceful curtsy. When she rises again, a smile wreathes her face. "I am told, *Aruka*, that you spend a great

deal of your time at the Urzulhar Circle these days.”

I nod silently, uncertain how to react. My doings are no secret; I simply didn't think anyone but Hael was paying attention.

“Excellent.” The queen lifts her gaze from me to the silent woman at my back. “Hael,” she says, before speaking a stream of trolde I do not understand.

Hael responds, her words uttered in a low growl.

“Good, good,” Roh says, slipping back into my own tongue. I'm half-tempted to reach for my former gift, to try to read her. Before I can make up my mind to attempt it, the queen inclines her head. “I will leave you to your business then, *Aruka. Morar tor Grakanak targhed.*”

With this blessing, she moves past me up the hall. Targ follows behind her, his every footstep rumbling the ground beneath his feet. He spares no more than a fleeting glance for me, but in that glance I feel once more that absolute hardness at his center.

Then they are gone. I am alone once more with just my bodyguard for company. “What did she say?” I ask, turning to peer up at Hael. “What did she want from you?”

Hael's gaze coldly meets mine. “She asked if I remember the great truth of our people.”

“And what truth is that?”

“That the trolde spirit is a spirit of stone.”

“And what did you reply?”

Her eyelids drop, her gaze fixed on the floor at my feet. “I told her I never forget.”

Her words fall like great blocks of granite between us. I feel them blocking any way I might reach her. But I gave up trying to reach her long ago. If Hael's true spirit is stone, why should she not embrace it? A spirit of

stone is better than the alternative, is it not? Especially in light of all the loss she has suffered.

I turn and continue to the garden. Hael follows, keeping a wary eye on me but allowing me my freedom. It is easy enough here among the twisting pathways and outcroppings to forget I have a bodyguard at all.

I am nearly to the upper gardens when I notice the mothcats have not come to see me. This is a surprise; ordinarily they are all too eager to swarm me for attention. Even Cheep keeps out of sight. I touch a crystal and send out a pulse. Maylin has taught me how to summon, and mothcats are particularly sensitive to *urzul* influence. A few of the little beasts spring into view, but they disappear again almost at once. Strange. Something must have happened to make them nervous. A predator in the garden? A cave devil? Surely not. But something feels off, and instinct tells me not to ignore the feeling.

I am just beginning the final climb to the Urzulhar when a sudden *pull* drags my attention to one side. It comes from the lake. I turn my head, grimacing. I've not been down that way since Vor left. The memories are too strong, making it difficult to hold onto my *jor*. But the pull comes again, unmistakable and insistent. It's Maylin. I'm sure of it. She wants me to meet her there.

Breathing a curse through my lips, I change course. Soon the lake comes into view. The old witch stands silhouetted against the falls, her back to me as though unaware of my approach. What does she see when she gazes out across those gleaming waters, watching the cascades churn up foam and sparks of light? Vor once said this was a favorite haunt of hers. She would bring him here when he was small, even taught him to swim, a distinctly untoldish pastime. It's difficult to imagine this hard-edged woman demonstrating any warm or tender feeling, even for her own child.

The heat from the lake makes my skin prickle. I drop my hood and slip the cloak from my shoulders, leaving it on a stone bench as I move to stand beside the old woman. We are silent for some moments, she lost in her thoughts, me in mine. The memory of Vor and I tangled up with one another beneath the falls feels terribly far away. Though the pleasure we knew was real and profound, I cannot recall it with any clarity. I can't even remember what it felt like to have his lips on mine. It's like he's—

“If you dwell on such feelings, you'll undo all your good work.”

I startle at the witch's sharp tone. My brow tightens, and I refuse to look at her as she turns, tipping her head back to look at me from under the edge of her deep hood. She studies me for some time in silence before heaving a sigh. “You're still young,” she says, as though absolving me of guilt. “Young and fiery and in love. It cannot be helped.” She stretches out her crooked stick then, tapping me sharply in the shin. “But you'll have to work twice as hard until you learn to control the *jor*. To keep it strong and ready to be called upon at a moment's notice.”

“I am ready,” I say, resentment tinging my voice.

“Hmmm.” She tilts her head to one side, eyeing me closely. “Show me then.”

I stretch out my arm. My garment is a simple, sleeveless white gown, loosely belted at the waist. It allows me freedom of movement and does not easily tear when crystals suddenly erupt across my skin. I hiss through my teeth. My bones seem to vibrate with the frequency of the stones under my feet and in the lake. It's almost, but not quite, painful.

Maylin watches, wordless. When the transformation is complete, she walks around me, tapping her stick against my limbs, my back, my chest, my head, seeking for weak spots. But I have been thorough. Crystals cover every inch of my body. “I can sustain it much longer,” I say with some pride. “Up

to an hour. Maybe more.”

The witch grunts and comes to a stop in front of me, both hands gripping the head of her stick. “Good,” she says. “This is good. A worthy beginning.”

My heart is too deeply wrapped in stone to feel any warmth at her praise. I let the words wash over me—being, but not feeling. Maylin notices and grunts again, satisfied. “You have learned well, child. You have proven yourself to be everything I expected and more. You are ready now for your next lesson.”

I raise my brows slightly. “And what lesson is that?”

“You must send this power outward. It’s time you learned how to transform other living things to a state of stone. It is time you learned *va-jor*.”

My heart gives a sudden kick. “I . . . I don’t want to kill anyone. Or anything.”

The old witch snorts. “You won’t. *Va-jor* is neither life nor death, merely existence. Your tender conscience may rest easy.”

I shift my fractured gaze down to my glittering hands. Small crystals jut from each knuckle, harsh and yet beautiful. “I’m not certain I’m cut out for this.”

“You’re not. Which is why you must practice.” Maylin turns from me and lifts one of the crystals strung from her heavy necklace. A pulse goes out from it, a *pull* not unlike what I used to summon the mothcats. This pull is stronger, however. And what it summons is no mothcat.

Movement draws my gaze. A hideous figure appears at the top of the waterfall, long and low, crawling on all fours, its awful, angled elbows protruding higher than its sway-backed spine. Flesh hangs loosely from its skeletal body, and white bone covers most of its eyeless face. Its mouth sags open, saliva dripping between enormous teeth.

My heart lurches, and my crystal covering melts away, leaving only my

shivering, vulnerable body. I take several paces back, opening my mouth to cry a warning to Maylin, but the words die on my tongue. Now that the crystals no longer shield me, I feel the pulse she sends out across the water more clearly, feel how it connects with the *woggha*.

My eyes widen. She is controlling it. She is drawing it here.

“What is this?” I breathe even as the devil climbs down the crystal-studded cliff, its awful body silhouetted starkly by the multi-colored lights. It enters the water without hesitation, swimming straight toward us. “Maylin, what are you doing?”

The old witch, still holding her crystal high, casts me an impatient look. “None of your timidity now, girl. I’ve got the beast well under control.”

But that’s what horrifies me: to see that monster controlled, its will subdued. I have been inside the heads of *woggha*. They are grotesque and terrifying, but solitary hunters who prefer to dwell in the depths of the Under Realm, far from other living souls. While it may look demonic and can certainly kill with unprecedented savagery, they do not seek out blood sport. This beast is far from where it belongs. If Maylin were to lose control . . .

“Send it back,” I urge, my voice thin in my throat. “Send it back, please. This is wrong.”

“Wrong?” Maylin turns to me again, and her blue crystal flares momentarily to a dark, vicious purple. “We’re facing the end of the world, child! Now is not the time to be tenderhearted over cave devils.”

I watch the monster approaching. Its slitted nostrils flare as its ungainly limbs splash awkwardly through the steaming water. “And what do you expect me to do?”

Maylin snorts again. “Enstone it, of course.”

“How?”

“That is not something one can teach. It’s like learning to walk—I can

stand you on your own two feet and give you a push. But you will have to find the balance within yourself to place one foot before the other. No one can teach you. No one can do it for you.”

The devil reaches the shore and heaves up onto the nearest stones. It sways back and forth as water streams from its misshapen body. Its whole attention is fixed upon Maylin. Maylin, who studies me.

“Go on, girl,” she says. A thread of feeling appears in my soul. Not the fear and dread and revulsion that belongs to me, but a bright spark of *urgency*. “Go on. Try.”

The urgency grows. It isn’t mine, I’m sure of it. Or not wholly mine. This is Maylin’s doing. She’s found my weakness and even now uses her powers to augment it. Images appear in my mind, images I neither want nor can resist: Vor. On the battlefield. Covered in blood. Striving with everything he has against impossible odds. Vor, Vor, Vor.

Crushed under stone.

The light snuffed from his eyes.

Buried.

Gone.

I set my teeth and face the monster. Is this one of the very devils I freed not so long ago? One of those poor, suffering creatures, caught in a poisonous thrall it could not resist? But no. I mustn’t think of that. Instead, I must remember all those shrouded bodies in the sacred hall. All those people, brutally slaughtered. How much more death might I prevent by making use of this creature’s life?

A natural outcropping of *urzul* stands just to my right. I rest one hand against the stones. Resonance hums through my bones, into my chest cavity, spreads through my spirit. Slowly, carefully, I turn that resonance around, send it out in a wave straight toward the *woggha*. Hurt radiates back, strikes

me like a blow. I gasp, stagger. Red light explodes in my head. The devil is afraid. It might stand there, docile as a hideous lamb. But its fear is no less real.

“You must learn to push through whatever feelings you encounter,” Maylin urges.

I let out a slow breath. How does she expect me to do this? Maybe . . . maybe . . . I look down at the crystals beneath my hand and press my thumb against one sharp point. The small cut I’d given myself this morning has scarcely crusted over. The wound reopens, and a bead of blood spills forth, rolling down the crystal in a crimson stain. The blue *urzul* darkens, pulsing a faint, pinkish hue. I feel the subtle change in the resonance.

Holding onto the crystals with one hand, I stretch out the other toward the waiting devil and send a pulse flowing out from me. The beast’s head swivels, its attention turning from Maylin to me. Its jaw opens. A long, low hiss burns the air between us.

“Keep your focus, girl,” Maylin says. I cannot tell if she speaks the words out loud or if I simply feel them inside. I grip the *urzul* tighter, refuse to let the flow of resonance falter. It’s a deep, gut-plunging pulse, not unlike the chant I’d heard in the dark chapel. But I don’t need a chant. I can summon enough power, pull it up through the soles of my feet from the very depths of the world.

The *woggha*’s nostrils flare. Its body shifts as it tries to lunge at me. But it cannot. Its feet have turned to stone. Stone gripping stone, keeping that awful figure fixed in place. But stone skin is not enough. Not for true *va-jor*. I must get all the way down to the very center of the beast.

This is wrong, something in me protests. I ignore it. I’m in the rush of the resonance now, a powerful wave which lifts and pulls me along. It’s glorious, this power of mine. So different from standing in the Urzulhar Circle, so

different from that wracking pain. There is no pain now. Not with a stone shield wrapped around my heart.

I feel it working. Layer upon layer, thicker and thicker, filling the *woggha* from the inside. With each layer, the fear, the anger, the struggle for freedom simply vanishes. A crust of gray stone spreads across the creature's flesh, bone, and soul alike, and when it is done . . .

I let out a ragged gasp and let go of the crystals, staggering back. My hand shakes. When I look down, I find many cuts have opened across my fingers and palm. Blood drips, and the crystals pulse a steady, shimmering red. Nausea churns in my gut. But I clench my trembling fingers and lift my gaze to the shore. To the cave devil which stands there, a perfect, frozen statue.

Leaning heavily on her stick, Maylin approaches the *woggha*, looking it over slowly. "Excellent," she murmurs. A smile breaks across her face. "Excellent!" To my surprise, she presses her stick against the stone devil's head and, with a single push, sends the whole thing crashing into the lake. The lapping water seems to grab it and pull it down into its depths, out of sight.

I watch, my mouth hanging open, my wounded hand pressed to my breast. Blood stains the front of my gown. Life seems to flood out of me. I sink to my knees, my throat closing tight. Tears fall, splash hot on the ground even as the last stone barriers surrounding my heart break apart and scatter. I stare at that place where the *woggha* had stood.

I feel dirty. I feel sick.

Maylin regards me coldly, leaning on her walking stick. She says nothing. To her credit, she makes no effort to manipulate the emotions storming in my soul. But her face speaks her disdain more clearly than words.

"How can you be like this?" I ask at last, my words thick and fuzzy on my tongue. "How can you be so hard?" I don't mean it as an accusation. Perhaps

once I would have, but now? I truly want to know. I *need* to know.

Maylin grunts. Then she walks toward me and, to my surprise, takes a seat on the ground beside me where I kneel. She crosses her legs and rests her hands on her bony knees, gazing out across the lake to the shining falls. “We feel everything too deeply,” she says quietly. “It is the great burden of our gift. But it doesn’t have to be this way. You can learn.”

“I’m not sure I can.”

“You can. You will.”

“How do you know?”

“Because.” She turns her head sharply, catching my gaze in hers. Her eyes are two icy chips of perfect, clear blue. “Because I once boasted a heart equally as soft and tender as yours.”

22

MAYLIN

Many turns of the cycle passed after my coming to Mythanar as I honed my powers, aided by the priests and priestesses of the Deeper Dark. I labored so long and so hard, I began to forget my former life as an anchoress. That life was dreary, full of pain and loneliness. Not worth remembering. In this world I had strength, purpose.

My powers grew beyond the limits of what the priests could teach me, yet I had not begun to test the fullness of my strength. Who knew the gods had been so generous in their gifting? I pushed myself harder, farther, deeper, never forgetting the danger lurking beneath my feet. Over time my awareness of the dragon grew until I began to feel it. To feel her. Her pain, her torment. Even in sleep she suffered, and when she stirred . . . well, the stirrings were not so frequent as they are now. But they were devastating. And I wondered, even as you are wondering, how one such as me could hope to put an end to both her suffering and the peril which held the entire Under Realm in its grip.

It wasn't until I discovered the secrets of va-jor that I began to see the way. At that time, it was little more than a theory whispered about among priests and priestesses. Thus, I had no teacher. But I learned, nonetheless.

I practiced on animals first: cave devils and bats and even the ghost spiders which dwell in the deeper caverns. The king—Gaur—was pleased with my efforts. He saw the potential of va-jor as I did and urged me to do

more, to extend myself further. Such simple creatures are easy enough to wrap in stone. Hardly an accomplishment. To compare such things to the vast soul of a dragon? Laughable!

So, Gaur brought me a man.

He was a criminal. A murderer, convicted of killing his brother to take his wife and property. The inside of his mind was a dark, twisted, rage-filled place. He deserved death. And yet, I wondered if he deserved the fate I gave him.

Gaur offered me no choice. In the end, I sent him into va-jor.

After that a group of twelve rebels was brought to me. I gave them the same mercy: va-jor in place of the drur's ax. The priests often reminded me in those days that stone is the natural trolde state, that these men and women might one day, in some distant millennium, be reborn as better versions of themselves. But I still remember their faces . . . the fear in their eyes the moment before . . .

Ah, but what is the use of such memories? It matters little. My powers increased, and so too did Gaur's challenges. Once he gathered fifty convicts from across three cities and brought them to me. When he urged me to perform the va-jor, I told him I could not. I simply could not give enough of my own blood to power such a working. No sooner had the words left my mouth than Gaur took hold of one man by his hair, dragged him forward, and slit his throat.

His scream lives on in my head.

The sacrifice was sufficient. It fed the crystals, and I channeled the resonance to enstone the forty-nine survivors. But it wasn't . . . good. I felt the wrongness of the magic, the strange, unsettled spirits captured beneath layers of rock. The dead man's blood worked, but not so well as willing blood.

I struggled in the days which followed. Always before I could justify what I had done, but that death and the va-jor which followed? It haunted me. Even Zur could not give me comfort.

Yes. Yes, Zur and I were still close. I was much occupied with my studies and had no time for companionship, but it did not matter. For I had Zur. He always knew where to find me, always knew what to say when the pain was too great and the burden too heavy. But the day of that sacrifice, his words could not reach me. Not until I heard him say: “Gaur has decided to marry you.”

“What?” I cried, lifting my head from my hands. “What are you talking about?”

It was then I was told for the first time of an alternate version of the Athtar-garag, the very prophecy which had brought me here to begin with. The song speaks of the kurspari-glur, the Woman of Crystals. But in an older, less well-known tradition, it once said: kurspari-aruka. The Human Queen.

I am no queen. I am of lowly birth, devoted to the temple at my infancy and there forgotten by my own blood. I am as common as urzul crystals save for the gift the gods saw fit to bestow upon me.

But it’s a simple matter to make a queen.

So, Zur informed me, I must wed Gaur. After my demonstration with the fifty convicts, the king was convinced my growing powers were indeed the very weapon he had long sought. He would marry me; then I would fulfill the prophecy and stop the rising tide of flame and destruction.

I was given no choice in the matter.

Was I a good wife?

Now there is a difficult question, one I have often considered.

I did not love Gaur. I never could, not when my heart was . . . but no

matter. I was faithful to the vows I made. Let no one ever cast doubt on the truth of my son's parentage. Vor is Gaur's son, though a better man than his father in every way.

After the marriage everything changed for me. The future I had secretly hoped to be mine was no longer possible. I had nothing save the power inside me and Gaur's relentless need for me to hone it. He offered more blood sacrifices to the Deeper Dark, feeding the Urzulhar Circle until the stones pulsed blood-red both lusterling and dimness. He brought in larger and larger numbers of people—all so-called convicts—to be put through va-jor.

One day, there were children in the midst of the criminals.

I protested. I told Gaur I wouldn't do it. He insisted this entire town had betrayed Mythanar, plotting against me and my half-human son. He said they harbored rebels who would see both Vor and me dead and claimed they must be placed in va-jor now so they might one day be reborn as better versions of themselves.

I told him to stop lying. Both to himself and to me. He was making me murder these people. This was why they protested my presence in this world.

"I won't do it," I declared. So brave. So bold.

So foolish.

Gaur was desperate. At the rate the stirrings increased, he knew it was a matter of time before the dragon woke. Perhaps not in his lifetime, but certainly in the lifetime of his son. Gaur had a future to provide for, and he would not be thwarted by the timidity of one human woman. He dragged one of the children forward and held a knife to its throat. He told me he would kill the child himself if I did not do as he asked. When the child's mother begged and pleaded for its life, Gaur declared, "We have our sacrifice."

This time when they killed her, they made it last.

They kept her blood warm and alive as it fed the stones.

I'll never forget her screams. I'll never forget the intense flow of power coursing through my being, my bones. I'll never forget.

And they all entered va-jor. Every man, woman, and child.

Even then, my heart was not hardened as it is now. Even then, I remained soft, tender. And so vulnerable. The experience drove me to the brink of madness. I wanted to die. My love for Vor was not enough to sustain me. So, I fled.

But Zur found me.

Of course, he did.

He always knew where I was, even when I did not know myself.

He found me and went down on his knees before me, begging my forgiveness. I did not understand at first, but he persisted, saying it was his fault, that he should never have brought me to this world. He did not know the depths to which Gaur would go in his bid to save the Under Realm.

Snarling, I answered, "But you always knew your brother would marry me."

"Yes," Zur replied. "But I did not know I would fall in love with you."

In those few words, I found what I needed. Life. Hope. A reason to hold on.

I could not return to Mythanar. Zur had been sent to retrieve me, loyal dog that he was. But for the first time, he disobeyed his master. We ran away. Together. We had the whole of Eledria in which to lose ourselves, and we intended never to be found. Let the dragon rise if she must! Let Gaur watch his whole world crumble and burn. It no longer mattered to us, except . . .

Vor.

I could not go without him.

Ah, but my tongue wearies of this talk! Of telling tales from so long ago. There's much to be done, and my time would be better spent doing it.

I suppose I'm committed now. A tale once begun can't very well be left untold.

Fine. Keep your mouth shut and your ears open. I'll tell you the rest of this sorry business, though you may wish it unsaid in the end.

We were caught.

Gaur knew I would return, and he was prepared for us. Perhaps if I had known then what I know now, I might have managed to slip in and take the child on my own. Zur did try to warn me. He knew somehow that if we went back, we would never escape again. But I insisted. I was weak—a mother's love can be such a treacherous parasite.

Gaur had prepared a chamber and lined it with lead, which effectively blocks the song of the urzul and hinders our gift. He chained me up within those four close walls and left me there for days on end. Without light. Without food. Without water. I was buried alive, abandoned to rot in those chains. Such would have been my end were it not for Zur.

"Let her redeem herself!" Zur begged. "Let her do what she came here to do. Let her enstone the dragon!"

"Impossible," Gaur replied. "The va-jor is not strong enough. Our priests say it can never be, not without a willing sacrifice."

"Then let me be that sacrifice," Zur declared before all Gaur's court. "I offer myself freely. My life for hers. My life for the va-jor."

They dragged me from my prison of lead, covered in my own foulness,

*thin, shuddering, starved. They cleaned me up, fed me, combed my hair.
Adorned me in sacred robes and crowned my head in jewels.*

*Then they brought me to the place of sacrifice where Zur was bound, his
flesh prepared for the diamond blade.*

I screamed.

I begged.

I pleaded.

I vowed I would never do it. That I would kill myself first.

In the end it was Zur who convinced me.

*He told me to let his death have meaning. He would die. Gruesomely.
Horribly. But he would die knowing his people would be spared.*

So much pain. So much.

*The sacrificed one must remain alive as long as possible.
To keep the blood fresh and flowing.*

I wept.

I wept until there were no tears left.

Then I sank into jor.

So deep I could not feel.

I did not want to feel.

I wanted to be stone.

*The crystals devoured Zur's blood. Their resonance was so profound, it
could be felt in every corner of the Under Realm.*

I felt nothing.

I knew nothing.

I was nothing.

I was fractured in a billion particles, spread out across the world.

I was everywhere. I was nowhere.

I stood before Arraog herself and looked her in the eye.

She was asleep. But she saw me. She knew me. She stirred, and towns were crushed to dust. She trembled, and rivers flooded, whole cities drowned. She breathed, and poison poured through channels, tunnels, crevices, souls.

But she could not escape me. And when I sent the resonance of a billion singing crystals into her, stone engulfed her heart.

She was afraid.

Then she was not afraid.

She was nothing.

Like me.

I don't remember what happened. How I lost control.

There was heat. Terrible heat. The furnace at the core of the world, blasting into me. Were I not so deeply enstoned myself, I would have perished in that blast.

I should have perished.

Even now, I wish . . .

Three cities were lost in the space of a single day.

Others were devastated by poison.

Zur died.

And the dragon lived.

23

FARAINÉ

Until this moment, I've never been able to read this woman's heart. The layers of protective stone she wears are so profound, it's too easy to think of her as a different kind of being, set apart from creatures of flesh and feeling. A true embodiment of the *jor* to which trolde aspire.

Now? It's as though she's cut open her chest cavity, pulled her heart from her breast, and placed it on the ground between us. Pulsing. Oozing. Struggling to live apart from its life source. A gruesome sight.

Shuddering, I turn away from her and stare out across the steaming waters of the lake. Only then do I realize my face is wet with tears. They stream down my cheeks, drip from my chin. I wipe them away swiftly, but more follow, a torrent I cannot suppress. The story is too real, too raw in my head, conveyed primarily through feelings rather than words. Feelings—all recalled with such exquisitely cruel clarity—implanted directly into my mind. Were it not for the remnants of *jor* still shielding my spirit, the pain would incapacitate me.

After a long silence, Maylin clears her throat. Her words, when they finally come again, are brittle and hard. "I could not return from the depths of *jor*. Not for many days, many weeks. They began to think I had lost control entirely. I have no memory of that time. There was no feeling, no thought. Merely being.

“In the end, however, the *jor* fell away. My body warmed. My soul stirred. I came back to myself. Back to an existence in which the horror I had endured, the evil I had done, surrounded me once more.”

Emotions erupt in my head again, complex and many-colored. But the raw red of Zur’s death dominates the rest. I shrink from it, wishing I dared rise and flee this place.

“I left,” Maylin continues, a world of meaning in those simple words. “Gaur tracked me down, of course. But this time I warned him never to seek me out again. I placed such a dread of me into his heart, he turned at once and never looked back. Not long after, he took a new wife, who bore another son. But he did not disinherit Vor. For that I owe him something.” She grimaces as though the admission tastes bitter.

I bow my head, my temples throbbing with emotions not my own. “Was it for Vor then that you have remained?” I ask softly. “That you sought me out, that you . . . made it possible for me to come here?”

“No.” Her voice is a sharp, swift cut. “It was for Zur.”

I feel the need in her. It’s too strong to suppress, this compulsion, this ache to somehow justify the death of the man she loved. Even now, after all this time, the brutality of his final moments haunts her. He begged her to let his death matter, to let his spilled blood and suffering be the means to save his world. She failed him then.

She will not fail him again.

I put my hands in my hair, fingers digging into my scalp. If I could, I would pull these feelings straight out of my head, free myself of her pain. But my emotions are so tangled up with hers now. I think of Vor. I think of all I would do to protect him, to keep him alive and with me. And if he is dead? If he has already lost his life on some distant battlefield? What would I give to make that sacrifice matter?

How far am I willing to go?

“The *va-jor*,” I whisper. “Vor told me it was black magic. The blood, the sacrifice. He said it was evil.”

“Only if the sacrifice is unwilling.” Maylin lifts her chin. “Should a willing sacrifice be found, the ceremony may be performed in its fullness without guilt, without sin.”

“Zur . . . He wasn’t truly willing.”

Her jaw hardens. “No. The choice was forced upon him. He was willing to die, but only to spare me.”

“Is it possible to find a sacrifice truly willing?”

“You let me worry about that.” With those words, the old witch climbs to her feet, peering down into my face from under the shadow of her hood.

“You concentrate on strengthening your powers. One cave devil is a beginning, but it is a far cry from what you will face when you meet Arraog. You will need a truly willing sacrifice then. And it will be provided.”

I shudder, wrapping my arms around my body. My head throbs again, this time with the intensity of her passion, her resolve. She sounds fanatical. She sounds like . . .

“The Children of Arraog,” I whisper.

Maylin stiffens.

“I’ve seen them,” I continue. “I’ve watched them attempt to generate a lesser *va-jor*.” That vision of blood and chanting and red, pulsing stones flashes through my mind. “Are you one of them?”

She draws a long breath, her lips pressed in a bloodless line. “There was a young priest. He was with me throughout my training, was present every time I performed *va-jor*, including the day I faced the dragon.” Her hands tighten around her walking stick, knuckles standing out hard and white. “He remains convinced to this day that *va-jor* is the means by which the Under Realm will

be saved. But after witnessing my failure, he came to believe the rise of the dragon is the ultimate will of the Deeper Dark. He still believes in the fulfillment of the *Athtar-garag* prophecy but sees that fulfillment manifesting rather differently. Now he teaches that troldefolk will only know deliverance by virtue of entering into total *jor*.”

Targ. She’s talking about Targ. I’m sure of it. The priest who has slowly but surely gained a following among the people of Mythanar and the Under Realm, preaching salvation through destruction.

An image flashes through my mind: the priest and the dowager queen. Standing together in the hall between me and this garden. Targ had cast me no more than a single glance devoid of all feeling, empty of soul. But the queen? There was hope in her gaze. And hunger.

“I am told, Aruka, that you spend a great deal of your time at the Urzulhar Circle these days.”

A wave of ice washes over me. Vor feared Targ and his influence over Queen Roh. He feared as well what Targ might intend for me. Is it possible the priest has recognized the power inside me? Does he know another *kurspari-glor* has come to the Under Realm?

Maylin watches me closely. I can almost feel her rooting around inside me, exploring each of my emotions, turning them over, studying them. When she catches my eye, however, she merely shakes her head. “Don’t waste your time worrying about the Children of Arraog. Their interests are best served by leaving you to your own devices. You have noticed, have you not, how singularly unimpeded you’ve been?”

I have. But until now, I’ve simply attributed it to the absolute disdain Vor’s courtiers feel for me.

Looking down at my blood-stained hand, I study the lines where the crystal edges cut and blood swelled. It throbs with pain, but I hardly notice it

even when I concentrate. Such pain has little to do with someone like me. It might as well belong to someone else.

What am I becoming? I wonder, moving my fingers slowly, watching how blood drips and stains the white fabric of my gown.

Then, more quietly, a mere whisper in the back of my mind: *And will I be able to come back?*

24

VOR

There are fewer wayposts to mark the journey between the human fort and our destination. Even those will do us no good as we do not possess the mortal magic necessary to call the light to life. We must make this crossing as swiftly as we may and simply pray to our god of darkness that he keeps this strange, terrifying dark at bay. At least we seem to be praying to the right god.

I lead the force with Parh at my side. Our ranks might be reduced but still make a formidable array as we ride our morleth across the open plain. Parh and I form the tip of a wide V formation, and the morleth eat up the distance, their hooves scarcely touching the tips of the waving dry grass as they skim just above the surface of the world.

By nightfall the churning magic above Evisar looks worse than ever. I have faced my fair share of foes in this life. Even so, my heart quakes at the thought of what lies before us. Far worse, however, is the threat of black lightning. We must break Ruvaen's siege and enter the sanctity of the citadel walls before we will be safely protected from another culling. If we are caught out in this open territory with no magicked light to shield us, we will all perish. Not a comforting thought, but a motivating one.

At last, the ruinous city comes into view, illuminated by the glare of magic and the awful half-closed eye of the moon. I narrow my gaze, searching for

signs of hobgoblins moving about the crumbling remnants of what might once have been towering and majestic structures. They make no attempt to hide themselves. They've staked the heads, limbs, skins, and entrails of their victims across the highest points of the fallen buildings, gruesome banners proclaiming their possession.

Gods, I hate hobgoblins.

I raise an arm; the formation draws to a halt. From this low vantage we cannot see what awaits beyond the city ruins, only the magic which bursts and ripples overhead. Ruvaen is no doubt aware of our approach and seeks to end this siege and take the citadel once and for all. He will have prepared a warm welcome for my *ortolarok*.

A growl in my throat, I urge Knar ahead of the formation, then turn in my saddle to look back at my riders. All these brave men and women who have followed me through nightmare and terror to fight a stranger's war. They have lost leaders, comrades, friends. They will lose more before this night is over. Yet they serve me still. I do not know what I did to deserve such loyalty.

"Brothers!" I cry, raising my sword above my head. "Sisters! Tonight, we ride into the unknown and meet the glory of battle! But always remember—for every life we take and every life we give, it is all for Mythanar and the Under Realm. Hold true to your purpose and never waver." I sweep my gaze across them, as though I might meet each pair of eyes individually. In some faces I see a spark of hope, in others a grim determination. In a few, despair has already settled in. Those few already know they will not live through the night. But they will meet what must come with courage, and I love them all the more for it.

Once again, I brandish my sword: "*Drag-or, ortolarok!*"

And they answer, their voices raised in a chorus of death: "*Rhozah!*"

Rhozah!”

I turn Knar’s head about, face the city. Face those grizzly trophies and the shadowy forms darting between them. Face the tortured light of spells and magic, both mortal and fae, the cacophony and terror of an outmatched fight. I face it all. And for one moment I close my eyes.

There she is. Just behind my eyelids.

Faraine.

I see her in a flash, in every guise that I’ve known her. From the first moment I scooped her up in my arms amid a battlefield, to the surprise on her face when I lifted her off her feet and twirled her around a dance floor. I see those wide, terrified, bi-colored eyes of hers staring up at me from our marriage bed in a moment of terrible revelation. I see them again, alight with ecstatic release as she gave herself over to me. I see her solemn and smiling, tearful and furious.

I see her dead. And alive once more.

Whatever our story is meant to be, it cannot end here. Not tonight.

I open my eyes and pull the visor of my helmet down. My spirit narrows to a spearhead, focused on the fight ahead. I will give everything, absolutely everything I have to give. Then I will return to her.

“*Drag-or!*” I bellow and spur Knar into action. My riders surge behind me. The morleth make no sound—no thundering hooves across the plain. We are a sweeping shadow of death riding in on sulfurous steeds.

The hobgoblins in their stolen city sense our coming. They swarm to the highest broken towers and walls, waving their arms and beating their chests as though to welcome us. There are so many of them, more than I’ve ever seen in one place. How Ruvaen managed to transport them from their own realm to this place without losing his life in the process is beyond me. But they’re here, and they are not afraid of troldefolk in trolde armor. Though

they themselves are naked save for the coarse hair covering their leathery hides, they expose themselves with wild abandon. Perhaps they welcome the embrace of death; it must be a relief for such repulsive creatures to leave this life behind.

“*Orghru, ortolarok!*” I bellow and drive my spurs into Knar’s flanks. He responds to my urging and takes to the air, eager to climb into that dark sky. Just as we reach the outermost walls of the fallen city, the host of morleth rise like a wave, sweeping over the heads of the raging hobgoblins. Missiles fly—stones, skulls, broken lances, severed heads. Anything those monsters can get their ugly hands on. Most whistle uselessly beneath our morleth’s churning hooves, the rest rebound off our stout trolde armor. Something strikes my pauldron and shatters on impact in a cloud of bone dust. Screeches of frustrated rage erupt below us, and the city streets team.

Several of my riders sweep low to hack at the beasts. “Keep to the air!” I bellow, but too late. They are hauled from their saddles. Hobgoblins pile on top of them, shrieking with bloodthirsty glee, drowning out their cries as they seek to rip away their armor and penetrate their tough trolde hides. We cannot stop to help. I can only pray they are able to shake free of their assailants and reclaim their mounts.

We rise higher. But this too is perilous, for the wild magic sears us from above. One of my warriors is struck by a bolt of unruly spell-light, which evaporates his morleth out from under him. He falls hard, crashing through a rotten rooftop below. I do not see what becomes of him.

Then we are beyond the city. The defenses the Miphates could not breach we have simply sailed over. We look now upon the stretch of plain between the city and the citadel nestled in the shadow of the mountain. The harsh glare of magic reveals the hosts of Ruvaen. My heart misses a beat.

It is worse than I thought. In a single glance, I calculate at least three

hundred Orrian lancers, armed with their moonblade weapons. Their horned heads and snarling helmet masks could lead a man to believe Ruvaen summoned demons from the depths of the nine hells to serve his cause. Beyond them are the foot soldiers, the Noxaurian berserkers, already ravaging from *virulium* and eager to fight, pounding their blades against their shields. They cannot approach the citadel, however, for powerful warding spells keep them at bay. Some counter-magic is even now working to bring those wards down, and it is this which sends the chaotic bursts of light and power rippling to the sky. For now, the wards hold, sustained by the Miphates within the citadel. But they won't hold much longer, and then the berserkers will swarm.

The keep is already under threat. Though the wards keep most of Ruvaen's force at bay, the giants have walked straight through, impervious to human magic. They are brutal, one-eyed monsters with huge warhog jaws and yellow tusks, the tallest of them at least forty meters high. Huge bushes of tangled beard spill over their naked torsos. Wielding massive war hammers, they beat at the gates and walls of the citadel, breaking through magical reinforcements as quickly as the mages on the far side can reinstate them. Sooner rather than later, the mages will simply run out of spells.

The giants must be brought down or nothing else that happens tonight will matter.

"*Drag-or!*" I cry, and charge, guiding Knar through the magic storm and over the heads of the Orrian lancers. They maneuver their lances, sending arcs of sharpened moonlight radiating from below. When those arcs hit the morleth, the beasts disintegrate immediately, leaving their riders to plummet. Trolde can take a fall, however. My warriors land, weapons at the ready, and set to work carving out circles of destruction as our enemies seek to close in upon them.

Parh's harsh voice barks commands to my right. She turns her morleth, leading a contingent of warriors to take on one of the giants. On my left flank, Lur does the same, while I fly straight on, riders at my heels, aiming for the centermost giant who even now pounds the gate.

"Go for the eye!" I bellow as we drive in close. The war hammer swings up, and we dodge to avoid it. One of our number is not so nimble, and a morleth disappears in a puff of smoke as its rider falls.

Knar is swift and responsive to my touch. We avoid both the hammer and the giant's swinging arm and pull in close to that hideous face. A blast of foul breath assaults my senses. I grind my teeth, tilt to one side in my saddle, my sword arm extended. It turns its heavy head, narrowly avoiding a slash to the eye. My blade cuts through the top half of its huge, tufted ear instead.

The giant bellows and wildly swings its hammer, batting at my riders like a swarm of *olk*. Another rider falls and another. That huge hammer brushes so close, I feel the wind of its passing. I haul on Knar's reins.

Suddenly a massive green hand appears before me. I try to bank, but Knar is not quick enough. We hit that lined and greasy palm like a brick wall. Knar immediately vanishes from this world back to his own dimension, leaving me to plummet to earth.

The fall is nothing—one moment I am midair, the next I smack into dirt, breath knocked from my lungs. Before I can react, a huge foot with curling dagger nails blocks out the glare of magic overhead. I just have time to brace myself before it comes down hard on top of me, driving my body into the ground. My armor creaks, but the spikes down my backplate pierce the callouses of that enormous sole. The giant screams.

The next moment, the foot lifts away. I can breathe again. I pry myself up from the dirt, dragging air into my lungs. Somehow I didn't lose my grip on my sword. Swiping the visor back from my face, I stare up at the howling

beast above me, still waving his heavy hands to ward off my *ortolarok*. They cannot get close enough to that red and raging eye.

I'm in motion before reason can dissuade me. My sword upraised, I leap for the nearest foot, which comes down heavily in front of me, shaking the ground. I scramble one-handed past the knee and catch hold of an old loincloth of ratty lamia hide. The tough skin holds my weight as I pull myself up to the belt wrapping the giant's ample girth. The stench is beyond description. I struggle to maintain my grip as the giant whirls in his defensive dance. He wears no garments on his upper torso, but that bush of beard will serve my purpose. I spring for it, grasping hold of coarse hair like a tangle of briars, and climb swiftly to the giant's shoulder. Only then does he take notice of me.

Mounding folds of green-gray skin form a ledge over that single red eye. He turns, trying to catch sight of me as I grab hold of his ear for support. His big hand swipes, seeking to brush me away like an insect. I swing out, straddle that bulbous nose, gripping it between my legs. The giant utters a rageful bellow just before I brandish my sword and plunge it straight into the center of that enormous black pupil.

Blood spurts, spraying me in hot sludge. The giant's howl cuts off abruptly. He's dead before his knees hit the ground, before his huge body tumbles forward. His outflung arm, still gripping the hammer, pounds the gates one last time, cracking the hinges. I spring free of my enemy and turn to see one of the gates tumble sideways. On the far side, a cluster of mages stand, all hooded and robed, their terrified eyes white-ringed as they stare out at me. A shout, and they leap into action, struggling to mend the breach.

"Knar!" I cry. My morleth does not respond, refuses to reappear from his dark dimension. Overhead, the *ortolarok* circle. One swoops low, shouting words I cannot discern. "Go!" I cry and motion to the other two giants still

assaulting the walls. "Take them down!"

They obey, reluctant to leave me in this vulnerable position. But this stretch of ground between the citadel wall and the ward-spell is safe enough. The Noxaurians throw themselves at the magicked barrier, slaving to get through. Once again, a ripple of counter-magic passes through the ward-spell. Someone out there is fighting hard to break it, but they've not managed it yet.

A snort behind me.

I turn, breathing hard. Gaze over the giant's fallen body.

So. Someone has penetrated the ward-wall after all.

A red beast stands before me, proud and muscular on four shining hooves from which tongues of flame burn. More flames engulf its body and spout from the coiled horn protruding from its forehead. It would be beautiful save for the ghoulish light blazing in its eyes.

On its back, untouched by the flames, sits a figure of equal power. A Licornyn, a unicorn rider. He wears no armor save a shoulder guard and gauntlet to protect his sword arm. His jet-black hair is swept back from a face sharpened to hard, merciless edges. A band of black warpaint streaks from temple to temple, and hellfire blazes in his eyes, reflecting off the twisted crown ringing his brow.

He looks at me where I stand beside the fallen giant, between him and the half-broken gate. His glowing eyes narrow to red slits. "Hail, Trolde King," he says in a voice of crackling fire. "Why do you defend these walls?"

My helmet is gone and with it my crown. How does this man recognize me? I cast about for my sword, spy it protruding from the giant's ruined eye, out of reach. I still have my great club strapped to my back, however. Gritting my teeth, I pull it free and assume a warrior's stance. "I am bound to defend the walls of my allies."

"Allies?" The Licornyn spits the word, his expression dark and terrible.

“You are on the wrong side of this war.”

I shrug. “I’m not the one attacking a peaceful center of learning.”

The unicorn takes a step toward me, fire spurting from its hooves. “Do you not realize?” its rider growls. “Do you not see the truth? Once they’ve taken everything from us, they will not be sated. Their hunger will only grow. They’ll be coming for you next.”

I edge forward, teeth bared. “Enough talk, Licornyn!” I throw one arm wide, exposing my chest. “Let’s finish this!”

With a ululating battle cry, the Licornyn bows over the neck of his mount, urging it to charge. Unmounted though I am, I stand tall to meet it. I heave my club in a mighty arc, intending to crush the unicorn’s skull and send its rider hurtling to the ground. My aim is true; I can see the moment of impact manifest in my mind’s eye.

Quick as thought, the Licornyn’s sword arm flashes. His blade gleams with red hell-light as it cuts through my stone weapon, cleaving it in two.

25

FARAINÉ

Heat fills my senses.

I know this dream. I've had it before. This moment of terror as my feet draw near to the edge of a chasm. As I peer over the brink and down, down, down, into those terrible depths.

Darkness yawns.

And deeper still, in fathoms incomprehensible, the vast, churning, living mass at the center of the world.

She stirs.

A bellow of hot air blasts from below, scorches my skin, disintegrates my clothing, my hair. I am small, naked, and bald, covered in open blisters. And still, I stare down into that darkness, my eyes melting in their sockets as I seek to fathom the vastness of this mystery, the awesomeness of this terror.

My cracked lips form a single word without sound: *Dragon.*

The world under my feet begins to quake. I stagger, arms wheeling, struggle to keep my balance on that perilous edge. A crack opens beneath my feet, splits, widens. Crystals sing out a screeching harmony as I pitch, as I fall

—and land hard on the floor of my chamber.

I gasp for air, scrambling for understanding as the world around me

shakes. The very walls growl and groan. Heart in my throat, I stare at surroundings rendered unfamiliar in the light of swinging *lorst* crystals. My room. My bed chamber. Deep in the Under Realm.

The dragon.

The thought has scarcely had a chance to crystalize before a chunk of stalactite breaks from the ceiling overhead and crushes my little breakfast table into fragments. Part of the carved mantel crashes to the hearth, glassware topples, shatters. The wardrobe on the far wall pitches forward, cracks open, spilling its contents just before they're buried in a downpour of dust.

This is it.

This is the end.

The dragon has awakened.

Something flashes in the corner of my eye. I turn my head, my attention fixing on a single point: a fruit knife, fallen from my bedside table, bouncing and dancing on the wildly buckling floor. I snatch it up, little caring how the blade bites into my skin. Clenching my fingers hard, I feel the blood swell, then press my bloody hand into the floor.

Even through the wild rumble and growl, I feel them—all the millions of microscopic *urzul* crystals embedded in every stone of this palace. I close my eyes, force my mind to concentrate through surging terror. Reach for the resonance of those stones and call it to me.

Crystal wraps around my heart. Spreads.

Formations of shining gems erupt from my flesh, protrude in jagged points from every joint. Inside it spreads faster still, blocking out fear. I am stone. I am hard. I feel nothing as the world around me breaks apart. Something heavy crashes into my skull, shatters. Streams of dust and debris pour around me, and the *lorst* lights flash and go dark.

It feels like hours. In truth, it was probably no more than a minute. One of those minutes in which entire lives are lived and ended and lived again. When it is done, I lie in a ball of crystal, curled into myself. Covered in chunks of rock which should have crushed my human body to powder.

But I am *jor*. And I am alive.

I'm not sure how long it takes to find the will to sit up, to push back the rubble and slabs of broken stalactite. To stand and look through my many-faceted gemstone eyes. My room is unrecognizable. One would never know this was once a well-furnished chamber fit for a princess. It's nothing but a cavern, poorly lit by a single struggling, half-buried *lorst* stone.

Unhurried I pull that *lorst* free. It's broken in two, but the larger half still shines. I hold it up to light the far wall. The door is blocked behind fallen rock. I'm almost certain I hear scrabbling on the far side. *Hael*. A distant part of my mind, deeply embedded under stone, tries to cry out in fear for my bodyguard. Is she alive? Was she buried in the quake? But those questions seem to belong to someone else. Not to me. I am hard. I am fearless. I am unmoved.

Slowly, I make my way across the chamber, my crystalized feet crushing smaller stones beneath them. The scrabbling is louder now, and voices push through swirling dust and layers of rock.

"Faraine?"

"Princess?"

"Faraine, can you hear me? Are you all right in there?"

Two voices. *Hael*. And *Theodore*. Odd. I would not have expected my brother to come rushing to my aid so swiftly. Unless he was already there when the stirring began, lying in wait to pester me yet again. I draw back, staring at the pile of rock between me and that door. It looks precarious, but I might try to shift it. After all if it tumbles on top of me, what difference

would it make? But somehow, I cannot find the will to bother. Let them dig me out in their own time. In the meanwhile . . .

I return to the center of the room, the *lorst* still cradled in my hands. The crystal pendant around my neck *clinks* softly against my hardened breast. I touch it on impulse but feel nothing.

“It is likely that once the price of your life is paid, the darkness in the crystal will clear.”

I draw a sharp breath. Vor’s voice, deep and dark, rumbles in my memory. With it comes a burning brilliance of feeling which penetrates straight through every layer of stone and pierces me to the core. The price of my life . . . but who is to pay it? Vor? Vor, who even now risks his life fighting my father’s war. Vor, who may already be dead.

I stare down at the pendant in my palm, at that black spot in its heart. Slowly, the crystals crusting my face clear away. Tears trickle down my cheeks. Grimacing, I close my fist around the pendant, strive to pull the *jor* back around me. Now is not the time to be without my protective covering. Now is not the time for feelings like these. I must be strong. I must be hard. I must be—

“Ah! You’ve kept your wits about you, I see. Good, good. I half-feared I’d arrive only to find you crushed to a bloody pulp.”

That voice, sharp as a pickax, shocks me back to awareness. How long have I been lost in a hard space of unfeeling? I’m not sure. The *lorst* I was holding has gone out, and the whole room is dark save for the gleaming figure standing in the broken frame of my balcony window. Like me, she is covered from head to toe in a crust of crystal, pulsing gently with living light. “Maylin?” I say. My voice feels hard and echoes strangely.

Her eyes, bright gold and shimmering with power, flash. “You sound surprised. Did you think I’d forgotten how to fully *jor*? Some tricks even an

old mind like mine can't unlearn." She beckons. "Up, girl. We have business elsewhere. Those fools scratching at your door will be through any moment. We must be away before they reach you."

I'm too far gone in stone to feel curiosity. I merely rise, step across the broken rock, and take her hand. She leads me through the window onto the small ledge which is all that remains of my balcony. A morleth stands there, writhing black shadow standing on nothing more than darkness. Its eyes smolder like lumps of burning coal.

"What?" Maylin says, when I turn to her with some surprise. "How else do you think I've been coming and going all this time? It's not as though our gods-gift enables flight." She mounts, moving with surprising agility considering her age and the crystal wrapping her body. The morleth doesn't seem bothered by her weight. She settles in the saddle, then extends her hand to me. "Hop on."

"Where are we going?"

"I'll explain on the way. Come."

My lips part, questions mounding fast. Something about this makes me uneasy, even through layers of *jor*. "I'm not sure—"

A crash rumbles behind me. Whirling, I see the stones before my door fall away. Hael steps through a storm of dust, holding aloft a *lorst* stone. Behind her a muffled voice cries, "Do you see her?" and I half-glimpse the figure of my brother trying to peer around my big trolde guard.

Hael does not answer. She steps further into the room, lifting the *lorst* higher to better angle its light. It flashes across my crystalized skin, sending fractured glints of light dancing. Hael stops short. Her eyes widen. A wave of absolute shock emanates from behind all her carefully erected barriers.

"Princess!" she gasps.

Before she can form another word, a brilliant burst of white light fills the

chamber. Hael cries out, throwing up a hand to cover her face. I pivot on heel, see Maylin holding out her walking stick, aiming the brilliance of its stone in a painful ray. “Stop!” I cry. “You’ll hurt her!”

“Get on then, and let’s be off,” the witch snaps. “Do you really want to stop and make your excuses? *Move, girl!*”

There’s no time to dither. I spring from the ledge onto the back of the morleth, wrap my arms around the witch’s waist, and hold fast as she spurs her beast into motion. Careless of the weight of our two *jor*-coated bodies, the morleth gallops out across the air above the palace, moving like a streak of living darkness, only just holding onto physical form. I look back over my shoulder, see Hael stagger to the window, her feet poised on the edge of the broken balcony. Theodore joins her, but I turn away swiftly. The last thing I need is for my brother to see me in this state. I grind my teeth, grip the barrel of the morleth’s body with my legs, and stare into the shadows before me.

Mythanar is dark following the stirring. The crystals in the cavern ceiling are at the lowest point of *dimness*, and the *lorst* stones which would ordinarily light up the city streets are all fallen, cracked, or struggling to shine. I cannot see how bad the damage is, but I can feel the rising pressure of fear from below, the turmoil in the hearts of the city denizens as they scramble to find loved ones in the rubble of broken buildings. At least with my body and soul safely wrapped in *jor*, their fear cannot overwhelm me with pain as it once did.

Maylin and I glide over the city. We reach the chasm beyond the walls and continue without pause, leaving Mythanar and its people behind. The old witch guides her morleth to one of the channel openings from which a cascade of water rushes. The troldefolk use numerous riverways to navigate this subterranean world, and I’ve learned that each of these openings leads to a different town, village, or city of the Under Realm.

We enter the close confines of the channel, and the morleth glides above a rushing torrent. It's pitch dark in here, the only light source the crystal on the end of Maylin's walking stick. It casts a pale glow that does nothing to reveal our surroundings.

"Where are we going?" I ask again.

"You'll see."

"I'm not ready to face the dragon, Maylin."

She snorts. It sounds odd coming from her *jor*-wrapped body. "Do you think I would waste all the hard work I've put into you? No, child. You've performed the *va-jor* on one cave devil; you are far from ready to face Arraog!"

I close my mouth. There's little point in pressing her. No doubt I'll have my answers soon enough. The light from Maylin's stone makes me dizzy, so I close my eyes and sink even more deeply into *jor*. The cavern walls echo with the voice of the river, filling my senses. I let myself flow with it, rocked by the motion of the morleth, cradled in the arms of darkness. Fear scratches at the back of my awareness, trying to gain entrance, but my shield is far too thick and strong. It's a relief to know I need not feel anything I do not wish to.

"We're here."

I open my eyes. Once again, all concept of time has slipped away from me. I have no idea how far we traveled, how long I rode with my eyes shut and my senses subdued. We may be many hours from Mythanar for all I know. Or even days.

We've come to one of the river towns. Trolde dwellings loom above me, carved directly into a towering cavern wall many stories high. I cannot see much of it, for there are few *lorst* lanterns left, but I can discern signs of damage and ruin, no doubt caused by the most recent stirring. The whole

precipitous town looks ready to topple into the river. There's a strange haze in the air as well, a greenish fog hovering over the surface of the water and clinging to every stone.

"Where are we?" I ask as Maylin dismounts, stepping onto a stone jetty jutting into the river. I grip the morleth's saddle, unwilling to join her.

"This town was called Murzush," Maylin says, lifting her staff to send the crystal light glancing off the silent faces of the nearest houses. "A place of no consequence save to those who once lived here."

"Once lived here?"

"Yes. They're mostly dead now. Those who aren't soon will be."

I breathe in sharply, inhaling the stink of poison. Bitter, burning, foul. *Raog* poison. Now I understand that green haze. Dragon fumes. Rising from the depths of the world, penetrating through cracks and crevices, polluting the air.

I've seen the effects of *raog*. I've suffered at the hands of those enthralled to its influence. I lift my gaze, staring up at those ghostly buildings. How many of them contain the ripped-apart bodies of townsfolk who turned on one another? How many parents slaughtered their children, how many lovers tore each other apart? How much pain and devastation echoed among these now-silent streets?

"Why have we come here?" I ask softly, breathing the words through crystal-hardened lips. "Won't the poison take us as well?"

"*Raog* cannot penetrate *jor*," Maylin says. "Keep yourself enstoned, and you should be fine. Besides, it's been hours, and the fumes are dispersing." She motions for me to dismount. I do so reluctantly, leaving the morleth standing in midair above the water as my feet touch the jetty. "As for why we're here," the witch continues, "there may be survivors. Children sometimes are not so drastically influenced by *raog*. Only no one ever

reaches them in time. Trolde are too fearful of breathing the poison themselves and won't venture anywhere near until they are certain it's dispersed. But we have not the same concerns. So, we might yet do some good, eh?"

My *jor* covering shivers, threatening to fall. The idea of any child enduring the terror that took place here . . . I can't bear to think of it. Neither can I turn and flee if there's even a chance that what Maylin says is true. I follow her up the inclined path of the cliff face. The empty doors and windows of all those death-filled dwellings seem to breathe out gusts of poisonous air as we pass. It isn't long before we see the first signs of savagery. Brutal deaths, murderous and gory. Men, women. Children too. Thank the gods I'm wrapped in stone, or I should be rendered helpless to the horror trying so hard to break through my defenses.

"That is the way of it with *raog*," Maylin says, her voice devoid of feeling. "Sometimes it drives them to self-harm, sometimes to vicious hatred of all living things. Often, it's both."

We climb to the upper streets and here discover the remains of a brawl. At least fifty troldefolk met their ends here, limbs torn from limbs, heads wrenched from shoulders. Bite marks, gnawed and protruding bones . . . I cannot look. My *jor* trembles; it takes everything I have to hold on, to keep myself safe and hidden inside.

"Here," Maylin says, stopping abruptly before a black opening. This building looks no different from any of the others we've passed, yet she angles her light to peer inside. "There's someone in there. Listen."

I tip my head, holding my breath. At first, nothing. Then . . . "Crying," I whisper.

Without waiting for confirmation, I step through the door, leave the gore-stained street behind. The interior is even more painfully dark, with only the

occasional struggling *lorst* to offer a faint impression of furnishings. It was a private dwelling. A family home, perhaps. And the family themselves? Mostly dead on the street outside.

But not all. Not yet.

“Faraine!” the witch calls sharply behind me. I ignore her. Pushing deeper into the darkness, I let the stone around my heart fade, let the crystal coating my flesh and spirit melt. I’ve not yet fully recovered my ability to sense the feelings of others, but the gift is still there. As the last of the *jor* fades, leaving me vulnerable, I reach for that gift now. It responds, tentative at first. Placing one hand on the wall nearest me, I call to the crystals inside. They answer at once. Vibrations ripple out from my touch, carrying my perceptions with them.

There. I feel her. A child huddled in a back room. The image is so clear to my gods-gift, I can practically see it, even in this pitch blindness. I follow that image, follow that fear, which bursts across my senses in bright, lancing stabs. A small part of me wishes I’d held onto the *jor*.

Stifling that thought, I hurry on until I come to a door. Broken and partially fallen, it leaves but a small opening to the little chamber beyond, a bedroom with a circular stone bed. A single *lorst* illuminates the space, cupped in the hands of a tiny, knobby-kneed trolde child. Her long white hair covers her face and shoulders, and her head is bowed low as her whole body quakes with sobs.

“*Hiri!*” I call, one of the few troldish words I know. “*Hiri!* I see you there!” The broken door blocks my way but there should be room enough for me to lift the child through if she will come to me. “Look at me, little one! I can help you. Come with me, and I’ll—”

The child’s head snaps up. Her eyes blaze bright, glowing in the light of her stone. Her lips part, roll back from her teeth. Green foam dribbles from

her mouth and down her chin. For a moment we are both of us transfixed, each caught in the other's startled gaze.

Then she lunges, curled fingers reaching to tear out my eyes.

26

VOR

I duck, roll, still clutching the broken hilt of my club in one hand. The unicorn roars past me in a storm of flame, its knife-like hooves missing my head by inches.

Virmaer! Of course, the Licornyn are armed with *virmaer* blades, which are capable of cutting through not only trolde weapons and armor but trolde hides as well. I find my feet and whirl to face the rider just as he turns his mount's head about. The man's eyes blaze bright with hellfire, reflecting the fire which swaths the beast. The two are made one in that flame, a single deadly enemy. And I am unmounted. Weaponless.

A thrum of energy quickens my senses.

I turn, eyes sharpening. A ripple in the fabric of worlds moves in the air above the dead giant. I know what it means. Even as the Licornyn urges his mount into another charge, I hurl the broken club to one side and run for that head as fast as my feet will carry me. Flames billow past my back. I leap. "*Knar, to me!*" I cry. The muscles in my legs coil, and I propel myself from the giant's brow straight up into empty air.

My morleth bursts through a tear in reality, a black cloud of sulfur, snorting sparks. I catch his saddle, pull myself into the seat as the beast carries me into the sky. Below me, the Licornyn bellows, enraged, his unicorn tearing at the air with its forelegs, incapable of aerial pursuit.

A blast of agonized mage-light erupts on my left. I turn in time to see a rip open in the ward-wall. Whatever counter magic Ruvaen's forces have been hurling at the Miphates's spell has finally paid off. A stream of Noxaurian berserkers press through the narrow gap, killing each other in their mad need to reach their enemy. For a moment it looks as though their own dead bodies will block the rift, giving the Miphates time to reinforce the magic. Instead, they tear the gap wider, and a wave of ravaging lunatics spills forth. Black poison drips from their eyes, mouths, and nostrils.

"Breach!" I cry, signaling to the nearest of my *ortolarok*. They've brought down a second giant and speed back to the compromised gate. The Miphates scramble to shore up the damage done by the cyclops's war hammer, but now they face the onrush of *virulium*-maddened warriors. Before the Noxaurians reach the gap, morleth descend on them from above. Stone clubs smash skulls and send howling bodies flying. The berserkers are no match for trolde warriors.

I guide Knar in a slow turn, stealing a moment to catch my breath as I take in the field below. "Welcome back, stupid beast," I growl. "Enjoyed your nap?" Knar puffs, and smoke coils from his nostrils.

"*Trolde!*"

I shift my gaze down to where the giant's body lies sprawled. The Licornyn has ridden his mount up on the hill of the giant's back and shakes his fire-wreathed blade at me in defiance. "Come back and face me! Or do you fear to fight on level ground?"

Time to rid the field of this menace.

Spurring Knar, I descend in a streak of shadow. I am still unarmed, but my sword protrudes from the giant's eye. Leaning far to one side, I stretch out my arm and take hold of the hilt as my morleth sweeps by. The Licornyn springs his attack. For a moment, my vision is filled with red, raging flame.

His sword falls in a deadly arc. This time when I raise my defense, a blade of living black diamond meets his *virmaer* steel. Our weapons crash; a shudder ripples up my enemy's arm. Our faces are close, our eyes locked. A momentary flicker of doubt flashes in his gaze.

Heaving hard, I throw him off me even as Knar lunges with his great fangs, going for the unicorn's throat. The fiery beast dances lightly out of reach, but I drive Knar in close again. Confident now that my sword will hold up, I go on the offensive, raining down a series of devastating blows. The Licornyn defends well but is unprepared for the full force of a trolde warrior. The fifth time our weapons crash, he is nearly unseated. Teeth flashing, he angles the unicorn away, putting some distance between us before turning for another charge. His advantage is in the light quickness of his maneuvers; he knows he cannot best me with brute strength.

All around us, the field before the citadel wall fills with bloodshed. Many breaches weaken the ward now, new ones opening more quickly than the Miphates can reinforce the spell. Noxaurians rush through only to be met by the crushing clubs of my *ortolarok*. The ground is slick with poison-blackened berserker blood. Ruvaen may have the numbers, but we will carry this night. I am more certain of it by the moment.

As though struck by the same realization, the Licornyn roars in savage rage before hurtling toward me again. His unicorn's head is down, its blazing horn aimed straight at Knar's breast. I yank on the reins and spur Knar back to the air. He gathers himself, leaps, sailing over the unicorn in a neat arc. Just as we reach the apex, his body shudders beneath me. He utters a sound I've never heard from a morleth's throat, a hideous, rasping squeal. Flames spurt on either side of us, heating through my armor.

Then we crash to earth. Tumbling, rolling. My helmet is knocked away. Were it not for my trolde bones, my neck would snap, and my skeleton would

be pulverized to dust.

We come to a stop at last. I lie on my back, staring up at a distant, magic-riven sky, churning in a storm overhead. Something heavy crushes me. Black, solid, hot. A foul stench of burnt flesh fills my nostrils, sharp enough to make me gasp. My battered brain fights to comprehend what has just happened, fights to understand. Because this body on top of me . . . it's Knar. My wounded morleth did not simply flash out of existence, waiting to be called back again. He's dead. Heavy, solid. And dead.

Blood pools around me, black and steaming, eating away at my armor. I struggle to get my arms under the morleth's body, to push him off and free myself. What kind of sorcery is this? Morleth are beings unbound by physical confines. He should not be trapped in this form, should not be able to die.

The weight increases suddenly. The flame-wrapped figure of the Licornyn looms over me. He's dismounted and stands with his feet planted on Knar's carcass, his sword upraised. Would he stab me as I lie pinned? Fury rushes through my limbs in white-hot heat. My arms heave, rolling Knar's body, knocking the Licornyn off balance. He jumps back as I rise to my feet, towering over him, my face and armor blackened with morleth blood. I have no sword; it doesn't matter. I'll tear him apart with my bare hands.

The Licornyn sees death in my gaze. He retreats, avoiding my lunging arms, then moves to reclaim his unicorn, which stands close by. Before he can catch the reins, darkness sweeps overhead. He ducks, narrowly avoiding a braining from the swinging club of an *ortolarok*. His unicorn is not so lucky. The blow hits it hard across the side of the head. The beast lets out a shriek and flies through the air as though it weighs no more than a dream. It lands heavily, however, delicate limbs flailing, cloven hooves tearing at the air.

"Elydark!" the Licornyn cries and takes three lunging steps. Before he can

take a fourth, a flash of silver falls between him and his beast: a delicate net of woven spell-craft, one of a dozen Mage Artoris gave me and my people for this purpose. *“The threads are woven from fibers of the chaerora blossom,”* he told us, *“which is toxic to unicorn magic. It is the only means of defense we have against the damned beasts, but it works—if you can get close enough to use it.”*

The silvery weave settles across the unicorn’s head, shoulders, flanks, soft as a cloud, fine as mist. The instant it touches that flaming flesh, the unicorn’s fire goes out, snuffed like a moonfire candle. That body, which had burned red with flame, collapses in a black, smoldering pile.

The Licornyn screams wordlessly. His own fire flares and goes out in the same instant as the unicorn’s. He lunges forward, hands outstretched to tear that netting free, but all life seems to go out from his body. He staggers, crashes to his knees, falls on his face.

Morleth riders close in, dismounting and rushing to secure the unicorn. I move to help, but a Noxuarian berserker charges me, slavering with bloodthirst. I raise my blade, warding off his erratic attack with ease. In three simple maneuvers, I run him through, leave him gasping out his last breath on the ground.

A scream. Short, sharp. Abruptly cut off.

I whirl from my enemy in time to see one of my own warriors fall. Three of them had dismounted and surrounded the unicorn, working to secure the binding spell to ensure the unicorn did not escape. The nearest of them did not see the Licornyn’s approach. He had fallen, after all, collapsed, broken, the fire gone out from his body. He was done for.

Only now he stands over the body of the trolde warrior whose neck he snapped in a single, swift movement.

Time seems to slow. I cannot believe what I am seeing. Trolde are not

easily taken down, certainly not by half-human *ibrildians*. Our bones do not break like dolls of clay. We are stone. Yet my eyes cannot deny the truth.

Before I can react, the Licornyn launches himself at the next trolde, driving his *virmaer* blade straight through his face. The next heartbeat, he whirls and springs for the third, cutting him in half in a single, powerful blow. Then he begins hacking at the net, desperate to free the unicorn.

By now I'm in motion. "Licornyn!" I cry, storming toward him, my diamond blade upraised. He lifts his head. Shock radiates through me. Black juices pour from the corners of his eyes. *Virulium*. He's taken a dose of *virulium* just like those gods-damned Noxaurian berserkers. And now—

He bares his teeth, launching at me like a rabid cave devil, slavering in madness. That *virmaer* blade flashes in a storm of blows, and I'm hard-pressed to parry. His strength is tremendous, and the poison has made him unnaturally swift. He can't get past my defenses, but neither can I get through his. We are evenly matched. When I finally land a blow across his ribcage, it has no noticeable effect. Blood wells, but he moves as though he feels no pain.

The battle closes in around us, more Noxaurian's pouring through the faltering wards. My *ortolarok*, though grossly outnumbered, fell four enemies with each blow. We can beat them back. We can defend these walls. But this man? He is something else—a demon loosed from the deepest hell.

His blade catches my wrist, cutting clean through the bracer and jarring my sword from my grip. I do not hesitate. Rather than lunge to reclaim it, I go straight for my enemy. His sword is upraised to hew my head from my shoulders. I plant both hands against his chest, send him hurtling yards back. He makes a divot in the ground where he lands, but the *virulium* drives him to his feet even before he's caught his breath. Shuddering from the force of my blow, he turns to face me again. Raising his sword arm high, he charges.

A small, slight figure steps in his way.

She appears as though from nowhere, a ghost stepping out of the ether, manifesting in a shimmering, unreal haze. Her back is to me. Yet I know her. I recognize her. Even in the strange garb she wears, with her hair pulled back from her face in small, tight braids. Even with her arms uncovered save for bands of leather, and her gown made of animal hides. Even with a small, sharp sword gripped in one hand, upraised in my defense. Even so, I know her. I would know her anywhere.

Ilsevel.

My betrothed.

The Licornyn descends upon her, his footsteps carrying him forward at terrible speed. His sword is already flashing in an arc. “*Taar! No!*” she cries. Her sword rises to deflect his blow. Their weapons crash together. In a whirl of motion, the Licornyn pivots on heel, changes the angle of his attack.

And drives his sword into her gut.

It all happens too fast. My mind cannot register what it sees. I’m distantly aware of how the Licornyn’s gaze suddenly clears—how the black *virulium* fades, and his true eyes stare out from his face down at the girl skewered on the end of his blade. An expression of horror cuts across his features.

She staggers back. Her sword falls from numb fingers.

She sinks to her knees.

Then I am there. Hacking, roaring, driving into the Licornyn. He defends as though he does not know what he does, as though some foreign entity controls his body. He retreats into the fray raging around us, but I cannot follow him, cannot hew him to pieces as I would like.

She needs me. Ilsevel needs me.

Kneeling, I gather her in my arms. Her lovely face tilts back, dark eyes glazed over as she stares up at me. “V—Vor?” she whispers. Her hands press

into her gut, feebly striving to hold back the gush of blood.

“Hold on, Ilsevel,” I growl. She moans as I lift her off the ground. Each small motion must send bolts of agony shooting through her. But she’s too vulnerable here, and the Noxaurians are closing in.

I turn and race for the gate. The Miphates have shored up most of it, but I can see the terrified faces of young students through an opening. “Take her in!” I bellow. The faces through the gap stare at me in horror. Blood-spattered and monstrous as I am, they cannot tell me from their enemies. “Take her in!” I cry again. “She’s the king’s daughter. She’ll die out here!”

Someone must hear me and understand, for a harsh voice barks orders. The next moment, a wicket door is opened. It’s too small for me to pass under, so I simply shove the princess’s body into the opening. Grasping hands seize her, pull her through, and slam the door behind her.

Ilsevel. Alive.

But for how long?

I whirl to face the battle. The Licornyn is lost to my sight, but other unicorn riders streak across the field on their flaming mounts, charging through the ranks of Noxaurians. My *ortolarok*, though outnumbered, fight with unmatched savagery both on the ground and in the air. We will rout this force before the night is through.

Brandishing my diamond blade, I hurtle once more into the fray.

A hand lands hard on my shoulder and yanks me back from the door. The child hits the frame, scrabbles at the narrow opening, sticking her arm out to claw at empty air. The walls echo with her snarls, the light of the *lorst* stone flashing across an utterly savage face.

“You’ve lost your *jor*, girl,” Maylin’s voice hisses in my ear. “You’d best get it back quick.”

I’m shaking. Shaking so hard, my bones might break. The child’s emotions pour out from her in an unhindered torrent, assaulting my mind. Terror, rage, wrath, horror, all in battering blows. Maylin is right; I must wrap myself in *jor*. Yet looking into that slaver’s mouth, those lunatic eyes, I cry, “We’ve got to help her!”

“There’s only one way to help her now,” Maylin says grimly. She pulls me to my feet, her skinny old arms surprisingly forceful. “Come! I hear more of them. They’ve got wind of our presence and will be after us like hounds on a scent. We haven’t got time to lose.”

She drags me back up the passage as I crane my head for a last glimpse of the child. That tiny creature, trapped both in that chamber and in her own mind. I could help her. I’m sure of it. I’ve purged this poison before. I’ve just got to—

More snarls rumble in the shadows all around me, followed by sounds of

scrabbling hands and feet. My heart lodges in my throat, threatening to block all breath as I stagger after the witch. We emerge from the tomb-like house back into the street. Movement on my right draws my gaze—jerking, writhing, unnatural. Low, growling, ravenous voices. But worst of all is the cloud of fear rolling up the street in a churning dark mass shot through with red violence. It washes over me. My knees buckle, and I sag in Maylin’s grasp. “They’re coming!” I gasp.

Maylin looks down the street and spits a curse. “This way,” she says and yanks me after her.

“What about your morleth?” I pant, struggling to keep up with the witch. “Can’t you summon it?”

“No time.” The witch tightens her grip on me and doubles her speed. I stumble, nearly planting face-first in the paving stones. On one side the street ends in an abrupt cut-off, nothing but churning river far below. On the other are more of those empty houses from which a cacophony of chitters and howls echo. And everywhere, everywhere so much fear.

“Call up your *jor*, girl.” Maylin looks back at me, her eyes sharp in her crystal-crusted face. “Do you want them to tear you apart? You need to protect yourself!”

It’s too late. The tide of emotion has me in its thrall. I cannot find that quiet space inside myself to anchor the *jor*.

We pass a cavernous doorway. Shadow movement catches my awareness just before a huge trolde form bursts forth, knocking into the two of us. Maylin lets out a grunt, her small, crystal-wrapped body thrown to the ground. I stagger back, managing to keep my feet. “Maylin!” I cry. But the massive trolde stands between us. He’s as big as a wall, broad as a boulder, with flaky *dorgarag* skin. Madness rings his shining eyes. His lips roll back, displaying diamond-sharp teeth.

“Halt, villain!”

The trolde freezes. Blinks. Looks up.

A golden figure illuminated in *lorst* light appears in the darkness overhead, riding a massive morleth. Behind him sits a warrior, who holds him before her in her saddle while he waves a gilded sword. “Stand and declare yourself!” he bellows. “Will you fight me man-to-man?”

I have just time enough to breathe, “Theodre, no!” before my brother swings a leg over the morleth’s neck and springs free. He comes down hard in the space between me and the trolde, staggers, and falls to his knees, groaning. The jewel-hilted sword slips from his fingers. “Ugh,” he groans. “That was a bit farther than I thought.”

The trolde gapes down at this bizarre apparition which has dropped suddenly between him and his prey. For a moment, even the *raog* in his system subsides, giving way to pure surprise. The next moment, he raises his two great clubbed hands above his head, intending to smash my brother’s skull to jelly. “Oh, gods!” Theodre gasps and rolls to one side as those fists break the stone where he had lain an instant before. He catches up his sword, points it in vaguely the right direction as the trolde rounds on him.

A club hits the trolde in the side of the head, knocking him back. Hael streaks passed astride her morleth, carried away by the momentum of her attack. She swoops over the heads of the troldefolk now swarming up the street behind us. One of them leaps, snarling, and grabs Hael around the waist. She cries out, and her morleth banks sharply. They plummet beyond the light of the *lorst*, Hael’s roars echoing against stone as she descends.

I get to my feet, standing with my back to Theodre, who’s still on his knees, panting hard. “Up,” I say, motioning with one hand. Dozens of trolde-eyes reflect the *lorst* glow. Their mouths open in hungry snarls. Something is holding them back. Perhaps they fear Hael’s imminent return. But they won’t

wait forever. “Up, Theodre.”

“I think I twisted my ankle.”

“Get up or die.”

Cursing bitterly, my brother scrambles to his feet and limps to my side. He looks down the narrow road. “Not a friendly bunch, are they?”

“They’ll tear you apart with their bare hands.”

“Damn.” He rubs the back of his neck. “I don’t think I can run, Faraine.”

No sooner have the words left his mouth than the first trolde breaks from the pack and barrels toward us. She heaves a massive cleaver overhead. It whistles as it slices the air, aimed straight for my skull. With an unmanly yelp, Theodre leaps between us, sword upraised. He manages to deflect the blow. The cleaver hits paving stones, its wielder momentarily bent over. But she heaves her weapon up again, and this time she hacks at my brother.

I don’t think about what I’m doing. If I did, I wouldn’t be able to do it at all.

As it is, there is no thought, no feeling. Only movement, smooth, almost serene, as crystals erupt from every part of my body. Is there pain? I don’t know. I don’t care.

I step between the trolde and my brother. Her cleaver strikes my gut. Moments before, it would have spilled my entrails in the street. Now the blade shatters against crystal.

The trolde stares into my eyes. Madness gives way to fear, fear to awe. She opens her mouth as though to speak.

I lash out with one hand, send her hurtling backwards to the edge of the road. Arms wheeling, she teeters on the brink, but her own weight works against her, and she falls out of sight.

“What in all the nine hells!” Theodre breathes behind me. “Faraine! You’re . . . you’re all . . .sparkly?”

I turn slowly, face my brother. The same fear and awe which had burned in the trolde woman's eyes is now reflected in his. "Come, Theodre." I hold out a hand studded in crystals. "We must go."

"I, um . . ."

Always before when I've worn *jor*, I've found it difficult to move my heavy, ungainly limbs. Something is different now, something I can't explain. It is almost too easy to lunge, to catch my brother by the shoulder and heave him after me. He chokes on his own protests, forced to run beside me despite his wounded ankle. We race up the path, pursued by the remaining trolde. I've lost sight of Maylin. Did she survive that initial attack? Has she taken refuge in one of these houses? I cannot know and cannot stop. While the rabid horde might not be able to penetrate my *jor*, they'll pulverize Theodre in a heartbeat. I won't let that happen.

So, we run. My crystalized feet ring against the paving stones, while Theodre limps and curses behind me. The din of trolde voices swells around us, resounding against the cavern walls. I spy a doorway at the crest of this street. Something about it draws me. Choosing not to question the feeling, I drag Theodre after me and plunge through into the pitch blindness. There's a door, a huge slab of stone. It swings on well-hung hinges and slams fast just as the first of the trolde reach the entrance. A hasty search in the dark, and I drop the bolt. Bodies hurtle against the door on the other side, voices screaming in rage.

I sag, trembling beneath the outer coating of crystal. Behind me, Theodre shuffles his feet, grunting and grumbling over something. There's a crack of stone against stone, and light sparks. I turn to see him holding aloft a small *lorst*, which illuminates his face in harsh, ghoulish lines. I straighten, pull my shoulders back. "We should retreat further in. They'll break through eventually."

My brother nods mutely, his mouth agape. He limps behind me in the darkness, up a short flight of stairs and through an arched opening. There's another door, and we shut and bolt it as well.

"So, um," Theodre manages eventually. "So, your gods-gift."

"Yes?"

"It's . . . it's more than . . . it's . . ."

"I know."

We're silent as we shut and bolt a third door. We're quite deep into this cold, windowless space by now. Is it a temple? As I recall, trolde temples boast neither windows nor lights as darkness is sacred to their god. Let's hope if any of the priests have survived, they won't take offense at Theodre's flickering *lorst*.

Something stirs down under my skin-barrier, down close to the stone wrapped around my heart. I recognize it now: the pull of *urzul*. It's been calling me since the street, though I was unaware of it until this moment. Is it Maylin's doing? Did she survive? Has she taken refuge in this temple too and now draws me to her?

"You don't happen to know where we're going, do you?" Theodre asks abruptly.

"I'm not sure it matters."

"Why do all those people out there want to kill you?"

"It's the poison. It's driven them mad."

"Poison?"

"Yes." I don't bother to explain further. It's none of his business. I turn to him, staring at him through my faceted eyes. "Why did you come here, Theodre? You should have stayed behind in the palace."

He looks uneasy, not liking the sight of my strange face. His gaze drops to the floor. "I told you before. I didn't intend to abandon you. That night on the

road, I mean. You don't believe me, but it's the truth. I figured I might . . . I don't know . . . show you." His eyes flash to meet mine, his expression more intent than I recall ever seeing it. "I may not be battle-gifted, but I'm not a complete coward, no matter what Father thinks."

I stare at my brother. Were I not in *jor*, perhaps I would know what to make of his words, would know how to feel, how to react. As it is I'm . . . cold. So cold. And so hard.

Turning from him, I look back the way we've come. Somewhere in the distance, there's a deep, echoing *boom*. "The first door," I say softly. "There's no way out I'm afraid."

"Couldn't you just walk out?" Theodore waves a hand to indicate my crystalized self. "I saw that clever bounce right off you. Something tells me you could walk through them if you wanted."

"Yes," I admit. "I probably could."

"Do that, then."

I shake my head. "I cannot cover you in crystal as well, Theodore. Not without . . . well, not without killing you in the process."

He shrugs. "It's all right. I don't expect you to save me. I'm sure I'll come up with something."

"I'm not leaving you behind."

"Well, that's nice. We can die together, secure in the knowledge that we're neither of us quitters." He snorts and lifts an eyebrow. "Don't be ridiculous! You need to save yourself or the alliance will be off. If you're dead, the contract is broken, and the Shadow King certainly won't stick around to drive off our enemies. No, sister mine, there's simply too much riding on your survival. So, why don't you take your elder brother's advice and—"

"What in the nine hells is *he* doing here."

Theodre barks and whirls about, putting weight on his bad ankle in the process and crumpling to the ground. With him out of the way, I have a clear view to the dark arch beyond him. There stands Maylin, wrapped in *jor*, the *lorst* stone on the end of her walking stick shining brilliant white and sending fragmented rainbows glinting off the surrounding black stone. “You’re alive!” I gasp, taking a quick step toward her.

She shifts a disapproving gaze from my cursing brother to me. “Took you long enough to find this place. Were you letting him slow you down?”

“I couldn’t leave him.”

“Why not?”

“Well—”

“Never mind.” She turns, steps through the arch. “Hurry up, girl. We haven’t got much time.”

I cast a short glance Theodre’s way. He raises both brows, grimaces, but manages to pull himself to his feet. Leaving him to limp along in my wake, I hasten after Maylin. The chamber on the far side of the arch is far too big for the witch’s single *lorst* light to illuminate, but that doesn’t matter. My attention is drawn immediately to the center of the great space: an upraised dais on which stands a circle of *urzul* stones. I recognize them at once. That arrangement is a replica in miniature of the Urzulhar Circle. They pulse with a pale blue glow of life.

Maylin approaches the circle, her slight form silhouetted in their luminance. She turns to face me then, beckoning with some urgency.

“What is this place?” I ask. A sliver of dread makes its way through the *jor* around my heart.

“It’s a temple,” Maylin replies. “You must have figured that out for yourself by now.”

Crystals begin to melt back into my flesh, leaving me cold and naked. I

cannot seem to tear my gaze away from those stones. “You brought us here. On purpose,” I whisper.

“Of course.”

“You sent your morleth away. You stranded us.”

“Do you really want to get into all that now? The trolde have made it through the second door. There’s only one left between them and us.”

I swallow hard. Released from its stone covering, my heart throbs against my breastbone. I know what she intends. I should have known from the start, but I need to hear her say it. “Why?” I demand.

The old witch’s cheeks shift, her crystallized lips pulling back in a mirthless smile. “Because it’s time you pushed yourself, child. Because you’re much too tenderhearted to perform the *va-jor* on criminals as I once did. But these people? They need your help. They need the salvation only you can give them.”

I become aware of Theodore just behind me, a warm presence at my back. “What’s she talking about, Faraine?” he asks softly.

Ignoring him, I clench my fists. “I’m not going to *va-jor* these people. They’re sick with poison. They cannot help what they do.”

“Which is why they need the mercy of *va-jor*.” Maylin grinds the end of her stick into the floor, her fingers claspng it so hard, it threatens to break in half. “It is their only hope for peace and eventual rebirth.”

“But you don’t believe that!”

“It doesn’t matter what I believe. It’s what they believe which counts. Or what they used to believe back when they were capable of believing anything.” She takes a step toward me, her gold eyes snapping. “Do you think they would thank you for leaving them like this? Savage and tearing each other apart until they’re all violently dead?”

All traces of *jor* have left me now. Tears trickle down my face, hot and

fast. How did I not guess this is where the witch would eventually guide me? That she would push my powers further and deeper in her bid to make me into the weapon she needs.

“Faraine?” Theodre’s voice is a line back to a reality where I am small, defenseless. A princess in need of saving, not a monster to be unleashed. “Faraine,” he says, “I don’t know what’s going on or what the two of you are talking about, but . . . Well, if there is anything you can do, you might want to do it soon.”

Just as he speaks, there’s a huge crash at the nearest door. The voices of the trolde roar on the other side. They’ll be through any moment now.

“It’s up to you, girl.” Maylin draws my gaze back to her. To my surprise, she’s let her own *jor* drop as well, leaving behind nothing but a frail, wrinkled old woman with a crooked stick. She smiles at me, a sad sort of smile. But there are knives in her eyes. “We can all die here and now if you like. Or you can prove the power you possess and live to fight a much greater foe. You can save this whole world.”

But at what cost?

“Don’t we . . .” I stop, stumbling on the bitter words. “Don’t we need a willing sacrifice?”

“For something like this, unwilling will do well enough.”

The witch raises her hand, quirking one finger. A figure lurches into view just on the other side of the *urzul* circle. I press my hands to my mouth, forcing back a scream of surprise. The darkness in this chamber is so profound, I’d not realized we weren’t alone. “Don’t worry,” Maylin says, stepping up onto the dais and approaching the stranger. “He’s docile enough. For the moment.”

He’s a big trolde man, old but still handsome, with a full white beard and long hair that falls in silvery waves to his waist. He wears a stone circlet

across his brow, signifying his place in the priesthood. Beneath that band, his eyes roll with the madness of *raog*, only just held in check. I recognize that power which holds him: Maylin. She has him in her thrall.

“No.” My voice is small, lost beneath the din of the ravening troldefolk. “I won’t do it. I won’t kill this man.”

The witch sneers. “No one’s asking you to.”

Urzul light glints off the crystal protrusions which erupt suddenly from her clenched fist. Before I can cry out, before I can take a single step, she drives those crystals deep into the priest’s gut. His eyes widen. Even now, her thrall holds him fast. Without a word, without even a grunt, he sinks to his knees, falls into the center of the *urzul* circle. Blood flows freely, a blue-black gush. The crystals shine brighter and brighter, drinking in the sacrifice. Their resonance thrums against my senses and fills the chamber with a noise like thunder.

I gasp. My arms wrap around my stomach, as though it was I who received that blow. His crumpled, dying form fills my vision as the light from the crystals intensifies.

“He would die soon anyway,” Maylin says, standing over her victim. “He inhaled too much poison. This is a kinder death and one that might save other lives in the process.” Her head snaps up, her gaze fixed on me. “Stop being so squeamish. Are you the *kurspari-glur* or aren’t you? The Fist of the Deeper Dark? The gods-gifted queen, savior of the Under Realm?”

Another crash, followed by the growl of falling stone. “They’re breaking through!” Theodre cries, assuming a fighting stance between me and the open arch.

“It’s your choice, Faraine.” Maylin’s eyes never waver from mine. “Will you save our lives this day? Or should your brother and I prepare ourselves to be torn apart?”

I drag my gaze from the witch to the dying man, watch his blood seep from that gory wound. Watch how the crystals devour it, pulsing with greater and greater resonance, which calls to my bones and being. This is the moment of choice. The moment when I will either become what the gods-intended me to be . . . or nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing is the answer.

Nothing, deep inside me.

Down below all fear, all hope. All revulsion, sorrow, or pain.

Nothing from which pure *jor* may be drawn.

I must be stone.

One foot placed purposefully before the other, I ascend the dais and step into the circle with the dying man. Stretching out my hands to the pulsing crystals, I draw their resonance to me, draw it deep and deeper still, down to the center of my being. Down to that place of nothing where once my heart beat. Layer upon layer of *jor* enwraps me, inside and out.

A small part of my will protests: *This is wrong! Vor would not want this! How can such dark magic be blessed of the gods?*

Maybe the gods do not bless this magic. Maybe only one god can: the god of darkness whom the trolde worship. And it is the trolde who will be blessed by his will.

My eyes open. A faceted world of crystal lies before me. I am more truly *jor* than I have ever been, down to my core.

“Faraine!” Maylin’s voice chimes on the edge of awareness. “Faraine, are you there?”

Slowly, I turn to the old witch. She stares at me, her complexion bloodless in the light of her *lorst*, her eyes twin blue orbs in her skull.

“I am here, Maylin,” I answer, cold, hard, distant. “I will do what must be done.”

The door to the outer chamber bursts open. Trolde pour inside, the first appearing in the dark archway within moments. Theodre stands between me and them and can't seem to decide who he should fear more, the poisoned ones or his own, terrifying sister. One trolde, slavering green foam from her jaws, rushes him, arms outstretched. “No,” I say, and raise one hand.

Power pours through me, channeled straight from the blood-fed *urzul*. It strikes that trolde within two paces of Theodre. One moment she is alive and roaring. The next she is solid stone.

The resonance does not stop with her. It ripples out to those behind her. One after another the oncoming trolde halt in their tracks. Their eyes go blank, their limbs rigid, their feet planted to the floor. A wall of bodies fills up the space beyond the arch, blocking the other trolde from entering. They rave and wave their limbs, trying to break through, striving still to reach their prey.

I lift my other hand, send another pulse out from my palm. From my soul. From that deep well of nothing. The resonance of *va-jor* sweeps through those already enstoned and catches those still living in a second, more profound wave. For a brief, shining instant, their rage, their pain, their fear flares. I hear the chorus of their final resistance, but they cannot touch me, cannot reach me. I am impervious to all.

The *va-jor* spreads. On and on, throughout the temple, out into the town beyond, until not a single raving soul remains.

There is only stone.



I am still *jor*-wrapped when we exit the temple. Maylin and Theodre hang back in the shadow of the broken door as I descend into the street, into the

forest of enstoned bodies, taking in what I have wrought. It is an eerie sight. All those figures, caught in the throes of their final madness. Are they at peace? An air of quiet akin to calm covers the town in a heavy blanket. Perhaps that is peaceful enough.

“Well,” Theodre’s voice breathes behind me, his whisper as clear as a shout in this stillness. “I certainly didn’t see *that* coming.”

“I did,” Maylin says coldly.

Movement draws my crystal-lensed eye. I look up to see a morleth swoop down from above. Hael clings to its back, her eyes wide above the strange beaked mask she wears. So, she was not caught in the resonance wave. I consider this fact without emotion; it is merely something that is.

Hael lands her morleth further down the sloped street. Dismounting, she turns, stares at me. What does she see? A monster? A miracle? Slowly, she makes her way up the street, weaving between the enstoned people. Her pace slows as she draws near, but she keeps coming no matter how her limbs tremble. When she is still some ten paces away, she drops to her knees, gazing up at me with a mingling of wonder and fear.

“*Kurspari-glur*,” she whispers. “*Almuth tor Grakanak*.”

Woman of Crystals.

Fist of the Deeper Dark.

Blood, black and festering, gushes over my hilt as I plunge my sword deep into my enemy's gut. *Virulium*-maddened eyes widen, a rage-ravaged face drawn close to mine in a moment of bizarre intimacy which may only be found on the battlefield. We are as connected now as any two beings can be, here in this tangle of life and death. Mine is the last face those eyes will ever see as the light of life flickers, struggles, and finally goes out.

With a brute roar, I yank my weapon free. The Noxaurian collapses at my feet, our moment ended. Heaving great breaths, I turn in place, hungry for other prey. I've carved a swath of death around me, the field of battle strewn with the bodies of those I and my warriors have slain. The Noxaurians sold their lives cheaply in the end; such is the nature of the poison they take. The savagery it inspires will make the keenest soldier reckless. My *ortolarok* were more than ready to take advantage.

I scan the field. There are pockets of action remaining, but we have carried the night in our favor. The lancer line is broken, and the remaining Licornyn riders simply melted away following the disappearance of their leader. Grimacing, I swipe a trickle of blood out of my eye. Black blood, not my own.

Lady Parh stomps toward me, unmounted like myself. She looks grimmer than ever in all her blood-spattered glory. "*Aruk!*" she hails.

I nod. “What news, Lady Parh?”

“The battle is won, but there are yet the hobgoblins in the city ruins.”

The victory is not complete until the hobgoblins are dealt with, for they cut the citadel off from reinforcements. “Take a band of volunteers,” I say. “No doubt there are plenty of our brothers and sisters hungry for hobgoblin guts.”

Parh smiles like a cave devil. It might be the first time I’ve seen my minister of war look pleased. Not a sight I wish to see again; that smile will haunt my nightmares for many turns of the cycle. “And you, *Aruk*?” she asks.

I shift my gaze from her to the shored-up gates of the citadel. I made my stand here, the last defense between the citadel’s point of vulnerability and any Noxaurians who got through the morleth riders. “I will speak to those within,” I say, “learn what help they might offer our wounded. Find Lur, if she is still alive, and have her bring me a report of our casualties.”

Parh nods and offers no further questions, for which I am grateful. I have other business within the citadel of which she knows nothing yet. And I find I’m not ready to explain to her the presence of my former betrothed here on the field of battle.

I cannot yet explain it to myself.



“We’ve stopped the bleeding, internally and externally. And Mage Yalanue has crafted a potent stasis spell which should keep her from rapid deterioration. Beyond that, there’s little more we can offer.”

Princess Ilsevel lies on a long scribe’s-table-turned-healer’s-bed in a chamber hastily converted from a scriptorium to an infirmary. She no longer wears the strange garb of the Licornyn, but is stripped down, bandaged, and draped in blankets for modesty. They’ve wiped the war paint from her face,

though traces remain around her temples and the hollows of her eyes. She looks frail lying there. Like a pale ghost brought back from beyond the grave. Which is what she effectively is.

How long she will remain on this side of the grave remains to be seen.

I study her face in silent wonder. Ilsevel. Of all people! This woman who was meant to be my bride. The last time I saw that face—that stern brow, those full but down-turned lips—was on my wedding night. I had believed then that I made love to her.

I shudder. Now is not the time to recall that dark moment nor all the dark moments which followed. None of which were Ilsevel's fault or doing. She was dead. Or so we'd all believed. Does Larongar know? Is this all part of his ongoing scheme, a bid to keep his favorite daughter out of my hands? An unsuccessful bid if so, for here she lies. Wounded. Vulnerable. Completely at my mercy. These Miphates might put up some fight if they were to realize who she is, but their ranks are reduced and their magic supply much depleted following their long siege. They cannot stop me from taking her.

What twist of fate brought her to that battlefield? I cannot fathom it. Neither can I comprehend the bizarre moment I witnessed when she threw herself between me and that Licornyn. Was that his name she cried out? Does she know the man? The look on his face when his blow struck—that moment of lucidity burning through the madness of *virulium*—implied shock. Horror. Some recognition of the deed done. *Virulium* is a potent poison; he should not have been able to come out of it for many hours yet. Did I mistake what I thought I saw in his blackened eyes?

There's too much mystery here, all caught up in this girl who can tell me nothing. This girl who is now in my power.

"Will she live?" I ask, taking care to let no emotion color my voice.

The nervous mage across the table heaves a sigh. He is a young fellow,

unprepared for the responsibilities which have abruptly fallen on his shoulders. “It is beyond my skill to heal her. Most of our healing spells have been cast. We haven’t any strong ones left. Besides, look here.”

He lifts the blanket, exposing Ilsevel’s breast and bandaged torso. I start to avert my eyes, but the young man points to a patch of skin between her breasts. I am reluctant to look. Not at her, not at this woman who was supposed to be mine, lying in such a pitiable state. Ilsevel breathes shallowly. On her exhale, the mage says, “There! Do you see it?”

Something appears against her pale skin: a shimmering gold mark, there one instant, gone the next.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Runes.” The mage curls his lip.

“Written magic?”

“Yes. But not the right sort. This is *old* magic.” He says it with scorn as though age were a sin. “Witch magic.”

I look at him, uncomprehending. Written magic is all the same to my eye.

The mage continues, disgust limning each word. “It’s those *ibrildians*, you see. They work a bastardized form of spellcraft, somewhere between fae and human, taking bits and pieces from both and corrupting all. The impurity is sickening. But I cannot deny the potency of the spell.”

“This is a spell?” I wave a hand to indicate the shining rune, which appears again with Ilsevel’s exhale only to vanish on her inhale. “What does it mean?”

“Damned if I know,” the mage answers with certain sincerity. It very well might damn him, after all, if he were to know too much about forbidden magic. “All I can tell you is that it’s broken. See here?” He points to the upper edge of the rune as it appears. It’s not brilliant like the rest, but rather dark against her skin as though burned. “It will disintegrate once Mage

Yalanue's stasis spell wears off. Then . . ." He shrugs.

"Then what?"

"She dies. Maybe? As I said, I know nothing of rune magic, only enough to recognize it."

"Who can help her?"

"A fully trained Miphato might. But . . ."

"What?"

Reluctance is etched deep in the lines of his young face. But he looks at the princess again, so lovely as she lies there wounded, broken. Her complexion is paled to sickly gray, and sweat beads her skin, wet strands of hair sticking to her forehead and neck. I fight the urge to pull the blanket back up over her, shielding her feminine form from a gaze that is not quite disinterested. Instead, I fold my arms and grunt, drawing the young mage's eyes sharply up to mine.

"Oh, well, you'll need a witch," he says, stumbling a little to answer my question. "This is witch magic and will require witchery if anything's to be done."

"And where might I find a witch?"

"Not here." The man snorts. "No witches have ever been welcomed within these walls. Save for a burning or two."

"Where?" I repeat, my voice dropping to a dangerous rumble.

The mage pales and backs up a step. "Witches were outlawed in Gavaria a hundred years ago, but . . . but they say there's one. At Beldroth. Sheltered by the king." He puts up both hands as though in defense. "I'm not saying I know anything for sure! It's just a rumor I've heard. Nothing more."

I turn my attention from the sputtering man back to her. Back to the princess, whose life I once intended to join with mine in holy bonds. Whose life fate has now placed in my hands. Is this the provision from the gods for

which I have so earnestly prayed? Is this the leverage I have needed all along to save my people? Ilsevel Cyhorn might yet prove my ally . . . albeit in a manner I never expected.

“Can you make her ready for travel?”

The mage blinks up at me. “She has a gut wound and a curse, either of which will kill her if the stasis spell is compromised.”

“And?”

“And . . . we might be able to bolster the spell. If there is magic to spare.” He twists the collar of his robe uncomfortably. “Where are you taking her?”

“To Beldroth. We leave at once.”

Then we shall see what price Larongar is willing to pay for the life of his favorite daughter.

29

FARAINÉ

I do not wish to come out of *jor*.

To come out would mean to face what I have done. To feel all those lives fighting against the pulse of power I sent into them, resisting the stone I gave. Poisoned though they were, they lived. They lived and, like all living things, struggled to go on living. Every man, woman and . . . yes, every child. None entered *va-jor* willingly.

But I sent them to the stone. More easily than should have been possible. One might argue I was born to it. Born to channel the raw energies of this world, to mold reality into a shape of my own choosing.

I do not want to remember. I do not want to feel what it is like to be such a person, a being of such unnatural scope. I cannot bear to contemplate this new understanding of my own existence. Thus, I remain in *jor*. Deeply wrapped in layer upon layer of safe, enveloping crystal. I do not know if I will ever come out again.

Voices come and go. I hear them. Sometimes, I recognize them. Sometimes, I don't. They speak mostly in troldish, and I cannot be bothered to discern what few words I might understand. None of it has anything to do with me. Every so often, I open my eyes, peer up through crystal to those faces bowed over me. Hael is almost always there. There's a spark in her eye which hasn't been present for some time, an intensity of purpose thrumming

in her soul. It vibrates against the surface of my *jor* but cannot touch me inside. Nothing can.

Once I open my eyes, and Theodre is there. He startles when my gaze catches his and pulls back out of my range of vision. He reappears a moment later, tentative, as though afraid of being seen. “Faraine?”

I blink. Slowly. So slowly, I’m uncertain how much time passes between the falling and rising of my heavy lids. But when I look out at the world again at last, Theodre is still there, bowed over me, his face uncomfortably close to my own. “There you are!” he breathes. “Can you hear me, Faraine? I can’t tell if you’re in there. You’ve gone rather . . . spiky. They’re telling me it’s troll magic, but they won’t say anything else. Can you speak? Or give me a sign? It’s been three days now. Three days since you . . . and they . . . and we . . .” He runs a hand down his face, pulling at the dark circles under his eyes. I’ve never seen my brother’s perfect features so haggard. “I don’t know how to help you, Fairie.”

Perhaps were I not so deep in *jor*, the sound of my childhood name would stir something in me. It’s what Ilsevel and Aurae once called me. Before they were stolen from me. Before they were brutally slaughtered. I have no memory of Theodre calling me that, not once in the entire course of our lives. But he is my last remaining sibling. Which means I should feel some sort of bond to him. Shouldn’t I?

I don’t. I can’t. The *jor* is too deep.

I close my eyes and sink back under the crystals. Their resonance hums in and around and through me, a cocoon of safety.

Suddenly a hard line of shrieking white brilliance stabs through my head. For the first time in I don’t know how long, I react, recoil, desperate to draw my *jor* more closely around my spirit. Another stab lances straight through every layer of protection. With it comes a voice. Or a feeling. I’m not certain

which, but I instantly recognize to whom it belongs.

“Get up, Faraine. Enough of this lolling about. You’re needed now. Up!”

A third stab, this one sharp enough to cause real pain such as I should not feel through my *jor*. I try once more to pull the vibrations around me, but they’re too fractured. A discordant line ripples through the humming harmony, shattering crystal as it goes. Layers of *jor* peel away until I come to, lying on a narrow bed in a large, cold chamber of stone. My skin feels raw and exposed.

Pulling my reluctant eyelids open, I gaze up at Maylin, who stands beside my bed. We’re in the palace infirmary. Behind the witch hovers the square, craggy face of Madame Ar, the healer. Her hard brow is puckered with concern. “*Aruka*,” she says, addressing Maylin and not me. “*Aruka*, I’m not sure it’s best for her to be moved at this time. Humans are not built for such deep *jor*, and she’s been in it now for five days. It would be wiser to—”

“To what?” Maylin snaps. “To let her sulk until this world falls apart? Wake up, Ar! You’re out of time.” She grabs me by my wrist, her fingers icy cold against my newly-liberated flesh. “Come, girl,” she says, pulling me upright. “We haven’t a moment to waste.”

Ar growls a series of protests in trolde but makes no move to interfere when Maylin forces me to my feet and leads me from the infirmary. Hael is not present. I note this with a vague sort of awareness, not strong enough to be called curiosity. She has been near every other time I’ve opened my eyes. I should probably wonder where she is, how she’s been convinced to abandon her post. But I cannot summon the will to care.

No one interferes as Maylin leads me through the shadowed halls of the palace. There are cracks in the floors, half-collapsed walls partially shored up. I note them dispassionately, more information which I take in without feeling. Every trolde we encounter stands aside, assuming an attitude of calm,

their heads bowed, their hands folded. Only their eyes move to watch us pass. These gleam with expressions ranging from wary unease to outright fear. A vibration of calm holds them at bay, however. Maylin's influence; I recognize her particular resonance. I did not realize her gift could extend so broadly as to captivate the entire palace. I'm not surprised. I'm not horrified. I'm merely aware.

We continue to the gardens. Here are more signs of shocking damage. So many of the delicate crystal formations are now shattered, the living gems dull in death. There's no sign of mothcats anywhere, only trolde. Tall, silent trolde. Standing in the shadows, watching Maylin and me. They are not like the folk in the palace; no tell-tale resonance betrays Maylin's magic stirring in their souls. They are . . . empty. So still, so silent, one could almost forget they are alive. They wear no clothing save for simple loincloths, and their pale hides gleam in the low light of *dimness*.

I know who they are: the Children of Arraog. Followers of Targ and his death cult. Vor's enemies. I should wonder why they're gathered here. I should wonder why they show no surprise at the sight of Maylin leading me through their midst. I should wonder. But I don't. Everything simply is. Everything simply happens or it doesn't. And here am I, in the midst of it. Strong, hard. Unfearing.

Maylin continues with determined speed along the broken paths. There are places where the ruin is too great, and she must find a detour. This she does with ease, as though she already knows the way through this unrecognizable landscape. She guides me to the final slope, leads me up to the Urzulhar. More people gather on the hillside. Most of them are the silent-souled Children of Arraog, but there are others as well, men and women whose souls vibrate with barely-suppressed terror, but who stand in submission, wrapped in Maylin's resonance like chains. Their eyes fasten upon me when I draw

near. They strain against Maylin's influence, trying to resist, to cry out. It's an incredible feat of control to hold so many souls in thrall at once. What will happen when they inevitably burst free?

Queen Roh waits at the crest of the rise. Standing between two large crystals, she is clad in splendid trolde garb which is somehow both revealing and regal. A dragon-wing headdress adorns her brow, lending greater majesty to her already impressive height. Her gaze fixes on me as I approach, her expression so hungry, it should frighten me.

I let Maylin lead me to her without once faltering. And when I stand before her—clad in a simple white gown torn to rags, my head uncrowned, my hair limp and lusterless about my shoulders—it is she who goes down on her knees before me.

“*Kurspari-glur*,” she says. “Fist of the Deeper Dark. I bless you in the name of all true children of the Dark. It is in our darkest hour that our god sends salvation.” She bows down to kiss the ground at my feet. “So, we will go into the Dark with our souls prepared. Blessed be the Dark! Blessed be his instrument!”

A rolling echo of trolde voices rumbles across the gardens, resounding all the way to the cavern ceiling overhead. “*Morar tor Grakanak!* Blessed be the Fist of the Dark!”

I turn from the prostrate queen to Maylin. There is no question in my gaze, no question in my heart. I merely look. Maylin, still holding my wrist, squeezes slightly. “Come,” she says. “It is time.”

Roh makes way for the witch to lead me into the center of the circle. The tall *urzul* stones pulse gently with blue light. I can only just feel them against my *jor*. They give an impression of sleep on the verge of waking.

Maylin takes both my hands in hers. “This is your final test,” she says. Her eyes are both gold, shining with the powerful intensity of magic she is even

now exerting. “If you do this, if you succeed, you will be ready to face her. To face Arraog.” She presses my fingers tightly. “It is a difficult test. But I know you can do it. Remember, stone is the natural state of troldefolk. Not all of them realize it; you will meet some resistance. But you must push through. The resistance of ten thousand trolde souls is still nothing compared to what you will face with Arraog, but it is the best I can do.” She closes her eyes and leans forward, pressing her forehead against mine. “This world is running out of time,” she says. “I feel her, deep down. We’ve been connected since they spilled Zur’s blood and it wasn’t enough. I am with her, and she with me. Every hour of every day. And she is coming. Soon. Tomorrow or the next day. A blink of an eye to a being like her! There’s no stopping her, unless . . . unless . . .”

Her resonance ripples through me, strikes against my *jor* so hard, I cannot help feeling her desperation. I suck in a single sharp breath.

“I sense it in you,” Maylin breathes. “You are so strong in your gift! The gods did not shirk when they blessed you. They meant you for this role even as they meant me for mine. We will both perform our parts, Faraine. We will not disappoint the gods.” She steps back then, releasing her hold on one of my hands but maintaining her grip on the other. She turns to Roh, and says, “Bring forth the willing sacrifice.”

Roh whirls, the jewels adorning her gown and person glittering. She raises both hands above her head. Hundreds of trolde voices burst into song, uplifted in dark harmony that ripples down the hillside and spreads across the garden ruins. A deep-throated, multi-faceted chant which causes the whole world to respond. The Urzulhar Circle lights up, a clear bolt of blue light shooting straight to the high stone ceiling. The energy is tremendous.

Drums beat, a driving rhythm beneath the chant, pulsing so low, I feel their reverberation in my bones. A procession makes its way through the

gardens. I've seen something like it before: the two tall, naked women, so silent and beautiful, with long white hair covering their bosoms; the six drummers, solemn and empty-eyed, beating their skin drums; and the six powerful litter-bearers, carrying an open platform on their shoulders. Targ sits in the middle of that platform, sunk deep into *jor*. His body is covered in stone, his soul a void deep enough to swallow up unwary souls.

And before him, seated cross-legged and naked save for her own covering of loose white hair—Hael.

My heart thuds. My *jor* shudders, threatening to break. Why is Hael here? Why does she ride with Targ? She isn't . . . she can't be . . . But no, I cannot think this. To think it will be to feel it, and to feel is unacceptable. I close my eyes, breathe out slowly, and let the *jor* in my center spread once more. Crystals tear through the skin of my hands, my shoulders, along my jaw, slowly covering my flesh.

All the Children of Arraog bow as their priest passes, their chant rolling like an eternal river. When the procession reaches the top of the rise, the two women and the six drummers move to encircle the Urzulhar, forming an outer ring. Setting down their burden, the litter bearers stand aside, heads bowed, hands folded in supplication before their breasts. Targ rises from his seat in the center. He moves slowly, with great purpose, as though propelled by the very breath of his god. He extends a hand to Hael. Never opening her eyes, she accepts it, allows herself to be drawn to her feet. She steps down from the litter, her movements stiff and controlled. Even through my *jor*, I sense how valiantly she fights to maintain her stoicism. There is nothing of Maylin's resonance about her. Her body, mind, and soul are entirely at her own command.

She approaches me, her hand resting lightly in Targ's. Though she is a great trolde warrior and towers over me, she is dwarfed in comparison to the

priest. Head bowed, she keeps her eyes downcast until she stands directly before me, close enough that I might easily reach out and touch her. Only then does she lift her gaze to mine.

And I receive the full blast of her fear.

“*Aruka*,” she says in that deep voice I know so well. “I bless the Dark which brought you here. I bless as well the fate which has led me to this place. May my sacrifice prove worthy.”

I try to say her name. My heart pounds against the encasing *jor*, which has become a terrible weight in my breast. But I cannot move, cannot speak, cannot feel.

Targ leads her to that space between the two tallest stones where Roh stood a short time ago. The priestesses from the procession appear, cords of shimmering silk braid draped in their hands. These they use to bind Hael’s wrists. Then, crossing her arms in front of her, they toss the lengths of cord to loop through hooks affixed high on each standing stone. I had not noticed these before. Have they been there all along, or were they hammered in place in preparation for this ceremony? The women hoist Hael up. Their muscles strain under her weight, but they pull relentlessly, hand-over-hand, until she hangs suspended, her arms crossed over her face. She looks like a carcass hauled back from the hunt, waiting to be bled.

The priestesses secure the cords, then set to work binding Hael’s ankles. Now her body is spread in the air between the two stones. The Urzulhar pulses in eagerness for what is coming. Hael trembles. She cannot disguise the terror rippling out from her soul. She is willing; that doesn’t make her fearless.

Maylin’s hand clamps down on my shoulder. I jump, turn to her, eyes wide. “Your *jor* is faltering,” she says. “You must be brave now. The Urzulhar will be strongest while the blood is fresh. Most of the work must be

done while the sacrifice lives. Remember what you learned in Murzush. Let the power flow through you. You are but a channel. Wrap your heart in *jor*, girl, or the channel will break, and disaster will follow.”

She draws her lips close to my ear. “Do this for Vor. It is what he needs. It is what Mythanar needs.”

Somewhere in the back of my awareness, someone is screaming, pleading, begging for this madness to stop. But I cannot hear it, safe as I am behind my barriers. The task must be accomplished, mustn't it? What other choice do I have? How else can I become everything I am meant to be?

It is all very simple in the end.

Hael murmurs in troldish, quick short words that sound like prayers. Her fear is palpable now as she waits for the first cut of the knife. But how is that my concern? She gave herself willingly, did she not? We all have our parts to play.

“Are you ready?” Maylin whispers.

I nod.

Targ holds out one hand. Roh steps swiftly forward and presents a knife. The black diamond blade shines in the light of the Urzulhar. Targ takes it, approaches Hael. He rests the tip of the knife at the divot of her clavicle, just below the hollow of her throat. A bead of blue forms. Hael's body tenses. He draws the knife slowly, slowly down between her breasts. A line of blood lengthens, drips. Hael strangles a cry, twisting in her bonds. The first drops of blood land on the ground beneath her, and the Urzulhar reacts, sucking in the life force of that offering. Their resonance amplifies, continuing round the circle until every stone, both big and small, hums with power such as I've never felt before. It lures me, so tempting, so readily available. I want to taste it, to make it mine.

“Remember,” Maylin's voice cautions, “you are a channel.”

“I remember,” I reply.

Then I drop to my knees, plant my palms flat to the ground, and draw that resonance up through me, permeating the very pores of my bones. I cannot hear Hael’s moans, cannot see how she writhes under Targ’s knife. I am caught in that flow of power, like the pulse of the living world. Were it not for my *jor*, it would have killed me within the first moments of connection. As it is, I must constantly reinforce my protections, never letting them falter.

The souls of the living vibrate around me, each a uniquely individual note of a tremendous song. Maylin’s soul right behind me, Roh’s close at hand. The priestesses still holding the ropes, the drummers beating their skin drums. All those gathered on the hill, spread through the garden, both the hopeful and the fearful, on and on, to the palace, the courtyard, the city streets. I expand my reach, further and further, drawing each new soul as I find it into this growing swell of profound, complex, interwoven vibrations. A symphony of soul energies.

And every one of them must go to the stone.

I close my eyes, send out a pulse. Small at first, a mere ripple of tentative power which expands from where I kneel in the circle. It flows out, singing from crystal to crystal, all those connected *urzul*, both large and small. They take up the song, take up the vibration, carrying it with them through the city. No one can escape it. It passes through all barriers, both physical and spiritual, leaving stone in its wake.

I draw in more of what the Urzulhar gives me and send out a second pulse. This time I meet more resistance. Some have realized what is happening and fight for their fate. By the third pulse, that resistance has grown. I meet minds which slam doors against me, souls which roar with rage at the prospect of the peace I offer. But the power of Urzulhar flows through me. There is no stopping this.

A fourth pulse. A fifth. Hael's blood runs in blue rivulets down her body, and the crystals lap it up like dogs. The world around me darkens. I see nothing, feel nothing but the red thrum of the Uzulhar and the flashing fury of the souls resisting me. They are already beginning to waver. Soon they will all be in my hold, all those brightly singing strands of life. I clutch them tight, send out a last great pulse of power, and then—

A scream splits my awareness.

In a series of hideous bursts and flashes, the vibration of the Uzulhar shatters and falls around me in broken shards. The physical world comes back into focus. Sounds, movement, chaos. The taste of copper on my tongue, stinging my nostrils. Trolde voices, no longer chanting, but roaring. Maylin's cry, high and wrathful, "Kill him! Kill him!"

I lift my heavy, crystal-encrusted head.

Hael's bleeding body hangs at an odd angle, one of her bindings cut. Her face, wreathed with pain and fear, is visible through a veil of blood-matted hair. One of the priestesses lies on the ground before her, blood pouring from a gut wound which the Uzulhar accepts with greed. And standing beside Hael, over the fallen priestess, his hands gripping a *virmaer* blade much too large for him, his face spattered with blue trolde blood . . . Theodre.

He looks directly at me. "Fairie!" he cries, the name like a knife piercing straight to my heart. "Fairie, what are you doing?"

Targ moves. It is slow, purposeful, and inevitable. One moment my brother stands there, staring at me, his question ringing in the air between us. The next Targ's great stone fist strikes his skull.

Theodre falls inert to the ground beside the gasping priestess.

Targ turns to Hael. Heedless of her screams, he lifts his black blade to her suffering flesh once more.

I don't plan it. I don't think at all. Some force beyond my will possesses

my body, lifts up my arm, levels my palm straight at the back of that massive priest. All the power of the blood-fed Urzulhar is in me now, and it comes at my call, bursts from my core, aimed in a blast of profound resonance, which strikes Targ between his shoulders, transforming him to solid stone in the space of an instant.

He cracks.

Fractures.

Then bursts into a billion particles of shimmering dust.

30

VOR

“Let me ride through first with the princess, Your Majesty. I’ll inform Larongar of all that has transpired. No doubt he will have a hero’s welcome prepared for you and your people.”

Mage Artoris shifts in his saddle while his horse dances nervously under him, unhappy to stand in proximity to my morleth. We have taken up position a little to one side of the Between Gate as my warriors file through, leaving this realm behind.

The journey back across Cruor was less perilous than the journey in, thank the gods. It was as though the land itself was glad to see us go and wished to speed our departure. In the three nights we spent marching along the winding path marked by the wayposts, we faced only one instance of black lightning. Two of my riders were lost, dragged away into darkness. We found their dead and eyeless bodies when the darkness faded once more, and added their number to the other dead we carry home on the backs of their morleth. Fifty in total. The culling claimed almost as many lives as the battle itself.

But we have not seen the black lightning rip open the sky tonight. We rode unmolested across the miles until at last the gate appeared on the horizon, and our spirits lifted. We will all be glad to see the last of Cruor.

I sit astride Gash, a morleth who lost her rider in a culling. She’s no match for Knar in either size or viciousness but has proven a steadfast mount. She

growls softly at the nervous horse beside her, and I grip her reins tight to keep her from taking a bite out of the beast's neck. Parh is on my left, her face fixed, watching the procession of *ortolarok*. Behind us are two more morleth with a sling strung between them in which they carry the unconscious body of Princess Ilsevel. She has not woken once since leaving the citadel three nights ago. But she clings to the last threads of life with unexpected tenacity.

Artoris has scarcely let the girl out of his sight since the moment he discovered her with us upon our return from Evisar. His reaction to her recovery was . . . noteworthy. First all the color drained from his face. Then he staggered, fell to his knees so hard I feared he had fainted. It took some time before he could find the strength to form the first of what proved to be a deluge of questions. None of which I could answer; I know as little as he how she came to be there. He agreed with the citadel mage's assessment of the rune mark on her breast—the mark which darkened more with each passing day. He likewise acknowledged the presence of a witch in Beldroth and urged us to ride faster across the dangerous landscape, chaffing at each sunrise that brought us to a halt. I hated to risk the princess's life, but I hadn't the heart to push my people to march under the full light of that awful sun. They have suffered enough as it is.

So, Artoris cursed and raged to no avail, then spent his days in sleepless watch beside Ilsevel. Much more of this, and he will run himself to death. He is little more than a hollow-eyed phantom clinging to his saddle with both hands.

I ignore his plea to be sent through with the princess. I will not leave this cursed land behind until I am certain my people, both dead and alive, are free of it. And I am certainly not letting Ilsevel out of my sight.

Artoris curses again and slumps in his saddle. Lady Parh's hand rests

surreptitiously on the hilt of her sword. She is well aware who the cursed girl we carry with us is, of her value in the altercation to come. She's not about to let the Miphato compromise our chances of negotiation with Larongar.

Whether or not Artoris has guessed my intentions for Ilsevel, I cannot say.

My fist clenches, fingers tightening around the sharp edges of the crystal hidden in my palm. I've taken to carrying it, the *urzul* stone Maylin gave me what feels like a lifetime ago. Part of me longs to never look at it again. But I have to look; I have to know. The price of Faraine's life is not yet paid. Fifty good troldefolk perished in the name of Mythanar and the Under Realm, but they were not sufficient to cancel my debt. As for me . . . I didn't sustain a single scratch. Not even when my morleth was slaughtered and fell, crushing me beneath its remains. Apparently, the gods do not see me as a worthy substitute for my wife.

But what of Ilsevel? I turn in my saddle, cast my gaze over to that rough sling in which her body lies in fevered torment. Will she survive? Or have I already delayed too long? Perhaps it is she who will give her life to free me of my debt.

As the last of the morleth pass through the gate, Lur returns from the far side to offer her report. "Your people await you, my King."

"And Larongar?"

"He is there," she affirms. "He has heard news of the victory at Evisar already."

"What else has he heard?"

Her gaze flicks momentarily to the sling in which Ilsevel lies. "Nothing to my knowledge."

I nod. I have sought to keep news of Ilsevel's reappearance secret, but do not know what means the Miphates have of communicating with one another. For all I know, Artoris may have found a way to send word to Mage Wistari.

We will have to risk it. “Very well,” I say. “Lady Parh, remain with the princess until I send for you. Lur, you’re with me.”

“You would leave Ilsevel unguarded in this realm?” Artoris protests, his color rising.

Parh shows her teeth. “She is not unguarded, human.”

Before the Miphato can retort, I hold up one hand. “Artoris, I would be grateful for your company.” It is neither an invitation nor a request.

He hears the command in my tone and doesn’t have the mettle to resist. With a last glance Ilsevel’s way, followed by a bitter curse, he urges his steed into motion, riding alongside me and Lur as we approach the gate. I face the ripple of reality’s veil and cannot help a fleeting, futile attempt to peer through, striving to catch a glimpse of the far side. For all I know, Larongar even now waits with a contingent of warrior mages, ready to blast me to oblivion the moment I cross into his world. Drawing a short breath, I spur my morleth forward. She steps eagerly, ready to be rid of this place, though she’s about to have a rude surprise.

The veil of time and space slips over our bodies, gossamer thin. We stagger through into the blinding light of sunrise. Gash lets out a protesting bellow, shuddering so hard, she very nearly slips out of this reality altogether, anxious to reenter her own dimension. I hold her fast, managing to keep her present, my spirit straining against hers.

“Vor, my son!” Larongar’s voice roars in my head before my eyes have had a chance to adjust. “It is good to see you!”

I couldn’t return the compliment if I wanted to. I see only a black, shapeless form on horseback, draped in a bear-hide cloak. My own people stand in formation on either side of the gate, most of them unmounted as their morleth refused to exist in this too-bright world. “Greetings, Larongar,” I say, lifting an arm in salutation. “I return to you now from the liberation of Evisar.

Your city and your citadel are free.”

“I don’t give a goblin’s ass for the city,” Larongar replies. “Pile of useless rock. But Mage Wistari here”—he swings an arm to indicate one of the indistinct shadow-figures riding beside him—“thanks you for the safe return of his favorite citadel. Ah, but I always knew you’d do it, boy!” He slaps his thigh and utters a deep roar of laughter. “My advisors were all, ‘*Oh no, don’t go bargaining with trolls! Nasty, bone-gnawing brutes they are, not to be trusted!*’ But you’ve proven them all wrong, haven’t you?”

He knows I could crush his skull with one hand and not break a sweat. Yet he goads me, layering his speech with unsubtle insults. I don’t know which I find more offensive, his use of the word *troll* or *son*. Both bring bile rising in my throat.

But our agreement, written and signed, keeps me in check. So, I stare ahead into that blinding glare, my gaze fixed on the indistinct silhouette of the king. I won’t blink, I won’t squint, no matter how my trolde eyes suffer. “Larongar,” I say in a loud voice so that all those gathered may hear, “I have honored the terms of our alliance and put your enemies to flight. Now you must in turn honor the familial bonds which unite us. Send your Miphates with me to Mythanar that I may make use of their power according to my need. In this way, we shall forever establish goodwill and friendship between Gavaria and the Under Realm.”

Larongar breathes out a gusty sigh. “Well said, well said, my boy. Very pretty, indeed. And you know, I am more than eager to offer you the loan of my mages for your little problem. Only I can’t just yet.”

I knew it was coming. I knew it all along. Nevertheless, hearing the refusal slip so glibly from his tongue sets my blood to boil. It is just as well I’ve left Lady Parh on the other side of the gate, or she would have laid into him at once. As it is, Artoris clears his throat and shifts in his saddle. “Your

Majesty,” he begins, but I turn a sharp look his way, cutting him off abruptly.

“No,” Larongar continues, “I’m afraid I have a few more small tasks for you and your impressive fellows before I may deem Gavarria well and truly saved.”

“It will be my honor to perform whatever deeds are necessary,” I answer coldly, “when I return with your mages from the Under Realm.”

“Ah, that just won’t do, son. By the time you return, Ruvaen will have blazed a trail of destruction across half my kingdom. No, no, I need to see the pretty fae bastard soundly beaten and ousted from this world.”

I feel the magic of the written agreement tightening around my neck. But I’ve not yet shown my hand, and the knowledge brings a smile curling to my lips. I signal Lur, who slips away from my side, riding back through the gate while I hold the king’s attention.

“Larongar,” I say softly, “I have your child in my keeping.”

“Yes.” The king smiles. “My pretty daughter, my *Ilsevel*, as it were. And she’s made you a good little wife, has she not?”

My stomach knots. I’d almost forgotten that Faraine’s name was legally changed for the sake of fulfilling the contract. “Not her,” I answer.

Larongar snorts. “You mean that son of mine, then. Yes, I thought he might serve well to sweeten the deal. So, what are you saying? If I don’t send my mages, you’ll have the boy killed?” He leans forward in his saddle, his teeth flashing in the harsh light of the rising sun. “Somehow, I don’t think our agreement will allow you to take such drastic measures. But even if you can, what does it matter? Theodore is a wastrel and an idiot.”

“Not him.”

In that moment, the air beneath the gate arch stirs. Parh appears, followed by Lur, who leads the two morleth bearing the sling behind her. I dismount, allowing my own morleth to flash out of existence, and stride swiftly to the

sling. Ilsevel is so frail; lifting her in my arms is like bearing a cloud. I must take care not to let her float away.

I turn and face Larongar. The light of the rising sun shines full on his daughter's face, which tips back from my shoulder and lolls across my arm. Her dark hair trails in tattered ribbons, and her skin looks ghastly gray as the curse strives to break through the stasis spell and end her life.

Larongar swears softly. Murmurs run through his company, voices laced with disbelief. The king holds up a hand and barks for silence. Then his gaze shifts from the girl back to me. "Is it really her?"

He knows better than most how easily a disguise spell might be wrought. I sneer at him and toss my head to indicate Artoris. "Ask your mage."

Larongar turns to the Miphato, who looks pale and sick as he clings to his saddle. "Well, Artoris?" the king roars.

"It is," the mage answers. "It is Ilsevel. The true Ilsevel."

Larongar curses again and runs a hand down his face, pulling at the skin beneath his empty eye socket. "And how did you come by her, Shadow King? Have you had her all this time?"

"I have not. The gods saw fit to place her in my care."

"Yes? And what have you done to her?" Rage flushes the king's cheeks beneath his beard, and a vein stands out on his forehead. "Have you punished her for her sister's deceit? It was not her fault, you know."

"I know where the fault lies on that score," I answer through clenched teeth. "Ilsevel sustained a wound at the battle of Evisar. A magicked wound, requiring witch-healing."

Larongar turns to Artoris again, who nods in confirmation. "Hand her over then," the king says. "I know a witch. I'll take her there at once."

"Send the Miphates with me," I reply, "and I will give her to you."

"No!" Larongar's hand rests on the hilt of his sword. "You do not make

demands of me, boy! You signed that agreement with your own name, sealing your fate. You've taken your bride and had your fun with her. Now you'll do as you vowed."

"I signed an agreement for Ilsevel." I look down at her, at the line of her throat exposed before me, and the spreading spider-veins of the curse across her breast. "She is mine. To do with as I please."

"You already have Faraine."

"But the name on the contract was Ilsevel."

"Faraine is Ilsevel!" Larongar bellows. His horse prances and tosses its head beneath him. "By the laws of our land, she took her dead sister's name! She fulfills the contract."

"But her sister is yet living. By your own laws, Larongar, this girl is mine."

The king swivels in his saddle, turning to the men on his right and left, searching for help. Mage Wistari leans in his saddle and murmurs something to him, which earns him a curse and a threat of execution. The mage hastily sits back in his saddle, head tucked into the dark hood of his robe. Larongar rounds on me again, his single eye white-ringed with desperation. "Send her to Beldroth. Let the witch treat her wounds. She's no good to you dead."

I shake my head. "She is no good to me alive either."

"You may take her home, a healed wife."

"I have a wife."

"You'll have two!"

"I need mages. Not wives."

Larongar's gaze fastens on his daughter. I can see the calculations running through his head. This is why Faraine urged me to choose her sister as my bride. This man, this tyrant, this liar, cares for little in his life. He would sacrifice any one of his children on the altar of his own advancement. But

Ilsevel . . . for her, he feels something. Something deep, dangerous. Something powerful. For the space of ten heartbeats, I dare to hope.

“I lost her once. I thought it would kill me.” Larongar bows his head, the knuckles of his hand relaxing away from his sword hilt. “But it did not.” He looks up again and fixes his one-eyed stare on me. “Do what you will with her, King Vor. I do not release you from your vows. Nor will I send my mages to your world.”

And there it is. My last hope extinguished. Never a great hope to begin with, but one I’d clung to with true trolldish tenacity. From the moment I laid eyes on Larongar, I’d known I could not trust him. Now fifty good troldefolk are dead. For nothing.

All because I could not resist this man’s eldest daughter.

“*Aruk!*” Parh says, her voice a growl close to my ear. “Break the girl in half and hand him her body in pieces. Then let me give the order, and we shall slaughter these *guthakugs*.”

We could. Perhaps we should. It is what a true trolde king would do. Gaur would not have waited for his minister of war’s urging. He would have been on them in an instant. Shall I not do the same as he? I want to. The fire of vengeance burns in my belly. I see the faces of every rider who fell in battle, of every unlucky soul dragged into the darkness of the culling. It’s as though they surround me now, their voices hollow and chorusing in a song of death. I must answer that song. My arms ache with the need to tear and rend. Beginning with her, this girl even now pressed against my breast.

But when I look down at her still, stern face . . . it isn’t Ilsevel I see.

“Send word through the company,” I growl. “We return to Mythanar. At once.”

Parh sucks in a hissed breath. “But, Vor—”

“At once,” I repeat and turn to her, my eyes flashing. “There will be no

bloodshed. We are done with this world.”

For the space of three breaths, I wonder if Parh will obey. I wonder if my kingship will end here and now as my minister turns against me, and my *ortolarok* fall upon each other. Are we to perish on our own swords beneath this dreadful burning sun?

Then Parh turns from me and bellows, “*Drag-or, ortolarok!*”

“*Rhozah!*” they respond. Soon they have formed up, three abreast, eager to leave behind this world for the familiar darkness of home. Parh looks at me, wordless with rage, before turning on heel and marching to lead the first of our company through the gate arch.

“You can’t do this, Vor,” Larongar protests, watching as the warriors he’d fought so hard to command escape his control forever. “The alliance stands! I order you to honor it by the power of your written name.”

I ignore him. With the poisoned princess in my arms, I watch until all my people are safely through. Lur goes last of all, reluctant to leave me. But I nod silently, and she obeys without protest. Only then do I turn to Larongar. I am alone in his world, surrounded by allies-turned-enemies. But I am not afraid. Should they dare attack, they know I will slay half their number before they can take me down. None wishes to be the fool to initiate such slaughter.

I approach Larongar on his black horse and hold out the princess. His eye widens. With a wordless growl, he takes her in his arms, cradling her slim body across the bow of his saddle, all the while holding my gaze.

“Your daughter Ilsevel,” I say. “Returned to you. Untouched. Our contract is now void, Larongar. We shall not see one another again.”

He grunts, his lip curling beneath his thick mustache. “And Faraine? Theodre?”

I do not answer. I turn on heel, exposing my back, daring any one of those warrior mages to hurtle a curse, to give me reason to crush their spines and

rend their limbs apart. But Larongar growls a sharp, “Stay your hands!” and no spells fly. I march to the gate and step through the arch, never breaking stride. Back to the Under Realm. Back to Mythanar.

Back to face our final doom.

31

FARAINÉ

I don't know how long I remain in this state. Static. Frozen. Out of time and thought.

All I know is this feels safe, while anything beyond this feels . . . not.

It would be better to remain here.

Deep. Curled into myself.

Hidden.

But then . . .

The memories . . .

Memories of love and song. Of dancing together in the eternal vastness of space.

Of circling stars, of diving through nebulas, trailing celestial dust in our wake.

Together.

In an endless expanse that will never cease to reveal new and delectable beauties. For me. For my mate. For our great and everlasting love.

Until the Dark came.

Now there is nothing but stone. Wrapped tight around me, binding me fast. Compressing the fire in my heart until it is all but snuffed out. There is

no pain here. I cannot remember what it is to feel. No pain, no joy, no loss,
no relief.

Just stone.

Stone.

Stone.

Here I will remain, safe from it all. Safe from hunters. Safe from hands of
strangling cruelty. Safe from the ringing songs of the spheres which once
called my soul to glory.

Safe.

Small.

Hidden.

Dark.

But wakefulness beckons.

Memories prey on those unprotected corners of my mind.

Chinks in the stone.

I see my mate.

Broken.

Hanging in the grasp of a mighty fist, his spine limp, his skull crushed.

Then he falls. Plummets through the asteroid fields.

Streaking like a burning star.

My rage is hot. As hot now as it was in eons gone by.

Or was it mere breaths?

Time means nothing.

There is only heat, only rage.

Only vengeance—



My eyes flare open.

I stare up at a distant cavern ceiling framed by a ring of darkened *urzul* stones. For a moment, I don't know who I am. For a moment, fire burns in my belly, ready to burst. Then I blink again. Delicate shards of crystal break and fall away from my lashes, my cheeks, my jaw, my throat. It's unlike any other time I've returned from deep *jor*, when the stone simply reabsorbed into my flesh. This is more like shedding an outer skin. I feel new and small and vulnerable.

Slowly, I turn my head only to be met with a grim sight: Queen Roh, her eyes wide, her arm extended, her mouth open in a silent scream. Caught in stone. Caught in *va-jor*.

I inhale sharply and scramble up to my knees. Crawling to her, I reach for her outstretched hand, my trembling fingers gripping her stone ones. Immediately the depth of her *va-jor* strikes me like a blow. I gasp, only just maintaining my grip. Closing my eyes, I fix my awareness on the resonance still vibrating inside her, following it deeper, deeper, desperate to know if it goes all the way to her core. But no—there in her center, something still moves. Something desperate, frightened. Something trapped in far too many layers of stone.

The ceremony did not work. Not completely. It was close, so close. If I'd just had a bit more time, then maybe . . .

Releasing Roh's hand, I crumple to the ground. There I lie for I don't know how long. Breathing, breathing. Trying to find the will to look up again, to face the world and what I have wrought in it. The temptation to sink back into *jor* is strong, almost too strong to resist. It takes all the courage I possess simply to turn my head, to take in the sight of the Urzulhar Circle.

The great stones still pulse with power, but their light is gone. The

darkness in their centers has spread too far, transforming them into something new and terrible. Between them stand the Children of Arraog—the drummers, who maintained a steady beat throughout the ceremony, their drums singing in time with the resonance of the crystals. They are like Roh, caught in *va-jor*. From where I lie, I cannot tell if their enstonement is complete, if they have found the ultimate rest they sought. And what of the others? All those on the hill and scattered throughout the garden? What about the will-bound people in the palace, the unsuspecting folk of the city? What happened to them when those blasts of gods-gifted power rolled through their streets, their walls, their homes, every buried crystal crying out in response to the song of the Urzulhar? I'd felt their shock, their despair, their resistance.

Have I succeeded in bringing salvation to Mythanar? And in the process, have I damned my own soul?

"Hael," I whisper. Only then do I dare look up at to the two largest stones where the figure of my bodyguard still hangs, partially bound and bleeding. From this distance I cannot feel her. Is she dead? Did she pay the ultimate sacrifice all for a half-wrought miracle? And there, lying below Hael, beside the fallen body of a priestess . . . "Theodre!" I croak.

The next moment, I'm crawling across the circle, trying not to think too closely about the thin coating of dust which overlays everything. That last image of the ceremony, that final burst of power, I can neither comprehend nor believe. How could I do something so reactive, so violent? It simply could not have happened.

I'm gasping, trembling by the time I reach my brother. "Theodre?" I manage again, reaching for him over the priestess's remains. She too is captured in partial *va-jor*, trapped in a moment of eternal pain. But my brother isn't stone, thank the gods! Neither is he cold to the touch. There's living warmth in his flesh, and when I press my ear to his chest, I detect a

faint but determined heartbeat. Breathing out a prayer, I pull back only to discover him blinking blearily up at me. His pupils are dilated, his gaze unfocused. “F-Faraine?” he hazards, his voice slurring.

“Oh, Theodore!” My fingers tighten on the front of his embroidered jerkin. “Why did you do it? Why did you interfere?” I don’t know if I want to curse him or bless him. I don’t know if I’m relieved the ceremony was interrupted or devastated. I don’t know anything anymore.

The corner of his mouth pulls slightly. “I told you I . . . I wasn’t a coward. I told you I . . . I didn’t mean to leave you . . .”

His words trail off, and his head lolls to one side. Dead? No, he’s still alive, his spirit held to his body by a tentative thread. Targ’s fist must have caught him a glancing blow, otherwise his brains would be spattered on the crystals. As it is, I don’t know how long he can hold on.

A groan rakes harshly across my senses. I yank my head up, twist to look over my shoulder at Hael. Her free arm hangs slack, the broken end of the braided cord dragging on the ground. Her other arm remains twisted and bound, torquing her body at an unnatural angle. Many cuts lace her naked flesh, and her blue blood flows sluggishly. If she doesn’t get help soon, she will bleed out.

I struggle to rise, gasping at the knives of pain stabbing through my head and limbs. Without my *jor* to protect me, all the emotion I’ve spent the last several weeks holding at bay seeks to return in a deadly rush. I must reclaim my *jor*. But not before . . . before . . .

Leaning against a crystal, I cast about. Theodore’s blade lies close by. Or rather, not Theodore’s. I don’t know who he stole this weapon from, but it’s much too large for him. It’s a wonder he managed to wield it at all. Though I try, I cannot lift it, not in my weakened state. Shuddering, I drop my hold on the hilt, push hair out of my eyes, and look at my two companions, both

barely clinging to life. I cannot help them, cannot budge them. I must go for help and hope I find someone—anyone—not trapped in *va-jor* to assist me.

It's only then that I pause long enough to wonder: *Where is Maylin?*

On top of all the other fears, pains, questions, and needs, a sudden wave of abandonment threatens to overwhelm me. Why would she vanish? Why would she leave me trapped in *jor*, the ceremony incomplete, the sacrifice still alive and suffering? I shake my head and instantly regret it as a thousand angry bees burst to life inside my skull and make a simultaneous bid for escape. When the buzzing passes, and the dark sparks on the edge of my vision recede, I turn to make my way down the promontory. Questions can wait. I must find help for Hael and Theodre.

There are so many enstoned people. All the cultists, most captured in attitudes of supplication, but a few with their heads up, startled expressions eternally frozen on their faces. Members of Vor's court are here as well. Terrified. Trapped. Stone. I can't look at them. I can't bear to see what I have done. I stagger and stumble back down the steep incline, cutting my unprotected feet on the rough terrain. By the time I reach the bottom, I'm sweating so hard, my white gown is plastered to my body, but I shiver as though frozen to the bone. Nothing looks familiar in the depths of *dimness*. All the old landmarks are broken or altered, and the living gems have ceased to shine. I'm disoriented, but the sound of the falls draws me. I turn that way, hoping I might find a path back to the palace.

Movement in the garden.

I stop, heart lurching to my throat. How had I not noticed before? Shadows slip from stone to stone, keeping just out of sight. Images of cave devils spring unbidden to mind. But no, these figures are tall, towering troldefolk. The palace guard? Have they shaken off Maylin's stupor and come to investigate? Will they see me as friend or foe? I suppose it doesn't

matter in the end.

“Here!” I cry and step into a clear space, waving my arms over my head. If they are trolde, they should have no trouble seeing me in the dark. “Here, over here! They’re hurt, they need help!” I don’t bother to explain; these trolde might not speak my language anyway. But my voice, ringing against all those darkened crystals, attracts their attention. The shadows converge upon me. I take a few more stumbling steps, panting hard, whimpering, “Help!”

Lorst light ignites. It’s so sudden, so sharp, I throw up my hands to cover my eyes. A tall trolde approaches, the shining stone clutched in his hand. At first, my gaze is too dazzled to recognize him. Then a bolt of pure loathing shoots straight into my forehead.

I stagger to a halt, drop to my knees, overcome by the power of that emotion. The figure draws nearer, footsteps crunching on the broken crystals littering his path. More trolde crowd in behind him, their feelings veiled from my perception, but their menace palpable. There are many of them. Two dozen, maybe more. All helmed and armed for war.

“Please,” I whisper, my voice pathetic through the haze of pain. “My friends . . . they need help . . .”

The tall trolde angles his *lorst* to shine upon my face.

“So, Princess Faraine,” Prince Sul says in a voice of molten rock. “We meet again at last, here at the end of the world.”

Durgorim is gone.

The town was little more than ruins when last I saw it. Now even those have vanished. Crushed beneath rockslides, fallen into black chasms opened to the pit of the world. Swallowed up by Arraog as she awakens.

And what of the rest of my kingdom? Will I travel to Mythanar only to find it similarly wiped from existence?

“Gods,” Parh says and nothing more as she guides her morleth to the lookout point beside me and gazes down on that desolate view. Her voice is strangely soft. Our warriors make their way down the path behind us. All are silent, subdued. Haunted by their own fears of what we shall discover at the end of our journey.

I am empty inside, hollowed-out to nothing save one last desperate prayer: *Faraine. Let Faraine still live. Let me see her one last time.* Without a word, I turn my morleth’s head about and fall in with the rest of the riders. Parh follows close behind.

Our journey through the Under Realm passes in a blur. At least our morleth are pleased to be back in a realm of shadow. Where splits in the rock open to black voids below, the morleth fly easily over. There is so much damage everywhere, so many passages blocked or flooded. A constant bone-stirring rumble vibrates under our feet, in the walls around us, in the ceiling

overhead. It never quiets but eats its way into awareness until one forgets what it was like to be still.

Many of our riders peel out of formation without asking permission first, disappearing down passages and tunnels leading to their own home caverns. Lur asks if she should send pursuers after the deserters. I refuse. While Parh would no doubt like to see them skinned alive for insubordination, I cannot blame them. This is the end of the world. Let them die as they see fit, seeking the arms of their loved ones.

It is said every road of the Under Realm leads to Mythanar, yet the first dozen ways we try end in cave-ins, floods, and an unexpected river of lava too deep to safely ford. Our numbers dwindle still more as our company splits into smaller parts, each searching out a different route. I despair of ever seeing my home city again. But we forge on, stopping only when exhaustion threatens to drop us. Sleep is restless and fleeting. Who can sleep with that constant growl of stone against stone filling the senses?

By the time I finally stand at the mouth of a narrow tunnel and look out into Mythanar Cavern—when my heart thrills at the sight of those familiar buildings, the soaring bridges, the waterfalls, the towers and walls and winding streets, all illuminated beneath a million *lorst* crystals—it seems too good to be true.

Then reality hits. I look again and see the ruin before me. The watchtower of Zagig is smashed to pieces. Part of the Temple of Orgoth is caved in. A huge portion of the outer city wall has fallen into the chasm, leaving a ragged gash. Most of the bridges have collapsed. And that's just what I can see from this distance, under the *dimness* lights.

Oh, Mythanar, Mythanar! How I have failed you! I longed to return with your salvation in hand, but now . . .

I search for the Urzulhar Circle. It should be visible from this vantage.

Ghat, my chief engineer, once told me that when the end came, the Urzulhar would be the first to go, and the whole of the city would follow soon after. Surely so long as the sacred stones stand, there is still hope for Mythanar. But I cannot see them.

“*Aruk?*” Lur speaks softly at my elbow. I turn to find her heart-stricken gaze fixed on me. “What next, Big King?”

I cannot utter the word which springs to mind: *evacuation*. It is the only hope for our people now. We must leave the Under Realm, leave our world. Find our way to a new home in some distant land. For a moment, I close my eyes and see the Licornyn king in my head. That half-breed warlord without a world of his own. Scraping out an existence for his kind in some foreign realm. Is this to be the fate of the troldefolk?

Rather than answer, I spur my morleth into motion. She leaps into the open air, walking on darkness across the chasm and into the city. I guide her to the street below. My people need to see their king returning. They need to know I did not abandon them in their last, desperate hour. They need to know I will be with them to the bitter end.

The rumbling underfoot is more noticeable here. Part of me wants to urge my morleth back into the air. Instead, I dismount, allowing Gash to vanish, and proceed up the street on foot. Lur, Lady Parh, and the handful of *ortolarok* who have remained with me do the same. We march up the *aruk-dra* in silent file. There is no greeting or fanfare in the streets, no guards at watch along the broken walls to announce our coming. The city is hushed. It doesn't take long to discover why.

“Big King!” Lur hisses, trotting to draw abreast with me. “Do you see them?”

“I do,” I answer softly. Until that moment, I'd hoped I imagined it, hoped my mind, addled with fear and exhaustion, had dreamed the images from

nothing. But this is no dream. It's a nightmare.

The streets of Mythanar are filled with statues. Not carved or shaped by trolde-craft. Living statues.

Va-jor.

It's everywhere I turn. People, my people, in attitudes of shock, surprise, and dismay, captured in stone. I've seen this before. The city of Hoknath was similarly afflicted when the Children of Arraog attempted to perform the *va-jor* ceremony and failed. Their citizens were wrapped in stone while the life raged on inside, trapped. But how could this have happened in Mythanar? Who could have done it?

No sooner does the question form than the answer follows: *Targ*. He found a willing sacrifice. In the face of impending disaster, he probably had volunteers lining up. He performed the dark ceremony, sent a wave of magic across the willing and unwilling alike. And I was not here to stop him. Because I was in another world, fighting another man's war.

The deeper we venture into the city, word spreads of our arrival. People crawl to their doorways, hang out their windows. Hollow voices cry, "*Aruk! Save us! Save us from the fire! Save us from the stone!*" Some brave souls throw themselves at my feet, weeping and praying for deliverance, both for themselves and their enstoned loved ones. Lur and Parh roughly drag them away, clearing the path before me. Their bitter weeping fills my ears, but I am relieved to know not all of them were caught in the *va-jor* spell. I may yet be able to save a few.

My pace quickens. I need answers. I must reach the palace, must find someone who can tell me what has happened. Where is *Targ*? And *Roh*? No doubt she was involved in this as well. And *Faraine* . . . surely she is safe. She is human, not trolde. *Va-jor* should have no effect on her.

I break into a run. Ignoring Lur and Parh's shouts behind me, I race up the

street to the palace. Unknown faces swim before my vision as strangers seek to intercept me, hands outstretched and grasping. I avoid them all, never once breaking stride until I draw near to the palace gates. “Open up!” I cry, grabbing hold and rattling the bars. “Open for your king!”

No one answers. But I am not about to be detained. It is the work of a moment to scale the bars, hoist myself over the finials, and drop into the courtyard on the far side. Here are more figures wrapped in *va-jor*, some with arms raised in distress, others kneeling, heads bowed in attitudes of prayer, as though accepting their fate. Or anticipating it.

With a snarl, I mount the front steps to the palace door. It is shut fast but rattles in its frame when I pound it with both fists. “Open!” I bellow. “Open to your king! Open, I say!” My voice echoes across the courtyard and fades into eerie silence. I turn, lifting my gaze to the walls and ramparts around me, noting all signs of breakage and ruin, testimony to recent stirrings. My eye inevitably travels in search of Faraine’s balcony which once overlooked this courtyard. It’s gone.

“Faraine,” I whisper.

Whirling, I pound the door again, all words lost in a roar. Five, six, nine times I smash that heavy stone. But as I raise my hands for a tenth blow, the door flings suddenly wide. I find myself standing on the threshold of my own home, staring into the face of a stranger. A trolde man, aged but still broad as a warrior. His face is deeply lined and hatched with scars, one eye milky with blindness. “Who are you?” I demand.

He blinks at me slowly. “Vor, son of Gaur,” he says in a low rumble. “The Master of Mythanar will see you now.”

My blood chills. Once more, I feel I have stepped into a dream. With a dreamer’s ungraceful lumbering, I follow the stranger into the dark entrance hall. No *lorst* lights have been lit save for the one carried in the stranger’s

own hand. Its glow flashes across the stone-wrapped faces of people as we pass. My people. My courtiers, my servants, my friends. All caught in *va-jor*, inanimate but still living. “What happened?” I ask, my voice harsh and echoing in this tomb-like space. “Who did this?”

The stranger looks back over his shoulder, his face half-lit by his *lorst*. “The Master of Mythanar will explain all.”

“And who is this master? Is it Targ?”

The man makes no reply. It’s all I can do not to slam him against the wall and choke answers from his throat. But no. Answers would be better taken directly from this so-called Master. I grind my teeth, bite my tongue, and follow the stranger to the throne room. Two armor-clad strangers throw wide the great double doors and stand aside. My escort halts in the doorway, indicating with a wave of one hand that I am to enter alone.

I step through into the vaulted space. At least it isn’t so dark—a host of unknown warriors line the walls, each holding a brilliant *lorst* stone before his breast. They bow their heads to me, silent if not reverent. Their lights create a straight path from the door to the dais, the dragon-wing throne, and the figure standing before it.

I know him in an instant. Even with his back to me, half-hidden in shadows. I would know him anywhere, in any world.

“Sul,” I breathe.

He turns. Light washes over a face drawn and unexpectedly aged. He looks as though he’s lived many a long, hard cycle in the short weeks since his banishment. But he is still unmistakably himself. Beautiful, treacherous, and lethal. The brother in whom I placed absolute trust; the brother who betrayed me.

He holds my crown in his hands. The circle of black stone which once sat upon our father’s brow, and which many in my own court believed should

have belonged to Sul.

“What is this?” I snarl, striding swiftly forward, eating up the cavernous space between us. “I made myself clear, did I not? You were never to enter the Under Realm again on pain of death! Have you stooped so low as to stage a coup in Mythanar’s most desperate hour?”

Sul does not answer. He simply watches my approach, silent and unmoving until I stand just before the dais. I draw my sword, its diamond planes glittering in the *lorst* light. The warriors lining the walls make no move to defend their master. They stand as though they too have been caught in *va-jor*. Only their eyes are alive and watchful.

“Enough of this!” My voice rings to the high ceiling. I’m spoiling for a fight, a chance to vent my wrath. “You want the throne, Sul? You’re going to have to take it! Come down and face me once and for all!”

Sul blinks once. Then, with slow deliberation he descends the dais steps, his gaze never breaking with mine. He comes toward me, my crown in his hands, unarmed and defenseless.

And he goes down on his knees before me.

“Hail, Vor,” he says, his voice a cold echo against the stone walls. He raises the crown in offering and simultaneously bows his head. “Hail, King of Mythanar, Lord Protector of the Under Realm.”

The walls are lined with lead. So is the floor, the ceiling. Even the manacles gripping my wrists. Everything is lead.

“For every gift of power,” Sul said when he dragged me into this cell, “there must be an equally potent curse of weakness. The gods have ordained it thus, as you humans can so rarely be trusted with divine favors.” He fastened the manacles tight and hoisted my arms over my head so that my feet only just touch the ground. “Lead is a natural insulator against the resonance of *urzul*. Which means you cannot access the source of your power through these walls, little witch. Neither can you control the minds of others. Not here. Not anymore.” He leaned in then, his beautiful face close to mine. “I only regret,” he snarled, “that I cannot kill you for what you’ve done. But I’m afraid that honor belongs to another.”

“Where is Hael?” I demanded, my voice thin and raw in my throat. “Where is my brother? What have you done with them?”

He did not answer. He simply backed from the chamber, his eyes locked with mine until the very moment when the door slammed, leaving me in absolute darkness.

How long has it been? Hours? Days? All sense of time, space, and reality is lost. All sense of self. There is only fear.

Not even lead can block out the near constant rumble under my feet.

Arraog. Stirring. Ready to wake.

Dark memories of the Urzulhar and the sacrifice whirl in my mind's eye. Surely that couldn't have been real. Surely I would not have done such a thing. The flow of power through my body was too tremendous, that feeling of connection to all those souls . . . all those resisting souls . . . It's more than I can fathom. If only I could sink back into the comforting safety of *jor*, never to return. But I cannot. For I cannot sense the stones. I am alone. Exposed and defenseless in the dark, left to muse upon my fate. Does Sul intend to leave me here? Chained up and forgotten? Buried alive . . .

Panic thrills through my veins, carrying me away on a tide of frantic terror on the brink of madness. I don't know how long I remain in this state before I recall his final words: *That honor belongs to another. Vor.* He intends for Vor to kill me. That's always been his plan, from the beginning. Which means Sul will have to keep me alive until Vor's return. But Vor won't kill me. He won't. Vor loves me. He would never willingly harm me.

That was before I trapped a city full of people in deathlike stone.

My thoughts careen wildly from blind panic to bargaining to self-condemnation, all without the relief of *jor* to shield me. This room is a truly effective prison for one with my powers. It must be the chamber Maylin spoke of, the one Gaur equipped to contain her. Did she too hang here in the dark while others prepared her fate?

Maylin . . .

She tricked me. It's so clear now. Perhaps if I wasn't so blinded by my own arrogance, I would have seen the truth from the beginning. But I see it now: She never intended for me to face the dragon. How could she? My gift is unsuited for such a mighty task. She did not seek to save the Under Realm; she only wanted vengeance. Against Gaur. Against Mythanar. Against all those who used her, who wrung her out like a rag, squeezing every last drop

of power from her soul. They took her love and bled him out before her eyes. Is it any wonder she longed to make them pay?

So, she used me to accomplish her dirty work. Manipulated and molded me into the perfect weapon for her malice, all the while feeding me pretty stories and promises. Only to abandon me. To flee the scene of our crime and leave me to take the blame.

Well, what does it matter? It wasn't she who sent that spell blasting across a city full of innocents. It wasn't she who channeled the power of Hael's lifeblood, who drew on the profound resonance of the Urzulhar. Yes, she may have orchestrated events. But no one forced me to comply. I have no one to blame but myself.

Oh Vor! Vor, why don't you come? Come and kill me if you must, only come and put an end to this torment. My soul cries out for him again and again to no avail. Because Vor is gone. Far from this world. Perhaps he is dead. Perhaps I cannot hope for deliverance. But is that not better? I would rather die a slow, torturous death, than let Vor see what I have done. What I have become.

The door opens.

Blinding light spills through, stabbing my eyeballs, piercing my skull. I gasp and twist in my chains. Someone stands in the doorway. I know him, even before my shocked vision clears. It could only be Vor. Who else? Whether he's real or an illusion conjured by my tormented brain I cannot and will not guess. All I know is he's here, holding a *lorst* stone in one hand. Looking at me like he's never seen me before. Like I'm some dark thing crawled out from the pit of hell.

"Gods, Faraine," he breathes at last. "What has he done to you?"

The sound of his voice cuts me to the quick. In that moment, I know it's true. He's really here. Returned to me, the answer to all my most desperate

prayers. I could curse the gods for listening.

Turning slowly, chains creaking, I lift my heavy head and peer at him through snarled locks of hair. The look on his face . . . he's not looked at me like that since our wedding night. Since that horrible moment when everything he believed to be true about his bride was revealed to be a lie. When he discovered an imposter lying beside him in his bed.

I deserve it. That horror, that shock. I am not what he let himself believe—a pure princess, a true and loyal wife. No. I am a monster. A murderer. Covered in my victim's remains.

I don't know how long we remain in this state of suspended silence, staring at one another. I cannot find the strength to speak. I can do nothing but drink in the sight of him, a sight for which I've thirsted. Gods above, why must he be so beautiful? Stripped of his armor, wearing nothing but a loose black undershirt, the ties undone to reveal the swell of his powerful chest. Hazards of war have lined his face, but nothing can alter the magnificence of his form. Even now, chained up, haggard, filled with self-loathing though I am, I cannot help the jump in my heart and the warmth which floods my veins at the mere sight of him.

He steps into the chamber. The hand which holds the *lorst* stone trembles, casting wavery pale light into all but the darkest corners of my prison cell. He is alone; that is a mercy at least. I could not bear to face him in front of witnesses. His eyes move slowly down my elongated body, noting the unusual rips and tears in my gown, all those places where *jor* crystals protruded. The crystals are gone now, leaving only bare flesh to be glimpsed through the holes in my garments. Flesh covered in blood, dust, dirt, and debris, hardly a tempting sight. It must be only my deluded desperation which tries to convince me of the lust momentarily flashing in the depths of his eyes.

He approaches me slowly, one hand outstretched to touch the manacle clutching my right arm over my head. His fingertips trail ever so lightly against the flesh of my wrist. A thrill shoots straight to my core. I catch my breath, close my eyes, ashamed and humiliated.

“Please, Faraine.” His voice rumbles softly, a low growl. “Please, tell me none of it is true.”

When I try to speak, no words will come. My lips move without sound.

“Sul is here. He risked everything to break his banishment. And he tells me it was you. All those people throughout the city. The streets filled with bodies, trapped in stone. He says you colluded with Targ. Used your gods-gift to cast the *va-jor* spell.”

Were my gift not suppressed by this cursed lead, his pain would overwhelm me. It might even kill me. As it is, I feel only my own pain, my own shame, threatening to drag me into its depths and drown me.

“Say the word, Faraine,” Vor urges. “Tell me my brother lies. Tell me, and I will even now march from this chamber and slay him where he stands for daring to lay a finger on you, for daring to let such slander cross his lips. Say it, my love. Let me be your vengeance.”

Slowly, I open my eyes, gaze up into his beautiful face, which so earnestly studies mine. I would give anything, absolutely anything to be what he needs. What he wants. What he desires. To transform myself into the woman he thought he loved.

“Faraine,” he says again, his voice dropping to a painful rasp. “Lie to me. Grant me that grace at least.”

But I cannot.

With a strangled groan, he turns away, both hands gripping the hair close to his scalp, as though he would tear his own head from his shoulders and dash it to the floor. Then he half collapses against the wall, arms stiff, breath

ragged. I stare at his broad back straining the seams of his shirt, stare at the strands of white, silken hair flowing across his shoulders. Even in this attitude of defeat, his strength and breadth awe me. Here is a warrior who could rip his foes in half with his bare hands. A man among men, be they mortal or fae. Yet I have done this to him. Brought him low, nearly broken him. I want to cry out his name, to beg his forgiveness. But I haven't the courage.

“Sul wants me to kill you.” Vor's voice is softer now, speaking the words with careful control. “He claims you have used witchcraft to manipulate me. To drive me into your world to serve your father while you in turn tore my world apart. He says he tried to stop you, but your control over me was too strong. Only when I was gone, was he finally able to return and make his play against you, marching into Mythanar with warriors he'd gathered from across the Under Realm. They have taken precautions, he says, to prevent your witchery from overcoming their wills. Long enough for him to take you captive.” He turns at last, pins me with his gaze. “But he was too late. By the time he arrived, you had already done it. Made Hael your sacrifice and entrapped my city in stone.”

My dry lips part. “Hael?” I croak painfully. “Is she . . . ?”

The shadows cast by the *lorst* deepen around his eyes. “Alive.”

I breathe out a sigh, drop my chin to my chest. At least I don't bear that death on my conscience.

Vor takes a swift step forward, catches my chin in his hand, and forces me to look at him. His eyes are hot, blazing with dangerous fire. If I didn't know better, I'd call it passion. But I do know better. This isn't passion. This is hatred. And horror. “I have no means of protection against you,” he says. “Only your death.”

My heart jumps to my throat, throbbing.

“Sul says it is the only way I can be free of your spell. He tells me I must kill you. With my own hands. That, or you will haunt me even from beyond the grave.”

His hand moves from my chin, sliding across my cheek to the base of my skull, fingers tangling in my hair. Fear and longing war in my blood. When his gaze drops to my lips, my breath catches.

“I fear you will haunt me even so,” he growls. “Until the last *lorst* goes out. When the final stone crushes the gasping breath from my lungs, you will be with me, those strange eyes of yours compelling me even unto death. Making me forget who I am. Making me forget what I owe these people entrusted to my care. Making me forget everything save how much I need you. All of you.”

His face lowers to mine, his lips hovering in that little space between us. I breathe in his air. It is life to me. Bound as I am, I can neither move to claim him nor to flee him. I am trapped in this suspense of longing, lust, and shame.

“Tell me I’ve got it all wrong,” he whispers. “Tell me you’ve never altered my feelings. Tell me everything between us is true.”

How can I? I do not trust myself. I could never ask him to trust me. Not again.

“You should kill me, Vor.” I breathe the words against his lips. “You should kill me for what I’ve done. Kill me and be free.”

He yanks back. His pale eyes search my face as though trying to see through a mask, to discern the hidden secret of my soul. Whatever he sees sparks anguish. He turns away, pulling his hand from my hair, leaving a cold empty space at my neck. Retreating several paces, he puts his back to me once more.

“I could never kill you, Faraine,” he says at last. “To kill you would be to kill myself. I do not deserve such mercy. So, I will live on. And do what I can

for the remnants of my people. Which means you must live as well.” He smooths back his hair with both hands, draws a long breath. Exhaling slowly, he straightens his shoulders and turns to face me once again. In this moment, he looks like a man who has entered *jor*, so hard and immobile has his face become. “Arrangements will be made for your departure. You cannot be here, and I cannot kill you. So, you must go. Until all is ready, you will remain in this chamber. For your own safety. And for mine.” His eyes rove to the chains above my head, his expression considering. But he doesn’t dare unbind me. Not after everything I’ve done. Instead, he asks, “Have they seen to your needs?”

As foul and begrimed as I am, I wonder why he bothers to ask. I shake my head.

“I will send a servant,” he says. “I don’t know how long it will take to prepare your journey. I won’t leave you like this in the meanwhile.”

If only I could protest. If only I dared remind him I have nowhere to go, no home, no shelter. No place where I can flee what I have done or who I have become. There is no life for me beyond these four walls. It would be better if it ended here and now.

But I say nothing.

“I fought so long, Faraine,” he whispers, his soft words resounding in the profound stillness. “I wrestled in my soul over the bitter choice: my kingdom or my bride. In the end, it seemed there was no choice at all. There was only you.” He bows his head, a foul word spitting from his lips. Then, in a ragged snarl: “I should have been wiser. But you made me a fool.”

With those words, he turns for the door. And this is it, the last sight I will have of him. Though I fear it will tear my heart in two, I lift my head, gaze after those bowed shoulders and that retreating back as he makes his escape, carrying the *lorst* light with him.

The cell door slams.

Darkness closes in, claiming me once more.

“I take it you didn’t kill the witch then.”

I climb the last turn of the stairway leading up from a dungeon cell I had not previously known existed. A cell created right here in my own palace for the express purpose of containing my gods-gifted wife and those like her. What a strange world I’ve returned to.

Sul leans against the wall outside the stairwell. His manner is so easy and familiar. I don’t for a moment know what to make of it. I slump against the wall beside him, tipping my head back to stare up at the ceiling. Innumerable ragged cracks run through the stalactites overhead. It won’t take much of a stirring to bring them all down. This whole palace will soon be nothing more than a pile of rubble. The truth is, I’ve known my entire life this end was coming. I knew, but I didn’t really believe it. We dreaded the doom of our world for so long, we grew complacent. Now it is upon us, but who is left to care?

Sul looks at me long and hard, his arms crossed, his chin tucked. When I offer him no answer, he says, “She didn’t deny it though, did she?”

I shake my head.

“So, you believe me at last.”

I do. Even before I saw her, I believed him, though I wanted to pretend otherwise. Because I know her power and its strange connection to the

Urzulhar. I've seen the wonders of that power in action. How could I not suspect Targ would jump at the chance to use such a magnificent gift? But I was so distracted by worry for her safety, I never stopped to consider how dangerous she might be.

I close my eyes. My mind reels with the revelations my brother shared in the throne room, witnessed by his silent retinue. Apparently, Sul has for many turns of the cycle been a member of a secret order established to stand against the Children of Arraog. They have long been working in opposition, since the time of the Triune Devastation, when the three cities fell to ruin on the same day. Sul informs me that disaster was wrought by the previous gods-gifted woman thought to embody the Fist of the Deeper Dark—my mother.

Damn me, am I fated to spend my days embroiled with powerful, problematic women?

“We suspected your Gavarian princess might be another like the former queen, though we had no proof of her specific power,” Sul explained. “The way you reacted to her—how hard you fell for her, despite her distinct lack of charm—how you held onto her even following the revelation of her betrayal—all seemed to indicate the influence of witchcraft. There are numerous accounts of the previous *kurspari-glur* manipulating the feelings of others. We believed the princess was doing the same. Old Hirsh”—he indicates the milk-eyed man who escorted me—“was for slipping lead into your drink to build up your defenses against her influence, but I feared it would cause you great harm, half-human as you are.”

“So, you slipped me *raog* instead,” I growled. “First into my drink; then into the mouth of a bathhouse whore.”

“Yes. It was a mad attempt to force your hand and ultimately restore your reason. Hirsh was against it. But we knew you had to be the one to kill her or

her spell over you would last beyond the grave. It is powerful magic, Vor. See how it controls you even now! How you refuse to do what must be done even in the face of this great tragedy.”

He’s right of course. It doesn’t matter what evidence he presents. Not even the sight of all those enstoned bodies lining the city streets, filling the palace halls and grounds. It doesn’t matter. Because I could never hurt Faraine. Not willingly. From the moment I first laid eyes on her, I’ve been a lost man. Before we’d exchanged more than a handful of words, my heart was no longer my own. No hurt, no pain, no lies have ever changed that. I don’t think they ever could.

Only now I must wonder if any of it was real. Did Faraine plant these feelings in me in that same instant she filled my soul with her restful calm? Has she been playing me all this time? But *why*? It doesn’t make sense. Sul’s accusations, Faraine’s silence, the evidence of the ceremony and its victims . . . all form a compelling argument. But they cannot answer that one simple question: Why would she do it? Why would she play such an elaborate ruse? Why would she seek to destroy my city, my people? Even if she bore them some vendetta, it’s a great deal of trouble to go through for a people already facing the end of their world.

“What will you do now, Vor?”

Sul’s voice drags me back to the present. I turn to him, meeting his silent gaze. Though his face is carefully masked in an expression of unconcern, fear simmers behind his eyes. He knew what was coming. He saw it more clearly than I. He saw the destructive path down which I trod with such swift surety, and he did what he could to stop me. All to no avail. Now Mythanar suffers the consequences.

“There are survivors,” I say at last, my words heavy and low. “I passed some on my way up to the palace.”

“Yes. Those farthest from the Urzulhar were only partially caught in *jor* and able to break free.”

“Then we are not wholly lost. We must preserve what is left of our people.” I draw upright, square my shoulders. Prepared to face the coming end. “Take your men into the city, Sul. Gather all who remain and guide them to the Between Gate. You must find a new home for them in worlds beyond. The human world . . . the caverns beneath their mountains are uninhabited. You may be able to carve out some sort of life.”

Sul watches me closely, offering no response or reaction to my words. I instruct him on the route to take back to the Gate, warn of the flooded passages and cave-ins I encountered on my way through, and he listens to every detail I have to offer. Only when I’m finished does he say, “And what of you, Vor?”

“I shall remain until the end,” I answer. “I’ll not abandon my city. Not again.”

Sul’s face is set in hard lines. He is so much older than when last we met. Time spent in exile, wandering the outer worlds has aged him. I had commanded the Between Gate be warded to prevent his reentry, so in the end, he traveled the long way round. A perilous voyage across the Hinter Sea brought him finally to the shores of our world. What was mere weeks for me was many turns of the cycle for him.

But he is still the same brother I once knew. He still boasts that insufferable charm and biting tongue. And he is still loyal to me.

I reach out, clasp his forearm fast. “When I am dead, and our world has fallen, you will be king of the troldefolk.”

“Vor—”

“You will guide them into their future. Be the leader they’ve needed all along.”

His hand grips my arm in response, his fingers tight as though unwilling to let go. “I never sought kingship, Vor. I haven’t the stomach for it. I’m not the man you are.”

“No. You are trolde through and through. The trueborn son of Gaur. It is right that the crown should fall to you.”

Sul grimaces, drawing a long breath through his teeth. Then, with a sharp tug, he drags me a step closer to him, gazes earnestly into my eyes. “If you must die, brother, at least do it free. Save yourself from this curse. Do what must be done.”

His words are like knives through my heart, a dangerous and deadly urge. Releasing my hold, I back away, putting both distance and shadows between us. “Go,” I say firmly. “Save our people.”

Sul remains for the count of three breaths. Both of us know the truth: this is the last time we will see one another alive. Despite all the bitterness between us, we neither of us want to let the other go. Not now. Part of me can never forgive Sul for what he did in slipping me that poison. Part of him will never forgive me for letting myself be drawn into a witch’s trap, just like our father. None of that matters now. What matters in the end is that we are kin. Blood born of blood, the last of our house in a world about to end.

Finally, Sul salutes, turns and strides down the passage, prepared to carry out my final command. Just before he reaches the bend in the corridor, however, he looks back. “Do one thing for me, Vor.”

“Yes?”

“Make sure Hael lives. Get her out before the end.”

And there it is. As good as a confession. With those few words, I hear the truth of my brother’s heart, the love he’s carried all these turns of the cycle for a woman he could never hope to deserve.

“She will live, brother,” I say. “And she will find you in the worlds

beyond. I swear it.”

Sul nods. Then he pivots on heel and is gone.



I discover Madame Ar in the infirmary, standing at one of her worktables. Her body is hunched over some experiment, but her head is lifted in surprise. It’s difficult to discern her expression through the layers of *va-jor* enwrapping her body. Did she fight the spell of enstonement when it struck? Or was the wave of magic simply too swift and terrible for her to feel anything at all?

I stop a moment by her side. Of all those I’ve encountered lost to this dreadful spell, this one hurts the most. Ar had always seemed impervious either to harm or change. She was present at my birth even as she was present at the birth of my father. It would not have surprised me if she outlived me, my children, and my children’s children.

In the end, not even Ar could avoid the dark fate coming for Mythanar.

I touch her hand once, reverently. Then, turning from her, I continue to the recovery room where Sul’s men brought Hael following her ordeal. The beds in the long hall are all full, most of them with enstoned individuals caught in the spell while they slept. In one bed halfway down the room, however, the blankets shift and stir. “Hael?” I say, hastening to touch her shoulder.

The figure startles, turns. The next moment, the beautiful, bleary-eyed face of Prince Theodre peers up at me. “Hael?” he slurs. “Naaaaaw, you’re not Hael. She’s way scarier than you.”

I pull back swiftly, withdrawing my hand. I’d entirely forgotten the Gavarian prince’s presence in my realm. “What are you doing here?” I demand, my tone harsher than it needs to be. “Where is Hael?”

“She’s . . . around . . .” He pulls a hand from under his blankets and waves it vaguely. “I saved her. Did you know? Like a . . . a . . . thingy. A hero?”

Yeah, like that.” He pushes up on his elbows then, his focus sharpening somewhat. “Do you think she’ll let me put my lips on her lips and, like . . . move them around a bit? Or would she kill me?”

“She would definitely kill you.”

“I figured.” The prince slumps back to his pillow, disheartened. “Oh well. Being a . . . a thingy . . .”

“A hero?”

“Yeah. It isn’t all the bards make it out to be, is it?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

Leaving the prince to his labored musings, I proceed from one bed to the next, searching. I find Hael at last in the farthest bed from the light, tucked away in a corner. She’s upright, bandaged rather inexpertly. There was no *uggha* healer to help her, though Sul and his people managed the best they could. Bloodstains seep through the cloth, revealing the hideous extent of her injuries. Were it not for her trolde strength, the pain itself would have killed her.

She does not seem to be aware of my approach. Her head is bowed, her legs crossed, her hands resting on her knees. She’s partially sunk into *jor*. I hate to draw her out of it, to pull her back into a world so full of pain and loss. But I must speak to her.

“Hael?”

She does not react at first. My voice must penetrate through the layers of stone she has wrapped around her mind and soul. But she’s not deep into *jor*, not yet. When I speak again, a shiver runs down her body, and her brow tightens. Lifting her chin, she looks up, blinking. A flash of joy breaks across her face. “Vor!” she gasps.

Then that joy is replaced with horror. Shaking off her *jor*, she scrambles from the bed and collapses in a pile of limbs on the floor, her body bowed,

her head pressed to the flagstones. “My King! My King!” she cries, her voice muffled, raw.

I kneel, grasping shoulders. “Hael, my friend, what did they do to you?”

She shakes her head, unable to lift her face, unable to look me in the eye. “It was my choice. I gave myself willingly.”

I should be angry. I should be furious. I knew she was drawn to the teachings of the dragon cult, though she rarely spoke of her beliefs. But I never thought it would lead her to such a dark place. Were it not for her willingness to let her blood be fed to the magic, this tragedy could never have happened. She is as culpable as any of them. But I cannot face that idea.

“You’re not thinking straight, my friend. Someone has planted these ideas in your head. To manipulate you.”

“No!” She looks up at last. Her skin is paper thin, a contrast to the *dorgarag* stone which creeps up her neck and cheek. “No, my King. It was my choice. It was the only way.”

I cannot answer. Images of all those enstoned people throughout my city fill my head. The weight of it threatens to crush me.

So, I do the only thing I can. I take my powerful captain of the guard into my arms and let her weep against my shoulder. Let her weep the tears I cannot shed and pray the flood will give us both relief.

Eventually she draws back, swiping tears away from her bloodied face. “Sul is here,” she says softly.

“I know.”

“He always meant to help you. To serve you. His heart was always true.”

“I know.” I look her in the eye. “And you, Hael? Do you still serve me as well?”

A flicker of hope shines beneath her veil of despair. “Always, my King.”

“I have one last task for you then.”

The words have no sooner left my mouth than a great roar erupts around us, and the room shakes. It lasts no more than a breath. A little dust and debris fall from the ceiling and shiver down the walls. Nothing more. But the rumble under our feet never ceases.

I meet Hael's gaze in the wavering *lorst* light. "This world is about to come apart," I say. She nods her understanding. "I want you to go. I want you to take Faraine and get as far away from here as you can."

Her eyes widen, two pale mirrors reflecting my own fear back at me. "Where?"

"Back to her world. Deliver her and her brother to King Larongar. And do not return."

"You're banishing me?"

"No. No, Hael, my friend, I am saving you. I don't want your end to be here, crushed in darkness."

"I won't leave you, my King."

"You must. Sul is gathering survivors from the lower city. He will lead them out if he can. You must help him. The two of you must find a new home for our people."

She doesn't try to argue further. For this I am grateful. She allows me to help her back into her bed, squeezing my hands like a timid child. Several of her wounds have reopened, but she does not seem to notice them. "I will find someone to change your bandages," I say.

Even as the words cross my lips, I realize my error. Who is left to act as nurse or caretaker? The palace is full of enstoned bodies. Without another word, I go to Ar's workroom, fetch fresh cloths and water. I know little enough of the healer's arts, but I make do, removing the most blood-soaked of Hael's bandages, washing the wounds, and binding them once more. Someone had the forethought to apply Ar's sticky healing salve to the worst

cuts, and Hael's tough trolde hide is already knitting itself back together. But those bastards carved her up badly. She will bear the scars the rest of her life.

"I wish I could give you time to rest," I mutter as I finish securing the largest bandage around her torso. "But there is no time. You must ride at *lusterling*. Can you do it, Hael?"

"I can. I will." She looks up at me, her gaze searching and intent. "But what of you, Vor? What will you do?"

I cut the end of the cloth roll and tuck it firmly into place. "I will be King of Mythanar," I say and step back, holding her gaze. "Until the bitter end."

I twist my wrist, trying for the hundredth time to find an angle from which I might slip from these manacles. Though they are not tight, they hold me firmly. There's no getting free. Not that it makes any difference. Even if I escaped these chains and burst through this door, where would I go?

I breathe out a sigh ending with a curse. Didn't Vor promise to send someone to tend to my needs? I've been strung up here for I don't know how long. Hungry. Thirsty. Dirty. More than anything else I crave a chance to bathe, to cleanse myself of this dust coating which clings to my limbs. No one comes, though. Who is left? Everyone who once served in the palace is now wrapped in stone. Vor will have discovered that by now.

Or perhaps he never made that promise at all. Perhaps I imagined our whole encounter. I'm slowly going mad, trapped in this cell, deprived of light, of movement. Deprived of hope. It makes sense that my suffering mind would conjure an image of my husband come to confront me with my own guilt.

My head hangs to my breast. Shame wraps my heart, heavier than any *jor*. How have I come to this? It wasn't so long ago I spent my days hidden away in a prayer chamber in a lonely mountain convent. Sheltered from the world. Struggling to suppress the so-called gift which plagued me. At least then I bore no delusions of grandeur. No one could have convinced me I had some

great role to play in the fate of worlds. A mighty dragon-slayer, the fulfillment of an ancient prophecy . . . a laughable idea! My old self would never have indulged in such foolishness. She accepted her destiny of solitude, devoting what little heart she had left to love her sisters.

Now they are gone. Both sisters. And I am here. Isolated yet again. Facing down my imminent doom.

It is not the prospect of death which horrifies me. I have died before; I know how easy it is in the end. Though a slow death by degrees, walled up in this chamber will indeed be horrible, I can accept it if that is what the gods have willed. Besides, the rising dragon will bring all the weight of this world crashing down on my head soon enough, putting an end to my misery. But what of beyond? Surely I, murderer that I am, can never ascend to the gracious light of my goddess. There is no place for me in her great song.

No, I am bound for the Dark. I have sacrificed many offerings to the god of this world, and he will claim me as his own.

The door opens.

A sudden glare of *lorst* light slices painfully across my eyes. I gasp, turning away, half convinced death has come for me. A thud of heavy footsteps; a *thunk*, followed by a slosh of water. Flinching, I crack one eyelid and peer out at the shadowy figure who has entered my cell. My addled mind tries to tell me it's the servant Vor promised. But no. The man who turns to me now, his face bathed in white *lorst* glow is no servant.

I stare. This is a dream. An apparition conjured by my own desperation.

"You must be thirsty," Vor says.

I am. Painfully, powerfully thirsty. And that's how I know I must be awake. Surely my dreaming self would not so greedily accept the flask he lifts to my lips. I gulp too fast. Clear, cold water spills down my chin and the front of my gown. Vor withdraws the flask, giving me a chance to swallow

and recover myself before he offers it again. Once I have drunk my fill, he steps back, his gaze never quite meeting mine. He looks up at the manacles gripping my wrists. “I do not have the key to unlock these,” he says musingly, more to himself than to me. “Sul must have it on him. But maybe . . .”

Setting aside the flask, he slips a knife from his belt and begins to fiddle with the manacles, doing something I cannot see. Is he trying to pick the lock? To cut through the soft lead? I don't know. I can't think clearly, not when he's standing so close to me. His powerful chest is so near my face, I could swear I hear his heartbeat. The scent of him overwhelms me—that mixture of earth and granite, of icy streams and molten heat which I had almost forgotten. Now it floods my nostrils and calls memories springing to life. Memories of our bodies tangled together, as closely intertwined as any two people can be. Memories of those powerful arms enfolding me, of those hands, those lips, laying claim to every inch of me.

My breath catches. I close my eyes, struggling not to let my body lean forward and press against him, hungry for just a taste of that closeness we once shared. Vor stiffens. Though we are not touching, I feel the tension lock up his limbs, his chest. If these lead walls and lead chains didn't block my gods-gift, what feelings would I receive rippling from his soul right now? Awareness of my hunger? Disgust? Revulsion? Fear?

Surely it is only wishful thinking that tries to tell me *hunger* vibrates in the air between us.

He steps back, his breath audible in the stillness. His eyes glitter, gazing down at me. “I cannot undo your bonds,” he says. “They are warded. I shall have to fetch the key.”

I nod, dropping my eyelids, too ashamed to meet his eyes. Of course, he must go. Again. Go to find his brother. Go and leave me once more in the

dark, wondering if I dreamed this moment. He turns away. I draw a breath as though preparing to plunge headlong into a dark current. His leaving feels like that loss of air, the emptiness of his absence like the chill grip of an endless river.

But he doesn't go. He steps to one side, beyond range of the *lorst* stone. Then he returns, a bucket in one hand. He sets it down. Cold water foaming with soap sloshes over the brim and pools around my bare feet. Vor kneels, plunges a silken cloth into the suds. The next moment, he stands, facing me, the wet cloth in his hand. His eyes meet mine, hold me transfixed for three long breaths.

He reaches out. Presses the cloth to my temple.

I jerk away, chains clattering. "No," I whisper.

Vor freezes. His brow is tight, his expression unreadable. Despite the lead, I try to sense him, my gods-gift straining but useless. He is as unknowable as a distant moon. Does he hate me? Loathe me for my sin? Surely, he must, and yet . . . and yet . . .

"I cannot leave you. Not like this." His voice is ragged, rough.

I shake my head. "I can't bear it." Can't bear that he should wash me. Can't bear that he should tend me, serve me. Like I'm still the beloved bride he left behind. I don't deserve it. I never did.

He takes a step closer. Heat radiates from his body, quickening my blood. Despite the ugly weight of guilt in my breast, the rest of me is suddenly weightless, dizzy. And so very alive. He lowers his head, brings his gaze nearer mine. "I cannot leave you like this," he says again, a dangerous edge to his tone. "I will care for your needs. Then I will set you free."

The words are a promise. Unbreakable, harder than diamond. Whether he speaks them to me or to himself, I cannot say. I know only that I have neither the strength nor the desire to resist.

I close my eyes, submitting as he touches that wet cloth to my face once more. Slowly, gently, he wipes away the grime, the muddy tracks of tears. I feel it peel away like scales, revealing the soft and tender flesh beneath. When he comes to the cut on my forehead, I draw a sharp breath at the sting of soap. He pauses. “Where did you get this?” he asks softly.

“I’m not sure.” The words come out breathless, a mere whisper. “It’s been . . . a busy few days.”

He grunts. Then, with utmost care, he continues his task, washing the wound thoroughly. Water drips down my cheeks, my neck, pooling in the hollow of my throat before running in rivulets between my breasts. I hear his breath catch. Lifting my lashes, I discover his gaze drawn down. Staring at the damp front of my bodice.

My pulse throbs. I don’t need a gods-gift to know what that look in his eye means.

He shakes his head. Without lifting his gaze back to mine, he bends to retrieve his bucket and moves to stand behind me. My chains prevent me from turning, from watching him. But my senses are alive now, every nerve attuned to his least movement. He soaks his cloth again, then wrings out the soapy water over my head. I gasp at the cold shower of droplets. The next moment, his fingers are in my hair, massaging my scalp, gently pulling out tangles. It’s the most delicious feeling to my starved senses. I cannot help the low moan that escapes my lips or the way my body shifts in these chains, responding to his touch.

His hands freeze. Water drips down my neck, between my shoulder blades, soaking the back of my gown. The fabric is thin, almost sheer even when dry. Dampened, it can’t leave much to the imagination. Vor’s fingers slip free of my hair. He steps back. I want to turn, to face him. To read in his eyes that longing I’d thought I glimpsed a moment before. I try to speak his

name, my lips moving soundlessly.

Then his hands are on me. His large palms burn through the wet, clinging fabric as they slide down lower and lower, until he grips my buttocks, fingers tense. The breadth of his chest warms my back as he presses in close, nuzzling my hair. He breathes in deeply and utters a terrible groan. “You don’t know how I’ve hungered for you. How every waking hour I’ve starved for your touch. How every fevered dream has plagued me with devouring need.”

I close my eyes, lean my head back against his shoulder. One of his hands glides up to touch my shackled arm overhead, then drifts down, down, fingers dancing over my skin before slipping to the front of my gown. He cups my breast, and my body arches into his touch. Heat bursts through my veins. I struggle to breathe, writhing in my chains, everything in me crying out for more, more, *more*.

With a growl he steps back. The chill of his sudden absence draws a whimper from my lips. Once again, I strive to face him, but the chains hold me fast. “Vor?” I whisper, straining my ears for the least sound of him. I hear nothing. Only heavy breathing.

Then: “I should go.”

“No!” The word bursts from me, a gut-wrenching cry.

He picks up his bucket, circles back into my line of vision, his face turned away from me. The *lorst* light illuminates only the hard line of his jaw, the slope of his brow. “Vor, please,” I begin. But what can I say?

I thought of you too. Longed for the touch of your hand, the sound of your voice, the atmosphere of your presence. Longed for you, my love, like the very breath of life.

It was for you I made myself stronger.

It was for you I explored the possibilities of my power.

It was for you I destroyed a city full of people. Your people.

Everyone you know and love.

For you.

For you.

I bow my head, overcome with shame. There is nothing I can say to keep him here, nothing I can say to earn his forgiveness, to restore his love. He should leave me; he must leave me. Flee this cell, flee this mounting fire threatening to destroy us. Flee while he still can and leave me to the darkness.

But the bucket hits the stone floor, a loud *thunk* and a slosh of water. My head jerks up. I stare at the shadowed figure of my husband as he kneels, swirls his cloth in the water once again, wringing out the excess. He stands and, without meeting my gaze, begins to wash my arms. They are pulled up high on either side of my head, but he is so tall, he has no trouble reaching them. He pays special attention to my hands first, washing each finger carefully in turn. I fight to hold still, refuse to let my body react each time his skin brushes mine. Water trails down my arms as he continues to work over my palms, my wrists, my elbows. By the time he reaches my armpits, I'm shivering. But not with cold.

He steps back. His gaze fixes on the front of my bodice. Only now do I notice how hard and dark my nipples are, standing out through the thin, pale fabric. Vor's breath comes in short, hot pants, burning my skin, sending lava pooling in my lower gut. His hand moves. Slowly, deliberately, he presses that cool cloth against my clavicle. Trails it lower, lower. Wetness seeps into the crisscrossed ribbons holding my bodice together across my heaving breast. He comes to those ribbons, pauses at my neckline. One finger extends, sliding back and forth across the topmost lace, considering. With the same deliberation, he slips that finger under the ribbon and tugs.

The laces come apart.

I struggle to catch a breath as he explores further, tracing the curve of my bared breast, burning a trail of heat across my flesh. At last, his eyes lift to mine once more. Shadows cover his face, but red light burns in the depths of his pupils. I do not look away. Not even when his fingertip flicks across my nipple, and heat explodes through my body. My eyelashes flutter, but I hold his gaze.

His lips part. His is the face of a starved man gazing upon a forbidden feast. War wages in his soul, raging and resistant. I cannot bear it. I long to reach out, to clasp his head and draw him to my bosom, to guide his lips to my trembling flesh. Instead, I twist in my shackles, gripping the chains just above my wrists, and arch my body toward him. Offering myself. Offering everything I am. Every hope, every longing, every need.

He bows his head. The warmth of his breath blazes across my skin. His tongue emerges from between his lips, tracing a long, leisurely stroke along my breastbone. I jolt in my chains, then press toward him. He strokes again, turns his head slightly. Uses his teeth to pull the little remaining bodice away. Then he takes my nipple between his lips, teasing it with the tip of his tongue in a featherlight dance. I gasp, sensation bursting through my veins as I writhe, shifting from one foot to the other. “Vor! Oh, Vor!” I whimper. My body is so flushed, heat threatens to evaporate the water beading my flesh.

Vor pulls away. I cry out wordlessly at the loss of his lips, his tongue. Deaf to my need, he turns away, kneels. Drags the bucket a few inches closer, swirls his cloth, squeezes the excess. I crane my neck, staring down at the top of his head, struggling for something, anything I might say. He catches hold of my ankle, lifting my foot from the damp cell floor. He’s washed my feet before—I remember it so vividly, that moment by the lake. He bathed my wounds with such tenderness then, it had filled my chest with a warm glow.

This is not like that. He’s quick, almost harsh in his movements, clutching

first one foot then the other in a grip tighter than these manacles. By the time he's done, he's breathing harder, a steady growl of sound in his chest. He's crouched before me, one knee on the ground, the other up as he balances. Affording me a clear view of the swell against the seam of his trousers.

He releases my second foot, but I do not set it back on the ground. I reach out, rest my toe against his inner thigh. He catches his breath, turning his face up to me. His eyes flash dangerously, but I do not look away. Slowly, I glide my foot along the muscled length of his leg until I meet the warm hardness of his groin. Vor groans. His head tilts back, his eyelids dropping shut as I rub back and forth, feeling him harden in response to my touch. I may be the one in chains, but in that moment, I feel powerful. Dangerous.

His hand shoots up under my skirts, clamping down hard on my calf. I startle, choking on a scream. He opens his eyes, glaring up at me. His teeth flash in a snarl. "Sorceress," he growls. "Would you torture me even now?"

I can't breathe. Not with his hand gripping my leg, driving all my senses wild. I stare down at him over the loosened laces of my bodice. My pale breast gleams with beads of moisture. Heat floods my center, the pressure intensifying by the moment.

"I am no sorceress," I whisper softly. "I'm your wife."

"You would break me apart." He grimaces. His grip tightens painfully. "You would enter my mind, steal my will, tear me to pieces."

"No, Vor. I could never—" I break off with a cry as his hand slides up my legs, fingers trailing along the delicate skin of my thigh to my buttocks. His fingers dig hard into my soft flesh even as his other hand reaches under my skirts and presses the dripping cloth against my core. He rubs back and forth, driving me wild even as I drove him. I moan, move my hips, frantic to make friction against that cloth, against his fingers as he cleanses me. Droplets of water roll down my legs, pool at my feet.

“You’re wet,” Vor growls. He drops the cloth and runs his finger between my soft folds. “Hot and wet.”

I whimper again, hips gyrating. His finger moves, stoking my fire brighter. I twist in my chains, my eyelashes fluttering, ready to give in to everything he calls to life within me. But just at the last, excruciating moment, he withdraws his hand. “What are you doing?” I gasp, choking on my own frustrated need.

His mouth curls in a bitter line. “I should leave you like this.”

“No, Vor!”

“I should leave and walk away now. While I still can.”

“Please, Vor, I’m begging you—”

A shuddering cry bursts from my lips as his hands grip my hips and yank me to him where he kneels. His head vanishes underneath my skirts, his nose pressed against my newly washed flesh. I wrap my leg around his shoulders, bucking my hips, angling toward him.

His mouth finds me. His tongue is hot and slick as it moves against my core. I grip the chains with both hands, pull up higher, and wrap my other leg around his neck. I lean back, head lolling, damp hair trailing behind me. The links creak as I rock back and forth in time to his rhythm. “Vor! Vor!” I moan, his name a song on my lips.

I feel it then—chambers of my heart which had locked down tight open wide as streams of spirit rush through. My spirit. His. Meeting in a great, crashing wave of power, flooding my senses, flooding my world. I receive his anger, his rage, his horror. I feel his lust, his craving, his need. Every hot and desperate thing. And I want it. All of it. All of him, both pleasure and pain.

Inferno heat erupts inside me. Waves radiate from my center into every fiber of my body and being. I cry out, my voice trapped within these close, small walls.

But beyond the walls—
—beyond all warding and blocks—
—through layers of lead and guilt and fear—
—the *urzul* responds. A chorus of a million voices, vibrating in the walls,
the ceiling, up through the floor. Singing in time with my own quaking body.
A song of power and destruction.
A song of renewal.

36

VOR

Am I even now lost in her spell?

Surely there can be no other explanation for this intense longing infusing my soul. The feel of her, the touch of her, the taste of her . . . she fills my heart, my senses, driving everything else from me. There is no room in me now for anything but her. Faraine. My wife.

The destroyer of Mythanar.

Release quakes her small body, a powerful force emitted from so delicate a frame. It carries me away with her into the glory of her ecstasy. I've known no greater pleasure in life than the pleasure I've given to her. But even that I must now question. Even that I must now hold with suspicion. Does my need to please her only confirm her guilt? Is it more proof of the enchantment she wields over my mind and will?

In this moment, I don't care.

She is still shaking, rocking in her chains, when I draw away from her sweet center. Still kneeling, I turn my gaze up to her, drinking in the sight of her elongated form. I cannot see her for what she is: the murderer, the witch. I can see only my bride, the dream of my heart.

I've sacrificed everything for her sake. My people, my kingdom. My honor.

She cannot find her footing when I rise. Her knees quiver, and she sags in

her chains, drunk on the bliss I have given. She is a sight to behold with her bared breasts heaving, her golden hair fallen across her face, her lips parted and panting. I should flee her presence. I should try to reclaim whatever virtue I have left.

Instead, I reach for her. Let my hands shape her hips, glide over the warmth of her breasts. My fingers trace her throat and finally grip her cheeks, dragging her mouth to mine. Let her taste her own desire on my lips as my tongue enters her mouth, lashing and ravishing. She does not try to pull away. Her legs wrap around my waist, pulling me to her, and her hips move as she rubs against me, craving that friction. My body, already tight with desire, throbs in response, a fiery agony akin to pain.

She gasps, pulling her mouth free of mine. “I need you, Vor,” she pants. Growling, I devour her jaw, her throat, her breasts, ungentle in my fervor. Her body arches into me, surrendering even as she pleads, “I need you inside me!”

Even now, I could resist. Whatever magic she uses, I’m not so completely enthralled that I might not turn away and flee this cell. The choice remains.

But I choose her. Damn the consequences, I choose her.

It is the work of a moment to loosen my trousers, to take hold of her thighs. To guide my swollen manhood and enter her. She cries out, whether in pain or delight, I cannot say. Her head rolls back, her damp hair wafting behind her, her fingers tightening around the chain links. “Look at me!” I snarl even as I thrust.

With an effort she pulls her head up, lifts her gaze to mine.

“Is this what you wanted?” I demand through bared teeth. “Is this what you need?”

“I need you, Vor,” she breathes, then lets out another cry as I thrust deeper still, driving inside her. “I need you! I need you!”

She has me. All of me. For good or evil. No matter what she's done, no matter the cost. I hate myself for my weakness, despise this unruly hunger that drives me to give myself to her. But it will change nothing. I am hers. Forever.

I cry out at the pinnacle of heat, my roar muted by the close walls of the cell. The flood of release fills me, and I stagger. But I do not lose my hold on her. Her legs squeeze my waist, and I hear her gasping, feel her body vibrating as though she too experienced my crest. Or perhaps it is only her gods-gift reawakened, responding to my sensations.

When the flood has passed, I draw a great breath and look down into her face again. Her strange eyes, one blue, one gold, blink up at me. Alight and alive with . . . what? With love? Can she still feel something so holy, so sacred? Or am I fooling myself, desperate in the face of all I've lost?

I step back, escaping the circle of her legs. She catches her breath, staggering to find her footing. Her body sways heavily in those bonds. I open my mouth, but words freeze on my lips. What is there left to say between us? We both know this moment should not have happened. But with the imminent end of the world fast approaching, what does it matter anymore? Both our souls are damned already.

Pulling up my trousers, I turn away from her and fasten the laces, avoiding her gaze. She must go. Which means I must find Sul, retrieve the key to her shackles. There is no time to waste. Wordless, silent, I take a step toward the cell door.

“Vor.”

The sound of my name spoken with such agony is a knife to my heart. I stop, catch hold of the doorframe, bracing against the urge to flee. What good is flight? I've already revealed everything. Bound or not, her power over me is absolute. I am her slave, enthralled to her will.

“Whatever happens,” she says, the words tumbling from her still panting lips, “whatever fate may come, I want you to know . . . to know . . .”

“What, Faraine?” I growl, not looking around.

“I want you to know how grateful I am. To have known you. To have loved you.”

“Loved?”

“Yes,” she breathes. “Loving you has been life. Everything else was mere shadow. A cold phantom of existence without color, without depth. Without warmth.” She chokes on a sob, and my heart constricts. Gods, does she even now seek to manipulate me? Do I care? “Oh, Vor!” she sighs, a desperate, broken sound, before her voice drops, and I strain to discern her next words: “I would have given anything to be what you needed. I would have become anything—”

A rumble grinds below.

At first it is merely a low murmur, but it grows, swells. Becomes a roar. The room shakes, the floor ripples. I grip the doorframe to keep from being thrown off my feet and turn, eyes widening with horror. Faraine swings helplessly from her chains, feet scrabbling for purchase. The *lorst* stone, discarded on the floor, bumps and rolls, wild flashes of light adding to the chaos. “Faraine!” I cry, lunging for her. But I’m hurled to the ground and cannot right myself. Something breaks overhead, and dust falls in my eyes. I throw my arms over my head, braced for the end.

The quake stops.

Beyond these four walls, the world groans. But here, in this small space, all is momentarily still.

“Vor!”

I peer through the swirling dust. Part of the ceiling has buckled, and Faraine, still bound, hangs at an odd angle. Her face is twisted in pain.

Surging to my feet, I rush to her side. “Are you hurt?” I ask, running my hands over her limbs, searching for breaks. She shakes her head, but her teeth are gritted. Her soft human hide was not made to take such a beating. Growling, I grip the chains, determined to pull them free. Another chunk of ceiling gives way. Rock and debris shower down on our heads. But the chains won’t give. Cursing, I look down into Faraine’s eyes, shot through with terror and gleaming in the dust-filtered *lorst* light. “I must find Sul.”

“No!” She shakes her head frantically.

“There’s no other way.”

“Another stirring is coming.” She shudders and twists against the manacles. “I feel it, I feel . . . her.”

“Who?”

“*Arraog.*”

Ice ripples through my blood. Deeper Dark devour me! Why did I not send Faraine away at once? Why did I allow Hael a few more hours of recovery? They should be far from here by now. But I was weak. Selfish. “I will find him,” I say, crushed by the sheer futility of the task. “I will find my brother, and I will free you.”

Faraine squeezes her eyes shut. Two tears escape, streaking down her face. Her face, which I had just washed with such care, filmed in dirt yet again. “You must go, Vor. You must get away. Don’t come back for me.”

“No!” I wrap her in my arms, press her to my breast. “I will return! You must believe me. I will—”

She cries out. In the same moment, something burns against my thigh. It’s so sudden, so sharp, I startle and back up a step. Frowning, I plunge a hand into my trouser pocket. My fingers close around the sharp edges of the *urzul* stone. It’s hot to the touch, and when I pull it out, it casts a soft sphere of pale blue light despite the darkness at its center.

“I can feel it!” Faraine yanks on her chains, momentarily forgetting they restrain her, hands reaching for that stone. “I can feel it through the lead!”

“What?”

“Quick, Vor.” Her eyes lock fast on mine. “There’s a cut on my arm. Press that stone to the blood.”

“Faraine, I—”

“Just do it!”

Still, I hesitate. She’s a witch after all. She was placed in this chamber to contain powers which have already proven devastating.

Then again, she’s already enstoned half the city. What more damage could she do?

I find the long stripe of crimson running down her arm, a wound sustained by the falling stones from the ceiling. Trying not to think about what I do, I press the crystal to her flesh, let her blood flow over it. Faraine utters a terrible groan. Closing her eyes, her head sags to her breast. “Faraine?” I cry, ready to throw the stone aside. Another rumble sounds from deep below. The room begins to shake, the walls buckling. I stagger, nearly lose my grip on the *urzul*. My other hand reaches for Faraine. I must shield her somehow, must protect her with my body. I must—

Her eyes flare wide. Two golden orbs burn into me through the rain of debris.

Crystals burst from her flesh. Jagged, knife-like protrusions emerge like spurs across every inch of her body. They fracture the lead shackles gripping her wrists, and the chains drop to the roiling ground. Rocks fall from the ceiling, smash into her head, her shoulders, shatter into pebbles and roll away.

I’m knocked from my feet and sprawl to the cracked and jagged floor. A large rock hits between my shoulders, driving the breath from my lungs. The

walls bend, warp, and the heavy ceiling tilts wildly. Instinct makes me cover my head as more stones and dust crash around and over me. This is the end. It must be. The final, pulverizing end.

But then it stops. And I am still alive.

Dust fills my nose. I snort, cough, surprised to find there is still air to breathe. Shaking my head, I look around me. “Faraine?” Panic thrills in my veins. Surely that image was an illusion. It couldn’t have been real. I’m going to find her still caught in those chains, battered to a pulp, her skull smashed by fallen stone. “Faraine!” I choke and wave a hand before my face, struggling to make sense of the world around me.

There’s something heavy on top of me. Pinning but not crushing. A growl in my throat, I take the *urzul* stone still gripped in one hand and hold it up.

Faraine.

She’s here. On top of me. Crouched in a protective stance, her body covering mine. Three-foot-long crystals protrude from her shoulders, her neck, her arms, forming a sort of shield. They pulse with their own inner light.

“Faraine?” I stare, unable to believe what my eyes tell me. “Is that you?”

Her expression is strangely serene beneath those layers of crystal. It’s not unlike the *dorgarag* stone hide which plagues so many of my people. But this crust is gemstone and covers her completely. Protrusions of crystal emerge from her elbows and knees, line the edge of her jaw. She is terrifying—both familiar and horribly unfamiliar at once.

She does not answer me at first. It’s as though my voice must reach across a vast distance before finding her ears. Then she shifts. Her eyelids lift, slowly, heavily. At last, shining gold eyes peer out at me, whorling with raw magic.

“What is this?” I demand and try to rise. Her hands hold me in place; I

cannot move her.

“Wait,” she says. Her voice is hollow. A voice of hard, unyielding stone. She moves her arms. A huge weight shifts above her, tumbling away, an avalanche which should have buried me beneath it. She moves again, slowly lifting her hands from my shoulders, at last allowing me to sit up.

The cell is destroyed. One wall is completely caved in, and the door is partially buried. The *lorst* stone is long gone, but there’s light still. A gentle pulsing light. Coming from her. Her living *urzul* body.

I don’t understand. My mind simply will not fathom what I see. I knew her gift was powerful and complex. But this? Nothing could have prepared me. Surely, I’m dreaming. Or mad.

“How did this happen?” I demand, the words strangled in my throat. “Faraine, why didn’t you . . . how could you . . . ?”

“When we joined,” she says, still in that hollow voice. “When your spirit opened to mine. It awakened me. I could feel the *urzul* again.”

None of this makes any sense. I open my mouth, my addled brain unable to form a coherent question. Before I can get a word out, Faraine utters a low moan. She falls to her knees. Her crystal coating cracks, shatters, and drifts away in a flurry of glinting light.

Then she topples to her side, unheeding as I bellow her name.

There's too much weight.

It crushes me, smothers me. Makes me other than I am meant to be.

And what am I meant to be?

A being of air.

Of light and movement.

Of speed and grace.

A being of fire, dangerous and dancing. Like the heat of a living sun.

I'm not meant for this stone. This heaviness enwrapping and entrapping me.

I must shake it off. Must stretch out my wings and take to the skies once more.

But . . . but . . .

Without the safety of stone . . .

I remember.

Pain.

Fire.

Rage.

Death, death, death . . .

Poison roils in my gut. I belch it from me in great noxious clouds.
Lifting my vast head, I open one roiling eye, and—



Fire burns in my throat as I suck in a breath. Fire in my throat, poison in my belly, stone pressing on my limbs. But none of it is mine.

I drag in another gulp of air, hold it. Fight to ground myself in reality. Everything is hazy and uncertain, the world around me a dizzying confusion of shadows. A steady pulse beats against my ear. A heartbeat? Yes, and I seem to be resting against a broad, powerful chest, cradled in strong arms. Oh gods. Am I being carried again? That's the last thing I want. But when I try to push against that hold, my limbs will not obey. I'm limp, small.

Moaning, I turn my head. I want to hide, to shield myself from my own shame. Instead, I inhale a powerful scent. Vor's scent: stone and earth and heat. Which means these must be Vor's arms. My mind is cloudy. What has happened? Struggle though I might, I cannot form a clear memory, and the crystals in the walls are all singing out at such a pitch. It's like I can hear each one individually, no matter how small—not a harmony but a cacophony of voices, all hitting me at once. It's torture. I should call up *jor* to protect myself, but . . . but . . . The feel of Vor's arms around me. The scent of him, the throb of his heartbeat. How I have longed for these things! Things I won't be able to feel through *jor*. Is this pleasure worth this pain?

Vor stops abruptly. "I think this is it," he mutters, talking to himself rather than to me. His breath is labored, his chest heaving. He looks around the cavernous space. There are few *lorst* lights left, but his *tralde* eyes are better adapted to the dark. "Nothing looks familiar anymore, the damage is so great. But I think this is where the infirmary door stood."

A pile of rock half-buries a doorway. If this is the infirmary, no one is getting in or out. Vor curses softly. Casting about, he spies a small alcove and

hastens to tuck me into it. He startles when he catches my eye. He'd not realized I was conscious. A flood of fresh feeling rolls out from him. He is already pulsing with fear, but this new pulse is deeper, darker. Dread mingled inextricably with desire. It hits me like a fist to the gut, and I recoil. He steps back, and the pain immediately lessens. But now I want to cry out at the lack of his touch, hungry to maintain contact with him at whatever cost. I cannot speak. Cannot move. I can only look up at him, desperately holding his gaze.

"I must try to reach Hael," he says, his voice carefully modulated but unable to disguise the horror underscoring each word. "And your brother. He's in there too."

I nod, though I hardly comprehend what he's saying. Leaning against the wall, my skin is in direct contact with too many *urzul* stones. Their screaming splits my awareness into two realms of existence—the physical realm I share with Vor, and the realm of soul where my gods-gift burns.

Vor looks as though he wants to say something more. His lips part. For a moment the fear pounding in his soul subsides, making room for both love and grief. Then the world shakes again. A small stirring, threatening a larger one to come.

"Go," I say softly. "Get them out."

Vor's lip curls, teeth flashing in a determined grimace. He turns and hurls himself at the big blocks of fallen masonry blocking that door. I wish I could help him. In this weakened state, I'm not much use. I never was. Even after all that training, all that pain, sacrifice, and blood. What did I accomplish in the end? The people of Mythanar are trapped in stone. And still the dragon rises.

A flutter of sensation touches my awareness. It's gone in an instant only to return a few breaths later. This time, accompanied by a *pull*. My heart stops. My breath catches. I've felt this compulsion before. And I know who's doing

it, I know where it's coming from. Should I answer? Dare I, after everything I've done already?

Can I possibly make something right out of all this wrongness?

Before I come to a decision, another quake rocks the world. I gasp, flinging out my arms for balance. Vor gives a wordless shout, turning toward me. He takes a step, but a shower of dust and debris falls between us, obscuring him from my vision. With a hideous groan, a great chunk of stalactite breaks, falls, smashes to the floor.

The stirring ends. Dust settles, streaming from the great blockade of stone between me and the end of the hall. For a moment, I hear nothing but the growling roar of stone settling all around me and the pounding of blood in my ears.

“Faraine!”

My heart gives a painful thud, relearning how to beat. Vor. He's alive. He wasn't crushed under that stalactite. He's alive and maybe . . . maybe . . .

“Faraine, are you there? Answer me!”

Sounds of scrabbling, scraping reach me. He's trying to dig through that barrier, trying to reach me. I listen, unable to make myself answer his frantic cries. Instead, I look down at my hands, scratched and bleeding in numerous places. It is the work of a moment to open some of those smaller cuts, to coax fresh blood to flow. I press both hands against the wall, offering up this small sacrifice. The screaming crystals erupt in my head, a catastrophic symphony of pain, pain, *pain*. I close my eyes, bow my head. Force my will, my spirit into that deeper space beneath the pain, down to the pit of emptiness.

From that pit, I summon *jor*. Wrap it tight around me. Harden my heart, my soul, my body from the inside out. The crystals hurt when they push through my skin. I don't care. Not anymore. What is a little pain to me? Pain is a concern of the flesh, not stone. I blink slowly, crystal-crusting lids falling

across faceted eyes. The *urzul* continue screaming, but now their screams simply bounce off my protective covering. Nothing can touch me. Not anymore. I am indestructible.

I turn back to the wall of broken stone between me and Vor. His frantic voice cries out my name. He still thinks he can save me. But that time is past. Approaching the rock, I place one hand against it, feel the *urzul* within its broken pieces. *Don't come after me, Vor.* My voice is flat, cold. It travels through the crystals, meaning carried in their resonance.

“*Morar juk!*” Vor growls. “Faraine, is that you? Wait there, my love, wait! I’m coming for you!”

I let my heavy eyelids fall once more, bowing my head as I send the feelings through the stone. *Get Hael. And my brother. They deserve to be saved.*

“What is this?” Vor’s voice deepens, a terrifying growl. “Faraine, what are you doing? What are you trying to tell me?”

For an instant, my *jor* trembles. The desperation of his voice is almost enough to undo me. But then the world shakes again. There is no time left. For what I must do, I must be hard to the core. Let no emotion weaken me, neither fear, nor anger. Nor love.

I say nothing. I simply turn and, as the walls of the palace undulate on either side of me, as the stalactites overhead break and fall, shattering unfelt against my shoulders, make my way through the ruins of this once glorious palace. Many silent, stone-wrapped trolde watch me with unseeing eyes as I pass, oblivious to the end of their world. That is my gift to them. And my curse.

The *pull* comes again, stronger than before. I run to answer. When I come to barriers, a swipe of my arm is enough to shatter stone, and I pass through in a cloud of dust, unstoppable in purpose. My fate is here. I am ready, eager

to embrace it.

The palace gardens are swathed in deep darkness. All the lights of the living gems are doused, buried under rubble. The very air vibrates with the constant rumble beneath my feet. Several times, I lose my footing, nearly fall into one of the fissures breaking apart this world. Heat and smoke rise simmering from below. I lift my gaze to the Urzulhar. The *pull* calls me again but . . . where are the stones? Panic thrums, struggling to penetrate my *jor*. Surely, they must still be intact if they are calling to me like this. Surely, they've not been destroyed. Because if they are, it's too late. I cannot hope to face Arraog without their resonance. I cannot . . . I cannot . . .

No thinking. No faltering. No weakness. The *pull* draws me on, and I follow it. I climb the last of the rise, using my hands as much as my feet. A terrible break runs up one side of the slope, and intermittent plumes of steam belch from its depths. I force myself onward until at last I reach the crest of the rise.

The Urzulhar.

They are gone.

Of the seven main crystals, only one remains upright and whole. The others are all either toppled or smashed into glittering shards. The minor stones have fared worse, broken pieces scattered everywhere. The troldefolk trapped in *va-jor* are still here, battered and partially buried. The stone-wrapped form of Queen Roh seems to stare out at me from her eternally fear-widened eyes, accusing and pleading by turns.

I feel no shock. No surprise, no dismay. I feel no sorrow, or disappointment, or despair. I simply stand in place. Staring around me. Feeling nothing.

“Took you long enough.”

I turn slowly to that voice, my stone eyes unblinking as the ragged,

hooded figure steps out from behind the last standing Urzulhar stone.

“Maylin,” I say coldly, my crystalized voice echoing.

“I was beginning to fear you’d never break out of that cursed cell.” The old woman totters toward me, her walking stick crushing bits of crystal. She looks around at the destruction, sneering as though she’s just discovered some child’s mess. “That wretched prince and his wretched followers ingest lead tablets. It makes them resistant to suggestion. I couldn’t reach you.” She sighs then and looks at me, one eyebrow quirked. “But I suppose you managed in the end. The gods are not through with you yet.”

On the far side of the stone around my heart, questions burn. Why did she conspire with the Children of Arraog? Why did she manipulate me into performing that spell? Was it all preparation for the confrontation she has envisioned? Or did she use me to seek some final vengeance against Gaur and the city he once loved? I wonder, but . . . I cannot care.

When I open my mouth, I say only, “What can be done? The Urzulhar are gone.”

“Yes, well.” The witch looks around at the ruined circle. “It was never strong enough for what we have in mind. We must go deeper.”

I tip my head to one side.

“Come, girl, you didn’t think these pretty rocks were the best the Under World has to offer, did you?” Maylin tosses back her head and cackles. “No, no. For your final wonder-working, I have something much better prepared. Come! Come with me.”

She turns and hobbles back through the rubble, her body more bowed and decrepit than I’ve ever seen it, as though all the age of her many long centuries of life has finally caught up with her. But pure purpose radiates from her soul, the strongest I’ve ever felt.

I fall into step behind her, following where she leads.

“Faraine!” Her name reverberates against the still-trembling walls, threatening to bring the compromised ceiling crashing down on me. Heedless, I bellow again and again, desperate to hear her response. That voice which had spoken—that hollow, distant, echoing voice—that was the voice of the crystal-bound being who had shielded me in the cell. Faraine, but not Faraine.

What has happened to her? What is this magic which warps and changes her? What has become of the gentle, thoughtful, wise, and soft-spoken woman I loved? Does that woman exist anymore? Did she ever?

“Vor!”

The desperate cry reaches my ear. I cannot heed it; all my energies are thrown into tearing away this barrier of rock which stands between me and my bride. I must get through. I must find her, wrap her in my arms, somehow force her back into the version of herself I know. The woman who could never do what this woman has done, who could never be what this woman has become.

“Vor! Help us!”

It’s Hael. Her fear cuts through the fog of my frenzy, jarring me back to awareness. With a curse, I turn. The pile of rubble blocking the infirmary door is partially shifted, enough that my captain has managed to shove the

door open and extend one arm through. But two great stones remain, wedging it fast. She cannot find leverage to move them. For half an instant, I hesitate. Every instinct urges me in pursuit of Faraine, all anger, all hurt, all betrayal forgotten. But I won't leave Hael trapped. I promised Sul she would live. She must live.

The world shakes again as I hurl myself at those last stones. Gripping one with both hands, I lift it above my head, muscles straining, and bring it crashing down atop the other. It strikes a point of weakness, and the boulder fractures. I hit again and a third time. On the fourth blow, the stone cracks in two. I push the chunks aside, giving Hael room to shove the door open. She stumbles through, Prince Theodre at her heels. His soft human skin is so coated in dust, he looks almost troidish. His bright blue eyes—so like Faraine's they make my heart lurch—blink up at me, dazed in the thin light of the *lorst* stone he clutches with both hands.

"Gods save me!" he yelps. "I thought the whole palace was about to fall in on top of us!"

"It was," Hael says, while in the same breath I growl, "It is."

The prince makes a thin, uneasy sound in his throat. "Don't you think perhaps—and I don't want to step on any toes here—but oughtn't we to think of making a speedy getaway?"

Ignoring him, Hael turns to me. Though weak from her many wounds, her eyes are brighter than they were, alight with a terrible, burning glow. "Where is the queen?" she asks tremulously.

I indicate the fallen stalactite filling up the passage. "Through there."

"Alive?"

I nod.

"*Morar tor Grakanak!*" she breathes. Without another word she throws herself to work, almost as zealous as I to clear the way. I should tell her to

stop, to be mindful of her injuries. Some of those cuts are deep and have scarcely begun to heal. They'll reopen if she isn't careful, and she'll bleed to death before the world caves in. But she wouldn't listen to me. There's a fire in her now that I don't fully comprehend.

Working side-by-side, we heave, break, and haul stone. Theodre tries to help, but mostly gets in the way. Hael finally growls at him to back off. Stirring after stirring shifts the ground beneath us, smaller tremors, but growing more frequent. Writhing dread fills my chest. Did Sul manage to clear the lower city? Will any of them reach the Between Gate in time? Was I too late to take action, foolishly clinging to a forlorn hope? Damn my arrogance! Damn my stubborn unwillingness to accept failure!

And yet, even as these thoughts clamor in my head, only one force drives me now: Faraine. *Faraine*. I must reach her. I must find her before the end, must send her from this world in which she never belonged. Perhaps she deserves to die in crushing oblivion for what she did. I don't care. Be she innocent or guilty, angel or destroyer, I will not go to the arms of the Deeper Dark until I know she is safe.

"Watch out!" Hael grabs me by the collar and yanks me back just before a small avalanche crashes into the space where I stood. Coughing, we wave our hands before our faces to clear the dust, while Theodre sputters curses. But when the cloud clears, it reveals a way through the passage. I take a lunging step, only for Hael to lay a hand on my shoulder. She's too weak to restrain me, but she catches my eye. "What are you going to do?" she asks.

"Find Faraine."

"Do you know where she's gone?"

I don't. But something tells me she'll be drawn back to that same place I have twice before found her. It's like the gods themselves keep driving her there, though for what purpose I cannot comprehend. "I have an idea," I say

darkly.

Hael's grip on my shoulder tightens. "You cannot stop her, Vor."

"She's already enstoned our people, Hael," I growl. "What more do you think she can do?"

Though her arm shakes with weariness, her grip doesn't slacken. "She is the *Almuth tor Grakanak*. The Fist of the Deeper Dark. She will stop Arraog's rise. She will save us."

I wrench away, staggering several paces as I shake my head. "She is not what you think she is. She is not some tool of the gods."

"You cannot stop it, Vor. No one can."

My teeth grind in a grimace. "Watch me."

Pivoting on heel, I leap for the opening even as the floor and ceiling begin to shake once more. "Find a morleth!" I toss back over my shoulder, uncertain she can hear me above the roar of breaking stone. "Meet me at the Urzulhar Circle. If I'm not there, then make for the surface and get out of here. Get out before the end. That's an order, Captain!"

Maylin leads me to a crack in the world. There she stops, swaying as the ground trembles again, threatening to throw her down. Her hood is back, her white hair loose and phantomlike in the weird semi-darkness of dust and *dimness*.

“Here, girl,” she says, turning to me. “Here is where you must make your descent.”

I wait for the tremor to pass before I approach the cleft. Looking down, I expect to see jagged stone, a newly-opened fissure, like so many others now ripping through these gardens. But my eyes are met with . . . a stairway. A long stairway, leading straight down. It’s so natural, one could easily believe it was shaped by the forces of the world, not carved by any hand. It looks as though it’s been waiting for millennia only to be revealed now as this world comes apart.

“Did you think the Urzulhar was enough for what you must do?” Maylin studies me closely as though trying to read my face. There’s nothing to read—no fear, no surprise. No emotion. I am empty. I am *jor*. I merely observe what is without feeling. “Queen Org of ancient days built all of Mythanar around the Urzulhar,” the old witch continues, her matter-of-fact voice underscored by the threatening rumble underfoot. “But those outer stones were merely the topmost branches. The true heart stone lies below.”

No light penetrates beyond the first few steps. Further down is complete darkness. But I don't mind. I don't need light to see. Not anymore. "What will I do when I find the heart stone?" I ask.

"You must use it to connect to all other *urzul* in this world. Only the combined resonance will generate enough power for a *va-jor* of this scale. Then you will bind Arraog in stone."

I nod. Though I've never attempted a working of this magnitude, there's a certainty about this moment. Of course, I was brought here. Of course, I must do this. Did not the gods ordain it?

The world shakes. Maylin plants the end of her walking stick, just catching her balance, still poised on the brink of that drop. Though she wears no *jor*, her eyes blaze bright gold, flaring with her gift. She fixes those eyes on me, holding me in her gaze until the stirring passes. Then: "It's time to give it all up, my girl. Let go of anything that binds you to your fleshly form, even your love for Vor. It is a powerful thing, true love. But if you would save him, you must release him." She grimaces, the lines of her haggard face gruesome with grief. "That is where I failed. I could not give Zur up. Not even when he begged me to with his dying breath."

Reaching out with one arm, she catches my chin in her hand. The sharp edges of jutting crystals cut into her unprotected skin. Blood wells, drips, and the shattered Urzulhar stirs in response, hungry still. "Do this for me, child," she says. "Do this for him. For my Zur. For my Vor."

I drop my gaze to those splashes of blood at our feet. "What of the sacrifice?" I ask. "What of the lifeblood?"

"It will be provided." The witch lets go of me and takes a step back, gripping her staff with both hands. "Leave that to me."

The world moves again. A blast of hot air erupts from below. All Mythanar seems to scream in pain. My *jor* protects me, but Maylin is

vulnerable. She shrieks and staggers, blisters bubbling across her exposed skin. I reach for her, some distant part of my soul still capable of concern. But she curses and flings out a burned arm, pointing one trembling finger. “Go! Go now! Find the heart stone and join with it. Save this world, *kurspari-glur.*”

I draw back, staring into the pain-maddened eyes of this woman, who has been my teacher. This woman who has shaped and molded me according to her will. This small, compact force of spirit who would even now throw herself headlong into battle against one of the Great Dragons. If in that moment I could love her, I would. If I could hate her, I would do that as well. I would fear her, pity her, wish to comfort and calm her.

But I feel none of these things. Not anymore.

I turn, face that dark stairway. Then I begin my slow descent into the depths of this world, even as shimmering heat ripples around me, and the stone crust of my *jor* hide glows red. Within a few paces, I leave all light behind.

40

VOR

The Urzulhar are broken.

Ghat warned me of this. *“If dese stirrings go on, the Circle be first to fall,”* my old engineer chief had said. *“When it goes, it all gonna go.”*

At the time I’d still believed this fate could be forestalled. I’d still believed not only in the power of the Miphates but in my own ability to bring them here. Perhaps it was arrogance. Or perhaps it was simply unthinkable that this ancient landmark, the very center of my city, the center of my world, could ever be moved.

But it’s gone now. Six of the seven stones cracked, fallen, shattered to fragments. Only one remains, a final testimony to the glory of an age now brought to ruin.

But I’m not done for yet. And I have one final task to accomplish. One last mighty deed fit for the last trolde king.

I climb the rise, calling Faraine’s name as I go. I can’t say why I know she’s here. The similarity to the last time I climbed this way and found her body dead and broken is all too real. But surely no god, no matter how capricious, would make me live the same horror twice over. Clinging to this hope, I reach the top of the rise and stand in the midst of wreckage. My eyes swiftly scan for any sign of Faraine, fixing on that spot where she once lay so still and cold.

But she's not here. Gods damn it, she's not here.

"Faraine!" I bellow, turning in place. Another shudder rocks the ground. The final standing stone groans and threatens to topple. From this vantage, I can see down into the city and watch with awe-filled dread as the Vetorka Monument, a famous landmark built during the rule of my grandfather, topples in a cloud of dust.

At least no screams rise from the city. The people are all stone. Faraine spared them this final terror.

That thought roils like fire in my gut. I cup my hands, roaring her name again and again. I don't expect her to answer. She has every reason to fear and flee me. Only . . . I cannot imagine a version of Faraine that would run away. I've watched her brave terrible calamity all without a murmur. When she was dragged onto the execution scaffold. When she faced a horde of rabid *woggha* all alone. When she chose to love the dangerous trolde king who'd threatened her life on more than one occasion. She has such courage in her heart, hard won over many years of unrelenting pain. She is no coward. She will not run.

But where is she?

A low hum warms my ear. At first, I scarcely notice it. But it grows, rising in both pitch and intensity. The crystal. The last standing stone. I turn to it slowly, eyes widening. Its dark center glows red. That glow increases slowly, a pulsing light. The other broken crystals begin to pulse as well, all their fractured pieces flickering with life. The ground under my feet vibrates, not with a stirring, but with that same, vibrating hum, a thousand tiny voices growing and multiplying.

Another quake nearly knocks me from my feet. I stagger, catching hold of a boulder for support. Only when the quake passes do I realize that I'm embracing the enstoned form of Roh, my stepmother. So, this is where she

met her end. Did she find the peace she so adamantly sought? I can see little of her face through the layers of *va-jor*, but something tells me her final rest is not what she thought it was.

I release the rock and step back. The hum of the crystals is stronger than before, prickling my skin, sinking down into my bones. Only now it's accompanied by another voice. Not stone, not even trolde. A human voice. Moaning in pain.

“*Morar juk!*” I snarl and scramble out from the remains of the Urzulhar to the far side of the rise. A great gash splits this part of the hill, and steam rises from below, shimmering in the pulsing red light of a thousand *urzul* crystals. Great crystals and small, all alight and alive, cover this whole side of the rise. Ancient troldish magic radiates from their cores and fills the air, spreading fast.

Another moan snaps my attention to the small figure crouched on the brink of that chasm. For a breath, my mind fills with Faraine. I'm convinced it's her I see. Faraine reclining against an outcropping of rock, Faraine panting in short, agonized breaths as blood spills down her face, her neck, her arms, her legs, soaking that threadbare garment and pasting it to her thin frame.

Then my vision clears. And I see who truly lies before me.

“Mother!” I bark.

The next moment, I'm loping to her side, staggering as the world shakes yet again. I collapse on my knees beside her. She is a gruesome sight. Her robes are open. A long, terrible gash cuts her from clavicle to naval. More red lines score her withered breasts and ribcage. “Mother, who has done this to you?” I demand, fear, rage, and woe warring for dominance in my heart. It is only then I see the ceremonial black diamond knife clutched in her hand. Covered in her blood. I have my answer.

Her eyes flare open when I try to wrest the knife from her grasp. They are not the eyes of the woman I remember, the tender mother who would bring me to sit with her at her favorite place in the garden, who taught me to swim in the *Hirith Borbatha*, who sang me human songs and danced human dances. That woman had gentle blue eyes, not these burning gold orbs.

“You don’t want to touch that,” she says. Immediately a profound revulsion comes over me and I drop the blade. She smiles weakly, a terrible sight on that bloodied visage. “So,” she breathes. “You came to rescue her, did you?”

My heart catches. “Where is she, Mother? Where is Faraine?”

She nods to the edge of the chasm. A pit seems to open inside me. I scramble to that brink, gripping stone as I peer over. I glimpse stone steps before another blast of hot air rises, heating my flesh. I retreat, teeth barred. “You sent her down there?” I roar.

“She doesn’t feel pain,” Maylin sighs even as more blood drips from her wounds. “She’s beyond pain now.”

Snarling wordlessly, I rise, prepared to fling myself down those steps in pursuit. But my mother’s voice cries out a desperate, “You don’t want to go down there!”

Absolute sickening dread overwhelms my heart. I stare at that ledge as though it’s the last barrier between me and the deepest hell. No matter how I fight, I cannot make my feet take another step. “Faraine!” I whisper, as though her name might be the key to break this spell. But the dread remains, binding me as fast as any chain.

I turn to Maylin, hatred now surpassing whatever pity I felt. I know what she’s doing. This is the witchcraft Sul warned me of, the witchcraft which, he claims, planted this love for Faraine in my heart to begin with. The violation of my will sickens me. I would kill this woman where she lies were she not

already dying. “Why are you doing this?” I demand, my voice strangled tight. “Why, Maylin, why?”

Her lips twist in a ghastly smile, teeth flashing through the veil of blood pouring from her forehead and cheeks. “It was always meant to be her,” she says. “The Woman of Crystals. The Fist of the Deeper Dark. The gods-gifted dragon-slayer.”

“No one can slay Arraog. None save the gods themselves.”

“Even the gods must have their tools.”

“This isn’t the gods’ doing.” The words spit like venom from my tongue. “It’s yours. You took her, manipulated her, changed her.”

“Yes!” Maylin gasps, her body shuddering in terrible agony. “I made her what she must be! To justify the life-price.” She closes her eyes then, leaning back against her stone. “A life for a life. It was the only way to bring her back. To give her a chance to fulfill her destiny. In the end, is this not a fair exchange?”

I stare at her a moment, uncomprehending. Then I shove my hand into my pocket, wrench out the *urzul* stone which I’ve carried there these many weeks. Like all others of its kind, it pulses with red light. The darkness in its heart has diminished, almost disappeared. Hissing, I lift my gaze back to the witch. “You knew? You knew yours would be the life required?”

She shrugs. “I suspected. One of us would have to pay it. Either you for carrying her there, or me for sending you in the first place.” She looks down at her bloodied body. “I suppose the gods thought it best to get double the use of this sacrifice. Very . . . efficient of them.”

I shake my head, turning again to the chasm. I try once more to take a step, but my feet will not obey. “Damn you, woman, let me go!” I roar. “She’s not prepared for such a foe. She cannot hope to survive.”

“Oh, she doesn’t.” Maylin chuckles, a dark, cruel sound. “Hope, that is.

She is as beyond hope now as she is beyond pain. Or love. There is only destiny left for her.”

“You lie.” It can’t be true. I felt love in her. I felt it in every touch of my lips against her skin, in the closeness we shared, the glory and the agony. She experienced it all so deeply it rocked her very soul. That woman cannot be gone.

But Maylin looks up at me sharply, her gold eyes suddenly bright and steady. “Why would I die for a lie?”

“You’re not dead yet.”

“No. The sacrifice must last as long as it can, but—”

Her voice breaks off as the *urzul* sing out suddenly, a pulse of sound that jolts through every sense and sends me to my knees. I cry out in pain and clamp my hands over my ears. The sound goes on and on, reverberating my bones as though it would burst them apart and scatter them as dust across this world. I fear it will never end, that I will spend the rest of eternity wracked in agony.

But it fades at last. And I, collapsed to my knees and panting, turn to look at the witch once more. Her face is ghastly, drained of lifeblood, sagging with age, ripped apart. But just for a moment I see her again: my mother. I see her as I remember her, young, beautiful, sad. And determined.

“There’s no more time,” she whispers. “She needs this. I will not balk here at the end.”

I see what she’s doing an instant before it happens. “No!” I shout and lunge to interfere. Perhaps her witchcraft prevents me, slows me just long enough so that I cannot smack the diamond blade away before it penetrates her abdominal wall and slices clean through. Blood and entrails spill forth onto the ground. The *urzul* respond at once, their song rising to a deafening pitch, drowning out my howl. I drop to my knees, gather my mother’s broken

body in my arms, frantically trying to shove her innards back into place. A madman's endeavor, but I am mad in this moment. Mad and lost to despair.

Maylin gazes up at me, her life fleeing fast now. One trembling, gore-stained hand flutters to my cheek. "Let her go," she whispers thickly as the last gasp of air leaves her lungs. "Let her . . . save you . . ."

Then the world begins to shake
again.

41

FARAINÉ

The *urzul* calls to me.

At first, it's just the small stones, the dust-sized specks trapped in the cliff face, reaching out with their millions of tiny voices. As I descend, the voices deepen, grow. Maylin is right—there are greater stones down here. Greater by far than the Urzulhar. It's as though the source of all *urzul* lies below me, sending out vibrations across this world. Ordinarily I would not be able to sense it. Now, with the earth cracked wide open, its voice echoes up to me, carried from the deeps.

The world quakes again. I put out a hand, catching hold of the trembling wall, my crystal-crusted fingers gripping fast. The old Faraine would have screamed in terror, flattened herself against the wall, and prayed to the gods for deliverance. But the old Faraine did not have the protection of *jor*.

I stand motionless as the world writhes and groans in agony. Should I be afraid? This would be an appropriate context for such emotion. But what good would fear do me? It will not prevent this narrow ledge from crumbling beneath my feet. It will not stop these falling stones from raining down on my head and shoulders. It certainly won't turn back Arraog.

So, I simply wait until the stirring passes. When I am satisfied nothing vital has cracked or broken across my protective covering, I continue down into the pitch dark, listening to the song of the *urzul* humming all around me.

The song intensifies. Though I am still walking blind, a reddish glow appears in my head, a sense as real as sight, possibly more real. “Blood,” I whisper, still without feeling, merely observing. This is how *urzul* responds to blood offerings, this change in resonance, this pulse of power. Maylin must have come through on her promise to find a willing sacrifice. Good. Everything is as it should be then.

How long have I descended into this darkness, this heat? Time has lost all meaning, measured only by the increased frequency of tremors. How much longer do I have left? Or is that the right question to ask? There’s no hurry after all. The people of Mythanar are beyond saving; I saw to that personally.

But I cannot stop. The deep stones call to me, their voices excited by blood. I must answer. With the pulse of *urzul* in my head, I hasten on. Heat surrounds but does not affect me, unable to penetrate my *jor*. I come to a place where the quakes have destroyed part of the stairway, and here at last I pause. When no alternative presents itself, I simply step out into nothing.

I fall.

A free, beautiful plummet into the unknown.

It is not unlike the dream I’ve had so many times before. Only in the dream, my skin burned away, and I screamed in terror.

There is no terror now. No pain.

Just the fall.

Then I hit the ground, jarred inside my *jor* protection, and roll several times over before coming to a stop. I lie where I’ve fallen for some while, feeling the tremors pulsing through my limbs, feeling the flares of raw red power erupt inside my head. Part of me wants to stay. To simply cease all striving and let the crystals claim me fully. But that’s not what I came here for.

A deep throb stabs my senses. Turning slowly, I open my eyes, not

expecting to see anything this deep down. Only . . . wait. There *is* something.

I've found the heart stone. But it's more than just a stone. It is a vast network of crystals, all grown together and spread before me, extending for miles in the deeps of the world. They are enormous, formed by the pressure of eons. Far greater than the tallest of the Urzulhar, ten times that size, all joined together like interlaced fingers, gleaming in unreal beauty. A complex song hums from their cores, multi-voiced and far beyond the comprehension of my gods-gift.

But I don't have to comprehend it. I only have to join it. To make myself part of it.

I rise slowly. The world shakes again, and the crystals groan in the midst of their song. But the red pulse in their centers strengthens, drawing me. I stretch out both hands, step in among that network, a weaving so intricate it could only be fashioned by the hands of a god. I plant my palms against two different juttings of living stone.

Resonance jolts through my body, penetrating my shield of *jor*. It rushes through my soul, expanding my awareness tenfold, a hundredfold, a thousand. I feel all the *urzul* around me, these massive crystals connected in vibrating force to each other, to the smaller crystals around them, to the broken fragments of the Urzulhar. On and on the connection spreads, dragging me with it. More and bigger, encompassing the world. It would be easy to lose myself in the vastness of this chorus, to let my body, mind, and soul be absorbed into this greater whole. Maybe I will. Maybe this is my final destiny. But first . . .

I close my eyes. Take hold of those vibrations. Were it not for my *jor*, I would shatter into a million pieces just as I shattered Targ. But I am stronger, for the moment at least. I send myself out, rippling across the world. The soul is a great thing after all, even when contained in a frail, human vessel. But I

am no longer contained. My vessel is that song, that radiance. It carries me out from my center, expanding every idea of self I once believed. I am a world. I am a song. I am everywhere at once.

I feel the other living souls of this realm, all their small and trembling fears. The troldefolk, who cower within their crumbling homes. The *woggha*, who scurry through their collapsing caverns. The mothcats, the cave spiders, the delicate winged *olk*, who gasp their last breaths, on the brink of extinction. I feel them all within myself. They are mine, and I am theirs, though they may never know me.

I will save them. All of them.

I plunge deep. Into the hot, crushing depths. This too is both like and unlike my dream of falling. In that dream my flesh could not endure the heat. But I am not flesh anymore. I am stone. I am crystal. I am ancient, ageless, and impervious. Thus, I plunge, riding on *urzul* vibrations all the way to the molten core where Arraog writhes.

She is vast.

Too great and too terrible to be contained within this form.

She is an idea—an unknowable greatness. Beauty and terror, meant for dancing across the hugeness of space and time. Yet here she is, hemmed in by a world of rock, which binds but cannot hold her. Not forever. She flexes one claw, and a new fissure opens along the surface crust. She roars, and plumes of poisonous gas rise, filling tunnels with deadly clouds. But worse by far than her size or her poison is her rage. It blasts, an inferno from the pits of hell. It would incinerate me in an instant were I not dispersed across the shimmering *urzul*. As it is, she cannot touch me.

But she knows I am here.

I feel you, creature of dust.

I feel you here in my prison.

She twists, straining against the walls of stone. Caverns quake, cities fall. Heat roils around her, molten rock dripping from every enormous scale. She turns a wild, rolling eye this way and that, as though she can see me, as though I am a thing that can be seen.

I've been waiting for you.

I was promised.

Her mouth opens. A river of lava rushes between teeth the size of mountains, rising, swelling, filling caves and caverns in a molten flood. Burning me across the miles of my existence. But I feel no pain, stone that I am.

Nornala said that you would come.

When Lamruil bound me, Nornala promised me relief.

Have you come to kill me, dust creature?

Have you come to set me free?

No human mind could comprehend that voice. It is too hot, too enormous, too ancient. To try to fathom it would be to cast oneself into a sea of madness.

But stone can bear such heat. Stone can bear such pressure.

“Arraog.” I sing her name from every crystal in the world. She would not hear a smaller voice, but this voice, this song, she perceives. Her head tilts to one side, and a hundred islands on the surface world vanish beneath rolling waves. But I have her attention.

“Arraog,” I say, “I feel your pain.”

You know nothing of pain, dust creature.

“I know more than you think.”

Your life, your reality, is too small to comprehend the pain of dragons.

“Pain is not measured by size or contained within the bounds of time. It simply is. My pain. Yours. It is one. It connects us, like air, like heat, like life and death.”

Death?

The dragon roars, her being swelling up, pressing against the barriers of her cell. Her great wings struggle, desperate to unfurl.

Death is not meant for my kind. We are dragons! We defy it!

She bellows the words, but her defiance is underscored by anguish. Her eyes, the size of small moons, roll in her great head, brimming with fire, with agony.

“I can help,” I say, my voice ringing from the *urzul*, echoing from every deep and hidden chamber of the Under Realm. “I can spare you this pain.”

One of your dust-kind tried that already. It did not work. It cannot.

“Did you not yourself say Nornala promised you relief? I am sent by the

gods. I bear their gift. And I will help you now.”

Arraog roars, her meaning too immense even for my expanded self to fathom. But her pain hits me, resounding against every facet of my multiplied being—sharp and ringing like the toll of funeral bells. It is neither an acquiescence nor a refusal. It is merely pain unending. It will shatter this world if I do not stop it now.

I summon the *urzul*. All those voices, millions upon millions. All those vibrations singing through me. Even as my once-mortal frame stands in that forest of crystal, my true self, my new self, channels that power, sends it coursing to the center of the world. It strikes Arraog. She roars again, tail thrashing, claws slashing. The bolt goes deep, penetrating her thick hide straight to her heart, that huge burning furnace which threatens to obliterate me. But I am not so easily destroyed. I gather more power, more radiant song, and send it in another, greater wave.

It hardens. Becomes rock.

Arraog shakes her body, shakes the world. Fractures run through layer after layer of stone. But I am relentless. The *va-jor* spell and I are one, and we are all the *urzul* of this realm. As swiftly as she destroys, we renew, until the hardened crust around her heart holds firm. The *va-jor* spreads then, covering her gnarled form in shining crystal.

This can work. It must work. I can enstone Arraog.

Foolish dust-being.

Her voice growls deep and low, shattering crystals only for their fragments to take up the song anew.

Foolish, foolish.

You hasten the end you seek to prevent.

“Enough!” I cry and pull the *va-jor* over her mouth. “Go into the darkness, dragon, and become as stone.”

The moment she dies, Maylin's spell over me breaks.

I feel the snap of her control and wrench an agonized breath into my lungs. My face is wet with tears: a child's sorrow, a son's loss. But other, stronger forces drive me now. Laying my mother's broken body down, I pause just long enough to rest her bloody hands across her withered breast, to whisper a brief prayer of pleading to the gods.

Then I turn and, no longer restrained by magic, fling myself to the edge of the chasm.

Another stirring strikes just as I reach it, nearly tossing me over the brink. I drop to my knees, grasp a handful of rock, and manage to hold on until the tremor passes. As soon as I can safely move, I begin my descent, too hurried to be safe, too desperate to care. I have no idea what I will find, no idea what to either hope or fear. I only know I must find her. If I can still get her out before the end, I will. If not . . .

I drive my body faster, half-falling down that narrow stair into darkness. This is the perfect darkness one finds throughout the Under Realm, darkness which has never been touched by traces of light. Even my trolde eyes are useless here. I move entirely on instinct, trusting my feet to find their way.

Red light abruptly bursts across my vision. It is so harsh, I cry out, stagger, and fall back on the steps. Pain lances my head, a twisting, relentless blade. It

is some time before I can find the will to move, more still before I dare crack my eyelids. The world is bathed in a raw glow, pulsing up from the depths. I cannot look at it. I'm obliged to shut my eyes again and simply feel my way down, down, down.

Faraine! my heart cries, driving me ever onward. *Wait for me. Do not go where I cannot follow.* How long ago was it since I extracted that promise from her lips? Since I held her living body, so newly restored, and knew I could not bear to be parted from her again? I was a different man then. A man who still hoped he could work miracles, could thwart destiny.

I am not that man anymore. Whatever arrogance burned in his breast is extinguished, leaving behind only one last, faint ember of need. Need for her. To save her. Even as I failed to save my world.

I miss a step. Fall.

The plummet is long enough for me to think, *So, this is it. My ignoble end, come at last to embrace me.* Then I hit the ground hard, roll over three times. Still alive. Pain radiates through my body, but it only confirms the truth. My soul is still bound within this frame. I must keep on. I must face whatever comes next.

The red glare is harsher here. I can hardly bear to look and discover where I've fallen. With an effort, I pry my eyes open. Is there something wrong with my vision? The world is made up of flashes of light and deep throbs of darkness. Slowly, I turn my head.

My heart jolts to my throat.

It's the Garden of Org. I've heard tales of it since I was young: the sacred grove to which our God of the Deeper Dark led Org, the founder of Mythanar, and promised to make her family great among the troldefolk, though she was but the daughter of slaves. Many have taught that the Urzulhar Circle was the garden of legend, though rather less glorious than the

old songs and carvings depicted. Others believed the original garden was lost, and the Urzulhar was all that remained. No one guessed that it might be merely hidden. Right beneath our feet.

I stare in awe at those great, pulsing stones, a formation so much greater than any I've seen before. Gods, but it must extend for miles! In some places, there is room enough for a man to walk upright; in others, the stones grow so close together, a child could scarcely squeeze through. It makes every other garden and carefully tended formation of living gems seem laughable by comparison. For a moment, the wonder overwhelms me. I can only think how fortunate I am that *Morar tor Grakanak* saw fit to lead me here before the end.

Then my eye lands on a strange growth of crystal standing close to where I lie. A cluster of jutting stones, pulsing in time with the taller crystals but brighter than they are. As though the light of all the rest is somehow channeling into this one. Something about it draws me.

Rising slowly, I step closer, my footsteps wary. There's something odd about that shape. The upper portion looks almost like a head resting on a pair of shoulders. From a certain angle, those two slender crystal protrusions could be arms. If I didn't know any better, I would think it was . . .

“Faraine!”

As though brought on by my cry, the world rocks again. A blast of heat hits me so hard, my troidish hide flakes and blisters, and my hair singes. Several of the larger crystals groan, crack, fall, crushing smaller stones beneath them. But the light never wavers. It intensifies, pulsing faster.

Coughing, waving dust from my face, I circle the crystal form, searching for proof of what my heart already knows. It's Faraine. It must be. Her face is so deeply hidden by layers of crystal, I can discern nothing of her features. Her body is warped, horrifying. She seems to have grown into the two tall

stones she touches, merging into one large formation.

But it's her. I know it in my gut. Faraine. My wife.

"No," I breathe even as another stirring rocks the cavern. Determined to protect her from falling debris, I throw my body around her only to cut myself on her sharp edges. Blood wells, a new offering for the hungry *urzul*. Grimacing in pain, I draw back and peer into that growth of crystal that may or may not once have been her face. "Faraine!" I cry again, my voice choked on dust. "Faraine, can you hear me?"

No response. What was it Maylin said? "*She is as beyond hope now as she is beyond pain.*" Is this what she meant? Is this what Faraine has become, this fleshless, unnatural being? Alive without feeling, without anything that makes life worth living.

"Faraine! You must stop!" I don't know what she is doing, sunk so deep into this spell. I only know I cannot lose her. Not again. But how am I to reach her? How am I to connect with her?

I look down at my own body, at the blood pouring from all those small cuts. An idea sparks. Reaching into my pocket, I pull out the *urzul*, my mother's final gift to me. Trying not to think about what I do, I cut a deep slice into the palm of my hand, then place it against the crystal formation, just where Faraine's heart might still beat down beneath that crust. "*Faraine,*" I call out within my mind. We connected once before in a space beyond physical restraints. Then I had the Death Stone and the voices of two hundred trolde priests and priestesses to sustain me, a mighty swell of magic. But what was that ceremony compared to the magic in this place? The pulse of power surrounds me, fills me from all sides, flowing from every corner of my kingdom. I must only join with it. I am the Shadow King after all. This is my realm, and these are my stones.

I close my eyes. "*Faraine!*" Mist fills my head. I lean in, send my

consciousness deeper. Step into that mist, which parts to allow me through. The hum of the *urzul* fills my senses. I let it carry me from my body into this space of existence between life and death.

I feel her. She's close. Through the mist I can almost see her, a dark silhouette. I cry out wordlessly and lunge toward her, but no matter how fast I run, the distance between us does not lessen. It's as though she's holding me at bay. The mist swirls so thick and dense, I nearly lose sight of her. "Faraine, my love! Come back to me!"

I don't know how many times I cry out, all the while painfully aware of the vulnerability of our bodies back in the physical realm. Any moment now, one of those great crystals will crumble and crush us beneath it as it falls. But I cannot think of that, cannot let such fear cast me from this realm. "*Faraine!*" I shout again, throwing my whole heart into my voice.

That vague, shadowy form in the distance turns slowly. Though I can discern no features, an air of concern emanates from it. Then Faraine's voice says softly: "*Vor?*"

"Yes!" I stagger, nearly falling in this strange, undefined space. "Yes, it's me. I've come to find you. The world is not yet destroyed. We can still get you to safety."

The figure continues turning, seems to face me now. I see nothing but a shadowy vagueness, but I feel both her perplexity and resistance. "*I have never desired safety. That is something others desire for me or from me. But it is not my desire.*"

The glow around her darkens, churning black shot through with flashing light. She herself is nothing more than the pitch darkness at its center, almost lost to my sight. It's her power—her gods-gift. It has overwhelmed her, dragging her into its depths until she and it are almost indivisible.

"*I desire to be strong,*" she says, her voice multitudinous as the singing

crystals. *“I desire to no longer be the shadow princess, cowering from the world.”*

A desperate void opens in my heart. I’m losing her. “Faraine!” I cry, determined that she should hear her own name and remember. “Faraine, this isn’t you. This dark thing is not what you are meant to be.”

“No,” she replies. *“This is what I need to be.”* She stretches out her arms. Darkness gathers to her hands, pulsing and alive. *“I know now. I understand. This is who the gods intended from the beginning, from the moment my gift came upon me.”* Suddenly her eyes blaze bright, two golden orbs whirling with power. *“I will be what you need, Vor. I will be Queen of the Under Realm. And I will slay Arraog.”*

For a moment, I cannot think, cannot move. I can only stare at this thing, this shadow that boasts Faraine’s eyes. This monstrous, terrifying, beautiful darkness, this being beyond humanity, beyond mortality. In this moment I feel the vastness of her power, the greatness of her gift. It isn’t difficult to imagine that such a being, such a force, might truly be the instrument the gods need to stop the dragon rising, to end the suffering of my world.

“No,” I say.

“What?”

Her voice is sharp, hot. Not a voice at all, but a feeling, a vibration. Her eyes widen, burning brighter. They seem to spin slowly in that shadowed nothing of a face, a terrible illusion. Or perhaps this is not the illusion but the truth. Perhaps my memories of my wife are the true fantasy. But I don’t believe it. I won’t.

“This is not what I need. Never.”

Those golden orbs narrow. The pulse of power thunders around me, drowning out my voice. But I continue speaking. “I need you, Faraine. You are all I’ve ever needed. Your strength and your weakness. Gentle, kind

Faraine, with your calming touch and your extraordinary empathy. The woman who never lets pain harden you, who fearlessly loves no matter what shocks wrack your body and mind. You are the woman I've craved since the moment I met you."

I take a step nearer, reaching out to her through the mist, sending my spirit toward hers even as my physical body clings to the crystals that bind her. She might easily cast me out of this space with that tremendous power of hers. But for the moment, she lets me remain, and I must use whatever time she allows me.

"I was wrong. Do you hear me?" Urgency pours in a hot stream from my lips. "I was wrong about everything. I thought I must fight what I felt for you. I thought my heart led me astray. My kingdom, my people . . . I could not sacrifice them. Surely their needs mattered more than the cry of my soul.

"But I should have chosen you. That first night of our meeting, I knew it. I should have damned all fears and made you my bride then and there. No alliance, no trickery. No obligation. Just you. Always you."

I'm close to her now. Close enough to almost discern her gentle features beneath the layers of shadow. "I believed I must choose between being a man and being king. Between saving you and saving my world. But I know the truth now. There is but one choice."

She gazes up at me, those golden eyes too bright and too strange. But she's still in there. I have to believe it. I have to believe she hears me.

"You *are* my world, Faraine."

She does not flinch when I stretch out my arms, when I enfold her dark, pulsing form. Here in this place of spirit, standing between life and death, I press her to my breast and hope she hears the beating of my heart far away in the living world. "I choose you. Over Mythanar. Over the Under Realm. I forsake all other claims. Let the dragon have it, let all else crumble and burn!

Still will I choose you. My love. My queen. My Faraine.”

A deep, terrible growl. In the real world, the ground shakes, and my body staggers, flung against the sharp edges of her form. I grip her there even as I grip her here, holding tight against all hope.

And I whisper into her ear: “I beg you now—choose me as well. Here at the end of everything, choose me.”

43

FARAINÉ

My awareness is split in a million directions.

I sense Maylin, breathing out her last, lying on the edge of that cliff as her blood feeds the *urzul*, her vicious journey finally come full circle. Elsewhere in the caverns, Prince Sul barks orders, commanding families to hold on to each other as another stirring brings rock crashing down on their heads. Troldefolk scattered across the Under Realm cling desperately to life, their emotions clamoring but unable to penetrate my *jor*. In the streets of Mythanar, stone men, women, and children feel nothing as their world breaks around them.

I see them. I am with them, all of them, simultaneously. As omnipresent as the gods who gifted me.

But I am also here. In the center of destruction. Face-to-face with Arraog.

She fights me, resisting in flame and fury. Her eyes blaze with white heat, melting each layer of stone I wrap over them. The rock walls melt, the *urzul* liquifies. Cracks form across the crust of *va-jor* binding her vast limbs. More of that white-hot heat shines through. Rage, pain, sorrow, all on a scale beyond knowing so that words lose their very meaning. Not all the *urzul* in all this world can give me the power I need to stop her. I have succeeded only in containing the pressure for a moment.

When it bursts, this realm will be obliterated.

But this is what I was born to do. This is the gods' will for me, the very reason they gave me this gift. I will not back down. She breaks the layers of *va-jor*, and I rebuild them, one after the other. Fighting because there is nothing left. Only this struggle, this final strife.

"Faraine!"

Vor.

How had I not felt him before? How had I neglected to sense his approach? Perhaps because I feared the very reaction which even now shoots through my soul, compromising the *jor* which protects me. I must stay here, stay present in this space. Just me and Arraog, my great foe. I won't—

"Faraine, this isn't you. This dark thing is not what you are meant to be."

His voice, caught in the resonance of the *urzul*, reaches out to me from a hundred thousand different places all at once. It jars me, drags my focus away from where it needs to be. I see him. Standing there in the *urzul* forest. He's found me. Or rather, he's found the crystal cluster that covers that fragile form which once encompassed the totality of my existence. He stands with his hand pressed against what was once my chest, as though to feel a heart that no longer beats. What is he doing? Why is he wasting his breath? Can he not see I am not what I was? Can he not see I have transformed, transcended?

I must not let him in. I must not be weak.

I send a blast of resonance back through the crystals, strong enough to stun him, to break this connection between us. But it seems to pass over him like a wave, leaving him untouched. His voice is in my head, earnest and entreating, and I . . . to my shame, some small part of me listens. Listens as Arraog roars, and the world quakes. Listens as Vor pours out his heart, each word ringing out in a series of clear, crystal notes. Listens even as I know I should turn away.

"Faraine is all I ever needed. Faraine with her calming touch and her

extraordinary empathy.”

He’s wrong. He’s so wrong! Pretty words, but so false, so foolish. That version of me was nothing. Pathetic, useless. A pariah.

But his voice persists. I hear him, though I cannot see his mouth moving. His words reach me from everywhere at once, filling my awareness.

“I choose you, Faraine.

“Now choose me.

“Choose me.

“Choose me.”

He takes me in his arms. I am too big now to be held, spread across his entire world. Yet somehow, I rest against his breast, listen to the beat of his heart. Not the wild, frantic beat of a man about to be crushed to death. This is a steady pulse, stronger even than the pulse of the crystal. A measured beat that cannot, will not be broken.

“You are all I’ve ever needed. Your strength. And your weakness.”

This cannot be real. It must be the heat, the pressure, the desperation of my situation bringing such delusions to life in my mind.

But what if it’s true?

What if the old Faraine—not this Faraine, who is stone—what if she were here? What would she do now, faced with the dragon and the end of the world? Her power was not true power. It was weakness. It broke her down, made her small. Could it be that power simply wasn’t meant to be used on its own? Was it intended to work in tandem with this other side of my gift?

Feeling and stone.

Fire and rock.

Chaos and stillness.

In balance.

In dance.

I turn to Arraog, study her through a thousand eyes. Her pain is vast. I cannot contain it, cannot squeeze it small enough, tight enough to fit in *va-jor*. But I could let it out.

This is not what Maylin wanted, some part of my mind protests. But Maylin didn't know all. Her gifts were not the same as mine. We share only our magic. But when the gods shaped me, they endowed me with other gifts as well.

It's time I used them.

"Arraog!" I cry.

Though I am but a voice, echoing from a thousand stones, it seems as though the dragon fixes her rolling eye upon me. Her attention arrested, I let my own focus center, allowing a shimmering, phantom-self to appear in that space between this world and the next. Most cannot perceive that realm, but Arraog is a celestial being. She sees me. Small, naked, helpless, and weak. She sees me exactly as I am.

Her mouth opens. Lava bubbles up on her tongue.

Release me, dust-being.

Her voice nearly disintegrates this feeble form. But I hold on. "Give me your pain, Arraog," I say.

Her eyes flash. A terrible laugh rumbles in her throat, splitting stone straight through to the upper crust of the world.

You cannot survive such pain. It will annihilate you.

I wave my spectral hand. The *urzul* sing, and the layers of *va-jor* surrounding the dragon's body and soul begin to disintegrate. A rush of

feeling rolls out, striking me with a force too great, too incomprehensible for words. Were it not for my *jor*, were not my selfhood spread across this world, I would indeed be destroyed in that single instant. But I am not. My *jor* holds. The crystals hum. I stand untouched in the midst of her despair.

But I must channel it. Before it destroys everything.

Slowly, with careful precision, I begin to peel back my *jor*. Not all at once and not completely. It's all in the balance, the two sides of my gift: that which feels everything and that which feels nothing. Both powerful magic, neither meant to be used alone.

Flames lap the cavern walls. Lava roils, spewing great fountaining plumes, surrounding that quiet, small space where my phantom self stands. I hold out my arms, receive the song of the *urzul*, moving by its power through the center of chaos to where Arraog lies. She watches my approach. Whether she is surprised at my continued existence I cannot say. Perhaps dragons are beyond surprise. But she opens wide her jaw, and a swell of magma rolls forth, sweeps over me, burning away my form as fast as the *urzul* can regenerate it. My physical body—far away and deeply wrapped in *jor*—rocks, still held in Vor's strong arms.

I keep coming. Narrowing that space between me and the dragon until I am directly in front of her, caught between her blazing-moon eyes. "Let me help you," I say and stretch out my hand. She is the size of a world, a being unbound by natural laws. I am a speck. I am nothing.

But I place my hand on the ridges between her eyes and—

Silence.

A silence which sings. An eternal song which no mortal ear may hope to hear. The song, the vibration, the resonance of spheres hurtling through

endless void, performing the dance ordained for them by the gods.

And there they are, in the midst of the dance: Arraog and her mate. Big beyond description. Their wings span galaxies, their tails trailing comets and asteroids in their wake. The two of them together shine and sing, voices blending in terrible, perfect harmony with the stars, the planets, the nebulas. They are more than flesh and scale. They are the dreams of the gods made living. The great Celestial Dancers.

They are one. They have each other. Their love is a timeless symphony of light and dark and joy.

Then, bursting through the gleaming stars, a figure limned in darkness appears. A being of absence, empty and endlessly hungry. Though none has ever seen him, he is everywhere to be found and known by many names. I whisper his name now, my voice soundless in the vacuum of space: *Morartor Grakanak*.

He stretches out one mighty hand, catches hold of one Dancer. With a single twist, he snaps its neck, and the Celestial ceases. The song is broken, the dance ended.

His mate screams.

Her flame engulfs planets and stars.

Her pain reverberates in a wave of destructive force, swelling greater and greater, as though it would encompass all living things.

But when the Dark drops the body of the broken Dancer, she catches it, wraps it around herself. Makes herself small, hot, and burning, safe within the shield of her mate's bones and skin. Her grief is contained, an inferno core in the center of death and loss.

I watch in mingled awe and incomprehension. It's the stuff of myth—the old, foolish tales once told to children in an effort to make sense of the

unknowable. But those tales were not so foolish after all. They were only words struggling to grasp that which can never be held in language, that which can never exist within the bounds of mortal understanding. It's too great, too terrible. Life and death and chaos and love.

And pain.

So much pain.

But this I understand. The wrapping up of oneself in layers of stone.

It cannot last. Suppression is but a temporary relief. It will lead only to ultimate destruction.

“Give it to me, Arraog,” I say, reaching out to that world of stone, cupping it in my hands. “Give me your pain. Let me hold it with you for a little while.”

I crack the stone apart, let the hot center pour forth like runny yolk. It sweeps over me in a flood, overwhelming my body, my mind, my soul. It is pain beyond anything I've ever known, pain beyond imagining. Over and over, I pull my *jor* back into place, holding myself together, a feeble protection but the only one I have against this apocalypse of agony. It goes on for an age. For an eternity.

I see the dead dragon become stone and earth and dirt.

Then the God of the Deeper Dark breathes life into its depths, and the troldefolk walk forth.

All the while, Arraog remains in the center. Burning. Alone.

She releases a breath. Poison seeps through the cracks of the world.

She stirs in her sleep. Mountains break and fall.

She dreams of vengeance. Of rising back into that endless sky, of challenging the gods themselves and wreaking havoc on their heavens. She dreams of fire and destruction and carnage, and those dreams infect the world.

“Arraog!” I cry out, my voice small. “You are poisoning your children. The children born of your love’s blood and bones.”

The dragon stills. She says nothing. Everything is poised, tense, her flame momentarily caught and held. I have moments, less than moments to make her hear me.

“Your love lives on,” I say, holding her broken, burning heart in my hands. “Do you want to feel them?”

She makes no answer. But I open up nonetheless, expanding the *urzul* song, channeling the fears of the troldefolk. Their agony, their terror, their desperate hope. “They are your children, Arraog,” I say. “And they are frightened. You are the only one who can save them.”

She throws back her head, roaring like the very bellows of chaos. But I hear her words.

It is too much.

The pain is too great.

“Destruction only begets more destruction.” I close my eyes. The song of my existence strains but holds, giving me just enough life and form. “But the legacy of your love is *life*.”

She weeps. She moans. A terrible cacophony, the roar of planets colliding, of civilizations falling. We are outside of time, outside of space, just the two of us together. The two of us and her pain. It is heavy. It will break me.

But I stay with her. I hold her.

Then I feel it—a sudden openness that wasn’t there before, straight through to the center of her, to the core of her heart, her existence. With a single, swift bolt, I might send the *va-jor* through. It would wrap her in stone at once, and she would be beyond pain, beyond flame, beyond world-ending.

It is a tempting prospect.

But that is not my gift.

I reach out into that space of vulnerability. Instead of stone, I offer . . .
calm.

It sings from every *urzul* stone, even from the microscopic fragments of shattered crystal dust. Millions upon millions of voices singing, vibrating, carrying my gift in a pure bolt of power. It strikes true, whorls in her molten core, and becomes one with her flame. The red-hot heat transforms into brilliant, shining white.

Arraog drags in a breath.

I feel it. All my *urzul* parts shiver at her inhale, which sucks air from every cavern and cave of the Under Realm. I feel the poison of her breath returning to its source. Then she exhales. But rather than poison, this time she sends out a breath of calm. My calm, my power. Rushing through the world, surrounding every living being.

Again and again, Arraog breathes, inhaling poison, exhaling calm. It hurts. It hurts us both. The pain is excruciating, but I hold on and hold on, until the vibrations of the *urzul* threaten to undo my very being. Then I hold on a little longer.

Arraog looks up at me. She is smaller now to my gaze. Great and mighty and terrible but cupped in the palms of my hands. She looks tired but peaceful.

I will sleep now, dust-being.

Her voice echoes through every chamber, cavern, and hole of the Under Realm, the words an incomprehensible roar to all perception but my own.

I will sleep.

And for once, I will not dream.

She lays down her head, closes her eyes.

So, the fire in the center of the world burns on, a warming heat of life, love, and endurance.

She slips from my arms, vanishing into the mist.

“Faraine!” I cry and lunge to follow her. But I’ve lost all form in this place and fall. Fall back through mist, through layers of reality. Back into the physical realm and my heavy, stone-carved body, still wrapped around the crystal formation that obscures my wife. “No,” I growl and bow over her, holding tighter despite all the many sharp protrusions cutting into my flesh. I won’t let her go. She must know I am here with her, now and into eternity.

The world shakes from its core. Heat and poison and dust fill the air, fill my lungs. I’m choking, dying. And still I hold on. Will Faraine survive, deep in *va-jor* as she is? Will she live on in this inanimate state to be reborn in some distant millennium? A terrible fate, one I know she would not choose. But there is nothing I can do for her now. If the force of my love could not call her back to life, she is truly gone.

I will die here then. Cradling all that remains of her physical vessel. And I will beg the gods to reunite our souls in some far realm of existence.

A gust of searing wind roars through the Garden of Org. It blasts my body, steals the air from my lungs. I heave, spasm. All the dust, grit, and poison I had inhaled rips from inside me. My chest constricts. I wrap myself around Faraine, determined not to be wrenched free. All around me the great crystals crack, groan. Break.

But as they break, something changes.

The red pulsing light shifts to white—blazing and powerful, stronger than ever. It fills my head with radiance, and when I squeeze my eyes tight, it penetrates my lids and bursts in my head. I scream, pain and fear overwhelming everything else.

Then I see her.

Faraine.

Standing in the center of that light.

Her hands are outstretched as though to cup the face of . . . of what? What words are there to describe this being, this entity so vast and beautiful and horrible? It is too enormous to be contained within a single mind.

And yet, she holds it. Lightly, gently. Her forehead is pressed to its bone-plated brow. Their eyes are closed, their breaths synchronized.

I stare in wonder, dumbstruck and afraid. My numb lips move, trying to form her name: *Faraine, Faraine* . . .



Dust settles on my shoulders. Glinting motes, shining with inner life even in the midst of destruction. The Garden of Org still surrounds me, the mighty stones no longer glowing. The only light in this dark space emanates from the dust which coats my skin and covers the small figure I hold in my arms.

I gasp, my dazzled gaze sharpening. “Faraine?” Swiftly I wipe the glittering crystal dust from her face, revealing her still, pale features. Her expression is calm. Her brow is smooth, her lips gently parted. And I know suddenly what this dust is: *jor*-dust. The residue of that crystal shell which had coated her.

Oh gods, does she breathe? I press my ear to her chest. A heartbeat, strong and steady and unmistakable sings in my ear. Choking on a sob, I cradle her against me, stroke her hair, rock her back and forth. I find that I’m praying,

singing old troidish songs of praise I'd forgotten I knew. I don't know how long we remain thus. It might be forever. This might be the only heaven I will ever know. If so, I am grateful. And I will remain here, seeking no other existence. Just let me be with her. Let me hold her and know she is near.

Then she stirs.

A shock like fire bursts through my veins. I stare down into her face, watch her fair brows knit together. "Vor?" she murmurs, and my heart soars up through the caverns of this world and flies away across the sky.

"Faraine! Faraine, my love!" My mouth finds her brow, her cheek, her jaw, her lips. She tries to respond to my ardor, but she is weak. Her trembling fingers lightly touch my cheek. Perhaps she finds strength enough to instill some measure of calm, for I find that I can breathe again. I sit for a long while, simply holding her. Unable to speak or think. Simply being.

After a time, she draws back. Just enough to look up at me. Her eyes are the same eyes I have known from the beginning: one blue, one gold. Both shining with remnant traces of *urzul* light. "She sleeps," she says.

At first, I don't understand. Then slowly it occurs to me that the world is not quaking and even now bursting into a billion shards. "Arraog?" I breathe, half afraid of conjuring her with the sound of her name.

But Faraine smiles softly and rests her head on my shoulder once more. "She needed to feel it. The sorrow, the loss. She'd been holding it in for so long."

Though I don't pretend to know what she's talking about, a vision of my wife and the unfathomable being flashes through my mind. "The gods did indeed gift you," I whisper against her hair. But it wasn't her magic that was the gift, not in the end. It was her compassion. Her grace. Her ability to see others even as they could not see themselves. Her endurance honed over years of wracking pain. All of it. These were the gifts, the true gifts that made

my Faraine uniquely powerful. That made her the answer to all our prayers.

“The gods fashioned you in the image of mercy,” I say. “They sent you to save us.”

“Yes,” she replies simply. “And they sent you to save me.”

45

FARAINÉ

Maylin's corpse lies close to the cliff edge. Dried streams of blood from dozens of wounds stain the crystals all around her.

Vor's sorrow hits me like a knife, sharp enough to make me stagger. I rest a hand against an outcropping of rock and steady myself, pulling on the gentle resonance within. After all this time, it would seem I am learning balance. Pain will always be part of my life—the gods have ordained it thus. But pain is also what gives this existence shape and meaning. It may never be welcome. But I believe I may learn not to fear it at last.

When I am certain I am fortified against the worst of Vor's feelings, I kneel beside him and the body of his mother. Her face is gory with congealed blood, lined with the agony of her death. This was the death she'd always intended for herself. I realize it now. It was her plan from the moment we met.

"A life for a life," I whisper and reach for my pendant, the pendant Maylin had sent to me, a gift of both kindness and control. It's not there; Sul took it with him when he left me in that cell. Is its center now completely dark? Or is the light within restored now that the life-price is paid?

I feel strangely lost without it.

Vor is silent for some while, studying the face of the woman who abandoned him. I wonder how much of her story he knows. Flinching a little,

prepared for the hurt it will bring, I reach out and take his hand. Another stab of pain travels up my arm and bursts in the back of my head, but I interlace my fingers with his and hold on. If I can share a dragon's pain, surely I can share my husband's.

"I believe in the end, she meant to do right," Vor says at last, his voice thick with conflict.

"She did," I answer softly.

Vor nods, as though this is enough. Then he reaches out to close her eyes. When he touches her, however, her body disintegrates into a cloud of glittering dust. He gasps and draws back, and the two of us watch those last glinting remnants float away, out of the garden, spreading across Mythanar down below. It is a strange sight to behold—that proud city brought low but not fully destroyed. It might still be rebuilt were there any troldefolk left to attempt it. But its streets and crumbled buildings are populated only by statues now.

I wonder if Maylin watches us from that thin space of existence on the threshold of death. Did she hold on long enough to see if her plan came to fruition, to see if the dragon was slain? How desperately she needed to make Zur's sacrifice whole! I doubt she is pleased with the turn of events.

But I told her from the beginning: I am no killer.

I glance up at Vor. His face is stricken, all the joy of our reunion lost in the face of so much tragedy and destruction. In some ways it would have been easier for him if the world had ended. Then he would not be here now to pick up the pieces, to figure out how to be king of this decimated realm.

I tighten my grip on his hand. "She did not abandon you," I say softly. I don't know if it's the right thing, if it's what he needs just now. But Maylin deserves for truth to be acknowledged. "She devoted her life to devising a way to save you."

Vor listens quietly as I relate his mother's sorry tale. He knew little of it, though he perhaps suspected some. When I come to the end, I cannot meet the solemn gaze he turns upon me but drop my eyes to the blood-stained stones on the cliff's edge. "The truth is," I say, "Sul was not wrong. Maylin manipulated the feelings of your court to bring about the alliance. Even your feelings for me may not be real."

He is silent for a long moment. Then his great hand cups my cheek, turns me to face him. Love radiates from his soul, warming me, giving me just enough courage to look up into his eyes. "When she told me you were down there"—he nods to the cliff and the broken stairs we've just climbed—"I tried to rush to your side immediately. She held me back, using her powers. It was as though my feet had grown roots, so great was the dread in my heart."

I nod. I know what it feels like to have Maylin's resonance vibrating in my body and soul.

"But Faraine," he persists, "the moment she died, her hold over me broke. I came for you. Whatever control she had over my feelings, it is gone. Yet my love for you remains." Leaning forward, he presses his forehead to mine. "I will always come for you, Faraine. No matter how far you go, no matter what darkness you face. I will come. And I will stand beside you."

I draw a long breath, inhaling the scent of him into my lungs even as the warmth of his love glows in my chest. But there's still so much between us, things that must be faced, however desperately we might wish to avoid them.

"Your people," I whisper.

Vor tenses. "Maylin's doing," he growls.

"In part, yes. But not entirely." I draw back enough to meet his eyes again. "You cannot erase my guilt. Or undo the loss of all those lives."

Sorrow mingles once more with love, pulsing from his center. Not long ago it would have broken me to pieces. I can bear it now, though it hurts. And

still he does not let me go. “Were it not for you, the Under Realm would no longer exist,” he says. “The troldefolk as a people would have no chance to rebuild. Our very species would be extinct.”

I open my mouth, prepared to remind him that one good deed doesn’t outweigh so great a sin. But then his lips are on mine. My senses flood with everything he’s feeling, the love, the loss, all so tremendous and beautiful it could easily carry me away in its flow. But he holds me anchored firmly to him.

Maybe, just maybe, we can find a way to hold on to each other in the dark days ahead.

“Oh, I say, is that them?”

Vor and I pull apart, startled by the voice bursting from above. It’s followed by a resounding: “*Hallooooo!* Faraine! Vor! Gods’ teeth am I glad to see the two of you!” There, emerging from the whirling shadows is a deeper shadow still, flame-eyed and snorting sulfur. Hael rides upon its back, her arm wrapped tight around my brother, who sits before her in the saddle, his pretty face scored with worry lines. He waves an arm wildly, nearly smacking Hael in the face. She avoids his blow and guides her mount down to us.

The next thing I know, I’m caught in my brother’s arms and receiving the full brunt of his terror. Hastily, I pull a shield of *jor* up to protect myself but relent enough to embrace him back. “Gods and goddesses, Faraine, you would not *believe* the time I’ve had of it!” he declares, squeezing. “Did you know we got buried in the infirmary? Had to dig our way out, it was dreadful. And after all that, the floor opened up under us suddenly, and I very nearly plummeted to my doom, only Captain Hael swooped me up to safety, and, do you know, I think we shared something very much like a *moment*? Just a little one, but there was an undeniable sort of *tension* in the air, though that

might have been the earth quaking apart around us. Who can say?"

I manage to extricate myself and turn to Hael, relieved to see her upright and whole. Her skin is scarred with all the dreadful cuts of the sacrifice not yet healed. But she stands on her own two feet and salutes her king, as strong and steadfast as I've ever seen her. She looks my way only once, a gleam of understanding in her pale eyes. As though she knows what I found in the depths, down under rock and magma in the pit of the world.

"The city is not lost," she says, her voice hard. "Part of the east end broke off and fell into the chasm, and many buildings have toppled. But it did not all fall."

Vor receives this report without visible reaction, though I feel the anxiety simmering in his soul. "The threat is past," he says, his voice firm and confident. "Arraog sleeps once more. We are safe, and those of us who survive may rebuild."

He goes on to tell Hael that she must ride out in search of Sul and bring the people back to Mythanar. As they discuss which route to take, and Theodre gazes with fixed attention at his beautiful rescuer, no one notices when I put a little distance between myself and all their turbulent emotions. Even with the new balance of *jor* to help me, I will never be immune to the shocks of feelings which wrack my mind and body. And I'm still weak from my encounter with Arraog.

Prrrrrlt?

I startle and look down. A small, furry body twines around my ankles. "Cheep!" I exclaim, and crouch to let the little beast scamper up my arm to my shoulder. "Cheep, you survived! Oh, I'm glad." It may seem foolish in the face of so much loss. But as the *lusterling* lights bravely shine from the cavern ceiling, spreading a glow across the ruins below, I am thankful for even the smallest blessing.

The mothcat leaps from my shoulder to a clump of crystals protruding from the slope behind me. Sitting up on its haunches, it tips its eyeless head to one side, emanating expectation. “What do you want, little friend?” I ask and take a step after it.

The mothcat darts forward, winds around my ankles again, then bounds up the rise, tail flicking as though to beckon. I cast a glance back at Vor, still deep in conversation with his captain. I chew my lip, considering. Then turning, I follow little Cheep up the rise to where the last of the Urzulhar stands, defiant against destruction. The red light has gone out of it, and it pulses gently with a low, blue glow, illuminating the ruined pieces of its fallen brethren.

I step into the circle, pursuing the mothcat, who dances among the broken shards of stone. Is the danger to the Under Realm truly past? I cannot help but wonder. The dragon is asleep, yes. Unless I miss my guess, she will sleep another few millennia at least. A new age of trolde will come and go before she reawakens. But reawaken she will. Someday. And this world will break along its fault lines unless something is done to prevent it.

I clench my fists. Something will be done. We will find a way to pass down our story to future generations. Not in writing, no, for the fae folk do not read. But in carvings, in songs, in stories. We’ll find a way to make certain our children’s children and their children and beyond remember what took place here in the cradle of their birth.

And maybe the gods will provide them with a new means of escape.

Cheeeep!

The insistent cry draws my attention back to the mothcat. It sits atop a dark stone. Not a crystal, but a misshapen boulder. Something about it feels familiar, but it isn’t until I step closer that I recognize Queen Roh, trapped in *va-jor*, her thick stone hide chipped in places but still intact. By the light of

the Urzulhar, I can still discern the faint impression of her fear-twisted face.

Cheep dances atop her head, fluffy tail whisking. Something has excited it. But what? I remember vividly how this little beast curled up to my dead body following the *woggha* attack, sending out a powerful resonance which somehow kept my soul tethered to this realm. Mothcats are much more intelligent, more sensitive to living vibrations than most would guess.

Brow furrowed I draw nearer. My breath is tight in my chest. Cheep trills and dances encouragingly, however, so I stretch out one hand, place my palm against the rock. There is no heartbeat, of course; she is stone through and through. But there is *something*.

Closing my eyes, I draw on the vibrations of broken *urzul* all around me. Channeling that resonance, I plunge my awareness deeper, down into this lump of stone. And there! At its heart—Roh. Her fear. Her pain, her confusion. Her anger. It's all present, faint but recognizable. The distinct vibration that makes up her unique soul. She's in the stone. Alive.

Which means she might be drawn out once more.

I open my eyes, gazing up into that hard, nearly featureless face. This woman caused so much pain. Were it not for her, I could never have performed the ceremony. Hael nearly died by her orders. But what if the gods had other plans? What if Targ's obsession and Roh's zeal were part of a much greater whole than any one of us could see? What if . . . ?

I grip that stone face between my hands. Summoning the *urzul*, I send my gift deeper, down to that core of her being. *Roh*, I call. *Roh*, hear my voice. *Come to me*.

The stone peels away. A furnace of pain and confusion rushes up to meet me, but it's so small compared to what I experienced with Arraog, I don't flinch. Instead, I whisper: "*Calm*." My gift floods into her, a wave of cooling sweetness. The spell responds, flaking away from her heart, her spirit, her

mind, and her body.

The stone cracks. Breaks.

With a little squeak, the mothcat leaps away just as the *va-jor* crumbles, and Roh staggers forward, falling into my arms. She gasps for breath, clings to me, weeping like a babe. “*Morar tor Grakanak!*” she prays over and over, as though she’s forgotten all other words. “*Morar tor Grakanak! Morar tor Grakanak!*” Then in a low breath: “*Kurspari-glur.*”

“It’s all right, Roh,” I say, braced against the rush of her feeling. “It’s all right. You’re safe now. You’re home.”

Somewhere behind me Vor shouts my name, frantic. My heart lifts. A smile breaks across my face. In that moment, I savor the secret which only I, the mothcat, and this woman who was my enemy share.

“Soon they will all be safely home,” I whisper.

46

VOR

“Well, Vor, I hate to admit it—and if you tell anyone I said so, I will deny it with my last breath—but perhaps there was some grain of truth in Targ’s mad scheme after all.”

I stand with Sul in an alcove of the recently dug-out palace throne room. The dragon-wing throne was destroyed in the last stirring, along with most of the intricate floor tiling. But many of the great supporting pillars held strong, and much of the ceiling still arches overhead. *Lorst* lights suspended from broken stalactites illuminate the space where Faraine stands, clad in a black troidish gown.

The contrast of that gown with her pale hair is striking. I can scarcely take my eyes off her. She waits, hands folded, for yet another company of troldefolk to bring their burden before her. They approach down the center of the hall, four strong trolde men with a tall, misshapen stone supported on their shoulders. Setting it down in front of Faraine, they step back quickly, their heads inclined in reverence.

It is a trolde, of course. One of the enstoned, brought up from the city. Over the last weeks, every man, woman, and child who can be spared has been hard at work unearthing their loved ones from the rubble and sending them up to the palace in hopes that my wife will be able to perform the miracle I watch her perform even now.

She steps up to the stone-wrapped figure, placing her hands on his cheeks. Bowing her head and closing her eyes, she summons that incredible gift inside her. Sometimes I think I can feel the *urzul* responding, singing within the walls. Other times she looks very alone and very small, and the atmosphere is strangely still around her. Those times I hold my breath, tense and anxious that the magic will not answer her call.

But each time the outer coating of *va-jor* cracks then crumbles. The figure inside steps out from the shell, staggering, blinking, but very much alive. Every instance is a wonder, breathtaking and beautiful. A gift from the gods.

“Yes,” I say, grudgingly acknowledging my brother’s comment as we watch the stone fracture and the face of Lord Rath appear. “Were it not for the *va-jor* spell, many more would have died in the last stirring. Thanks to Targ’s madness, the people of Mythanar were spared.”

“So my mother takes pains to remind me. From *lusterling* to *dimness*.” Sul snorts and crosses his arms, leaning back against the wall. “I haven’t forgiven her for what she almost did to Hael. But seeing these people come back to life is softening me. Somewhat.”

I don’t answer. My attention is fixed on Faraine, who steps back while Rath’s family swarms in to claim him, weeping and talking over each other in gladness. She looks worn. This is her tenth reclamation of the day. Each one requires a significant burst of energy, more than she likes to let on. She tries to pretend it doesn’t affect her and would drive herself to exhaustion if given her way. But I remind her that the people won’t be saved any faster if she breaks herself into little pieces before the work is done.

She freed Madame Ar first, after Hael and I dug her up from the infirmary. I feared the old healer would be smashed to dust in the wreckage, but the *va-jor* has proven much stronger than any of us could have hoped. Ar stepped from her stone-coating, shook herself out, looked around the room, and

growled, “What have you done to my infirmary?” I folded her brick of a body into my arms, crushing her in an embrace that made her gasp and pound tiny fists against my shoulder. “What is this nonsense?” she demanded, pushing me away. She took my explanation of events well enough and has since managed to arrange a make-shift infirmary in the old dining hall where she tends the wounded with her habitual enthusiasm.

Ghat, my chief engineer, was one of the next freed from enstonement. He accepted the story we told with his usual placidity and immediately launched into organizing recovery work: clearing rubble, shoring up walls, rebuilding and restructuring. Mythanar will never be what it once was. But with Ghat at the helm, we will endure. And we will be strong again in time.

Lord Rath is lead away to be checked over by Madame Ar, and another stone-wrapped individual is brought to my wife. I should step in, should interfere and make certain she rests and eats. As though reading my mind, Faraine shoots me a swift look and shakes her head slightly. This newest lump of rock is child-sized, and I know better than to try to pull her away just yet. I set my jaw, hold my tongue, and observe.

“*Morar juk,*” Sul growls softly.

I glance at him, one eyebrow upraised. “And do you still disapprove of my wife and her witchcraft?”

“I’ll never trust humans or their magic.” My brother sighs, his eyes narrowing as he watches Faraine perform yet another miracle. “But I will acknowledge that where your bride is concerned I was . . . wrong. And I’m sorry.”

His words settle in my gut, burning there. I don’t know if I will ever be able to forgive him. Not completely. In the moment I say only, “You were not wholly wrong. No more than was Targ, Roh, Maylin, any of them. We all saw different parts of the puzzle. But only the gods could see how each piece

fit.”

We are silent for a little while, watching the *va-jor* melt under Faraine’s touch, watching the child step free and fall into her arms. Sobs resound from the walls as a young mother leaps forward with outstretched arms. That sight will never grow old.

“I am leaving Mythanar.”

I turn sharply, fixing my brother with a stare. “What?”

“I’ll be taking my mother to Lazgar—if it still exists. That’s where her people are from. She is not in a good way. The loss of Targ affected her deeply. And the loss of her dream.” Sul shakes his head sadly. “She truly believed she would find peace within the *va-jor* stone. Instead, she found only a suspended state of terror. She is bereft now without her faith to guide her.”

“Running away won’t help.”

“No. But a change of scenery is in order. Besides, I can send you reports from across the kingdom, let you know how the rest of the Under Realm has fared through recent events.”

“But you will come back.”

Sul drops his gaze. A lock of white hair falls across his forehead. “I don’t know.” He lets out a slow breath, and I wait with my heart in my throat for him to continue. “I too find my purpose somewhat rocked following recent events. I’ve dedicated everything to protecting Mythanar from a fate to which it ultimately succumbed. But here we all are. And there is your wife, fulfilling her gods-ordained role.” He looks up slowly, meeting my eye. “I’m not sure where I fit in this new world you’re building, Vor.”

He’s right. I don’t want him to be, but he is. After everything we’ve endured—betrayal and poison and banishment—how can we simply go back to being the brothers we once were? I will always love Sul. But I will never

trust him fully.

“What about Hael?” I ask instead.

A flush of color stains Sul’s cheek. He turns from me, his gaze seeking the silent figure of my captain, standing in Faraine’s shadow. She is recovered following her ordeal, though she will carry those scars to her grave. They lend her a solemn, terrible dignity, not unbeautiful. “She will not leave her queen. Her *kurspari-glur*,” Sul says.

“She would for you.”

“But she shouldn’t.” My brother grins, but there is pain in his eye. “Come, we both know the truth! I am not worthy of that woman.”

“Perhaps Hael should be the one to decide your worth in her eyes.”

Sul pushes away from the wall, shaking his head. “I don’t have the courage, Vor. To live up to what she deserves is a feat far greater than any I would dare.”

“You crossed worlds and realms. You sailed the Hinter Sea. You faced perils beyond imagining in your bid to return and save Mythanar.”

“Yes. And look how that turned out.”

“Your courage was not lacking.”

But Sul’s lips twist in self-mockery. “It wasn’t courage. It was moral certainty. A certainty which I now lack.” He lets his gaze drift back to Hael one last time, lingering. His expression is softer than I recall ever seeing on his face before. “Maybe someday. If she is still free.”

I grunt. Hael has waited this long for my brother to realize the truth in his heart. She will probably wait a little longer.

That is, of course, unless Prince Theodre has his way. My brow tightens as that fop of a young man emerges from the crowd, two goblets in his hands. He offers one to his sister, who accepts it with murmured thanks. The other he holds out to Hael. She eyes it as though he’s just offered her a cup of

woggha spit. He says something, smiles a brilliant smile, probably meant to be endearing. She relents enough to take the cup and down the contents in a single gulp. When she hands the goblet back to the prince, one would think by his expression she'd just given him the keys to the kingdom.

But surely Sul has nothing to worry about on that score. Gods above and below spare me, I hope not!

Faraine staggers. My heart stops.

I'm across the chamber in a few quick strides, all other concerns forgotten, my attention fixed upon my wife's slim form as she begins to fold up on herself. The cup drops from her numb fingers, clattering to the floor. Then I'm there. And she settles in my arms as though she expected to land there all along. Scooping her off her feet, I turn away from the watchful eyes of all those gathered. "That is enough!" I bark. "The queen will rest now. There will be more miracles later."

The crowd murmurs in mingled protest and concern. Ignoring them all, I carry her back to the alcove with me. Sul is gone. Whether for good or simply to begin preparations for his journey I do not know. For now, I will not think of it.

I peer down into Faraine's pale face resting against my shoulder. How small and delicate she is, so fragile. And yet so magnificent. "Are you all right, my love?" I ask, my voice a low growl in my throat.

She looks up at me. Though there's pain in her eyes, she smiles. One hand reaches up to caress my cheek, as though drawing strength from inside me. "Yes, Vor," she says softly. "I am with you. All shall be well."

I perch on the edge of a wide stone bed draped in pale furs. Soft white *hugagog* silk clothes my body, clinging and revealing in the low moonfire light. Little *lorst* crystals hang suspended from the ceiling, adding to the soft atmosphere, and though this chamber is nowhere near as fine as the one from my first wedding night, I find I like it better.

It's meant for me. And Vor.

My husband insisted that we perform the *yunkathu* wedding swim anew before the eyes of his court. I was reluctant. I feel I have been much on display these last few weeks as I've worked to undo the *va-jor* spell across the city. The intense gratitude and adulation of the troldefolk is a lot for my gods-gift to bear.

But Vor took my hand in his and begged me to reconsider. The *yunkathu* is sacred to his people. The last time he made it, he had believed Ilsevel swam beside him. This time it would be me. And the ceremony, the vows, everything would be done in truth with his court to bear witness.

I couldn't deny him.

Master Ghat and his workers performed miracles of their own, unearthing the sacred hall and restoring the Yun Falls to something close to its original glory. Their trolde craftsmanship is unparalleled throughout the worlds. I could scarcely discern where repairs had been necessary. Vor could and

pointed out several places where breaks had been patched and walls shored up. But he declared those scars are now an important part of Mythanar's history.

So, he led me into the pool, and we swam through the falls. Or rather Vor swam while I kicked and otherwise tried not to be a dead weight as he pulled me after him to the other side. There we climbed out together, dripping wet as we stood before Umog Zu, and she delivered her final blessing: "*Uvulg tor ugdth. Hirark! Yuntog lorst.*"

"*Now have the Two died.*" Vor whispered the interpretation in my ear. "*Look! The One rises.*"

How true those words have become! Vor and I have lived and died many times over since the last time those words were spoken over us. We are truly One now. Inseparable from here to eternity, whatever trials may befall.

I draw a shivering breath, a nervous flutter stirring in my belly. I'm eager for my groom to come to me, eager for the closeness we will share. Since we climbed up from that pit in the world, we've scarcely had a moment to ourselves. What precious time we've had, I've spent in exhausted sleep, cradled in his arms. The work of undoing *va-jor* is constant and takes all my strength. It is a work that will continue for many weeks, many months. Possibly years as more people are discovered in the rubble and ruins. But I will do it. I will set every last one of them free.

Tonight is for us, however. For Vor and me. And I fully intend to enjoy my husband.

I touch the pendant at my throat. Sul returned it personally into my keeping. To my surprise, the stone was clear and bright once more, humming with the gentle vibrations of life. Though I no longer need it, I like to wear it as a reminder of my former life. Of my beloved sisters, so far from me.

I close my eyes now, sending up a prayer for both Ilsevel and Auraa.

When Vor told me that he found Ilsevel alive, I could scarcely believe it. Were it not for Mythanar's desperate need of my gift, I would have begged to set off at once and see for myself if she's recovered from her wound. As it is, Vor has sent messengers, and we anxiously await news. But she's alive. I'm sure of it. Aurae too—after all, if Ilsevel survived the attack on Nornala's shrine, surely there's reason to hope my youngest sister did as well. Ilsevel may even know what became of her.

I smile and wipe a stray tear from my face. One day soon, I will know their tales. Tales which could hardly be any stranger than the one I have lived! But I hope they too will come at last to their happy endings.

The chamber door opens.

Vor appears, standing in the opening, illuminated in moonfire light. His torso is bare, each muscle cut and defined to such perfection, it makes my stomach knot and my center flood with heat. He gazes at me where I sit on the edge of the bed, clad in this clinging gown. His eyes shine with pure hunger.

Slowly, I rise. Holding his gaze, I lift my hands to the delicate straps of my gown, slip them down my shoulders, baring myself before him.

“*Morar juk!*” he exclaims, his eyes taking me in, lingering and dangerous. With an effort, he brings his gaze back to mine. A smile pulls at the corner of his mouth. “My queen,” he says, his voice husky and low. “You and you alone shall dictate your desires to me this *lusterling*. It will be my honor to act accordingly.”

I approach him, one foot planted deliberately before the other until I stand so close, I can feel the warmth of his breath on my forehead. I tilt my face up to him.

“I want you to kiss me, Vor. I want you to kiss me until I beg for mercy, then kiss me again for good measure. And then I want you to ravish every

inch of me.”

He crushes me in his arms. His lips find mine in a kiss so bruising it almost hurts. I wrap my arms around his neck, pull him closer, answering his kiss with equal intensity even as the fullness of his feeling floods my senses. He does just as I ask, his mouth molding and shaping mine, until I am gasping and breathless. Then he wrenches my arms free, tears the gown from my body, and lifts me off my feet. I wrap my legs around his waist as he carries me to the bed, and we fall together in a tangle of laughter and limbs and delight. His lips, his teeth, his tongue find each and every one of my sensitive places, delighting in the gasps and cries he draws bursting from my lips. He pleasures me again and again, until I fear my soul will leave my body and float away on a cloud of sheer ecstasy.

“I want you inside me,” I plead after the third soaring rush begins to fade. “Please, Vor.”

“Ah, but if we do that, our marriage will be officially consummated,” he says, nuzzling my breasts and kissing my throat. “Then the law dictates I must escort you from this room and present you officially to my court.”

“They are waiting.” I turn to my side and prop up on one elbow. “They’re probably getting hungry as well, and all that great wedding feast will spoil.”

“Let it spoil,” he replies, greedily claiming my lips once more. “They’re none of them so hungry as I.”

Eventually, however, he allows himself to be convinced. As neither of us cares to have our time together cut short, I make certain the consummation is well worth the sacrifice. After he cries out in release and falls across me, his heavy torso pressed into mine, I hold him close and whisper in his ear: “Now I am truly Queen of Mythanar.”

“Yes.” He pushes up slightly, gazing down into my face. One finger gently caresses the line of my cheek and jaw. “I suppose we ought to see you

crowned.”

He sounds so resentful, I laugh outright. “We can come back here when the ceremony is finished.”

“Yes, but I may starve for the taste of you in the meanwhile.”

It isn’t difficult for him to make his case. I surrender once more to the pleasure he gives, gripping the blankets and staring up at the gently wafting *lorst* stones until the rush floods my body, and I cry out his name. Then he spreads himself alongside me, his hand resting on my stomach, gazing at me, his eyes drinking in my body. My chest rises and falls swiftly as I struggle to reclaim my breath, lost in a happy daze.

Finally, I turn to him. “Satisfied now, husband?”

“Hardly,” he responds. His teeth flash in a devastating smile, one I know I shall crave to the end of my days. “But I suppose I shall have to be for a little while.” With that, he rises from our marriage bed, sweeps hair back from his face, and holds out one hand to me.

“Come, wife. Let us go and present you. It is high time my people properly honored their Queen.”

EPILOGUE

The coronation of Queen Faraine of Mythanar, Lady Protector of the Under Realm, was much talked of for generations to come.

For one thing, she did not wear the traditional crown of red rubies all queen consorts had worn before her. Instead, her husband set a circlet of shining *urzul* stones on her head. This was considered very strange. King Vor was known to be devoted to his human bride; why would he give her a crown of such common stones? Perhaps it was in honor of the sacred Urzulhar Circle, which was destroyed in the Last Stirring. A lovely thought if so, though many still disapproved.

No one could deny how beautiful she looked, however. Small, yes, as humans are. But upright and confident with her long waves of golden hair falling down her back. She wore ceremonial white, as befit both a bride and a new queen.

“*Kurspari-glur.*” The name rippled throughout the court, whispered here, murmured there. Everyone knew it was she who had drawn them all back up from the stone in which they were trapped, using her gods-gift to save them from the spell. There were other rumors as well: that she had fought Arraog and killed her. Or possibly tamed her? No one was entirely certain of the details, and different accounts flooded the kingdom.

But everyone agreed that she was Mythanar’s savior. And it was right and

good that she should be crowned their queen.

A hush went through the hall when she knelt before her king. He lifted the *urzul* crown high and spoke the sacred words in a voice which seemed to roll out from the room and across the whole of Mythanar, traveling to the farthest corners of the Under Realm. “*Kurspari-glur,*” he declared. “*Aruka tor Mythanar bi sor Grak Harred!*”

“Here, now, what was that he said?” Prince Theodore plucked at the captain of the guard’s sleeve. “It sounded important.”

Hael turned her head just enough to cast him a long-suffering look. “He called her the Woman of Crystals, Queen of Mythanar and the Under Realm.”

Theodore whistled softly through his teeth. “Well! I suppose that makes it official then, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” Hael replied in a low rumble, crossing her arms and blinking back the tears that shimmered in her eyes. “I suppose it does.”

The king lowered the crown to his wife’s brow, speaking the final solemn words of blessing. They rolled from his tongue, filling the chamber. The walls themselves seemed to pulse with an energy of life and love which no one observing could either wholly explain or deny. But none could miss the way the king and his bride held each other’s gazes, their two souls inextricably bound. And if one listened closely, one could almost hear the strains of a great, celestial dance singing up from the deeps of the world and rippling out among the stars.

“Gods,” Theodore whispered, shaking his head in wonder. Then he leaned in close and whispered in the captain’s ear, “You know, I never thought I’d say this, but I’m really going to miss this place. I mean, the food is a bit odd, and the people always sound like they’re growling at each other. But it’s a nice enough sort of world. And who knows what greeting I’ll have from dear

old father back home? He would have been just as happy if I was crushed under rubble.” He sighed, his brow puckering. “Part of me wishes I could stay.”

Hael cast him a sidelong look. “So, stay,” she said.

The prince’s eyes bulged. His mouth dropped open, and he turned to the captain, the light of hope dawning in his face. “My dear Hael!” he gasped. “Did my ears deceive me? Did you just say what I think you—”

Perhaps to the relief of everyone concerned, his voice was drowned out the next moment. For King Vor helped his bride to her feet and turned her to face the assembly. And all the people of his court raised their fists above their heads and sent up a great cry. “*Kharsug-mor Aruk!*” they sang. “*Kharsug-mor Aruka!*”

*“Long live the King!
Long live the Queen!”*



THE END



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sylvia Mercedes makes her home in the idyllic North Carolina countryside with her handsome husband, numerous small children, and the feline duo affectionately known as the Fluffy Brothers. When she's not writing she's . . . okay, let's be honest. When she's not writing, she's running around after her kids, cleaning up glitter, trying to plan healthy-ish meals, and wondering where she left her phone. In between, she reads a steady diet of fantasy novels.

But mostly she's writing.

After a short career in Traditional Publishing (under a different name), Sylvia decided to take the plunge into the Indie Publishing World and is enjoying every minute of it. She's the author of the acclaimed Venatrix Chronicles, as well as The Scarred Mage of Roseward trilogy, and the romantic fantasy duology, Of Candlelight and Shadows.

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