

# DRAGON CLAN

BY HEATHEN57

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## Preface:

From time before written word or song Men, Elves and other races that coexisted peacefully had inhabited the land of Morgorne. The race of man had drawn their boundaries and struggled amongst themselves, but were governed by the laws of the Guardians, an ancient race from which man came. Eventually the great warrior and eventual king Halbren brought most of the Southern lands under a peaceful rule. The king, being a halfelven, ruled for almost 200 years before succumbing to age and treachery from his court. His son, Ginsbard, was installed as a puppet king manipulated by the counselors.

Around this time there came a new sect of priests who worshiped a different set of Gods. Gods that called for the destruction of any magics other than theirs. The elves, from time forgotten had known the magic of the dragons. Though not practiced for centuries as being too powerful, the priests, through the King, called for the elves to be destroyed. The bond between the Elves and Man was being severed. The forces of the dark were gaining a foothold and if they became victorious, the land would be plunged into such chaos that none would survive.

# Chapter 1

Posted: November 19, 2003 - 03:54:18 pm

"How did I get into this mess?" Aldren kept grumbling to himself. "Your temper and your sense of fair play" he answered. Aldren had a habit of arguing with himself. It came with traveling alone so much. A warrior by necessity, he did small jobs for the local rulers, Fighting off bands of rogues, and an occasional beast or two. He had once been a man of arms for the King of this land, but had to flee for his life when the zealots had convinced the king that all who believed in the old ways should be put to death, usually in the most gruesome and painful ways the priests could think of.

That had been ages ago it seemed. He had taken flight with his best mount, carrying his arms and what other possessions he could gather. Thrown from respected man of the king's guard to outlaw, he found that instead of missing the life he had had, the freedom of being a man for hire more to his spirit.

That was not what he was thinking about now though. He had been sitting in the only inn within the town of Cedric's Hollow, enjoying a meal that he was not forced to catch and cook himself. A nice change from dried meat and an occasional hare. He was finishing up, enjoying the last of his ale, when a group of locals came crashing in through the crude door yelling and boasting of the raid they had made on an elvish village. Elves had been in the kingdom since before men could remember, but had recently had been declared enemies by the High Priests. Most had moved into hiding among the forests of the mountains, practicing their magic and avoiding the settlements. This ragged group of fat sedentary fools had somehow stumbled across one of their few remaining villages left within a day's ride of humans.

The tales of murder and pillage kept growing, each man trying to out do his predecessor in tales of carnage. And this set Aldren on edge. His mother had been an elf. Aldren's features did not betray him as one of the bloodline, unless you looked closely at his eyes. They contained the depth of time. His long hair covered his elongated and slightly pointed ears. He was tiring of the talk and becoming irritated at the boastings. He stood and headed out to his horse to retrieve his belongings.

One of the revelers, a large man but soft, eyed his departure. "Now why aren't you staying to enjoy the celebration stranger?" The words were accompanied by bits of food and ale.

"I believe I prefer my own company" was Aldren's reply. He did not wish trouble, but these town folk were getting to him. A soft bed was only worth so much.

"We had a great victory today. We cleared the area of a great evil. The priest says we will be blessed" There were calls of general agreement from the fellows behind him.

That is when Aldren's temper took over. Still with his back to the man he growled, "All you have done is sneak into a peaceful village, slaughter a bunch of women and children." Aldren then turned to stare at the man. His eyes were flashing with anger and contempt. "If the male elves had been there a lot fewer of you would be here boasting. I am surprised that as many of you made it back even with just the women." Aldren let the sarcasm drip from his words. "Big men sneaking into huts while everyone slept and murdered babies. About the only kind of victory you would ever be able to proclaim"

The leader sputtered a couple of minutes, then tried to pull his knife. Aldren's sword appeared in his hand from the scabbard on his back. The leader hesitated. Aldren's words had stung because they were true. Attacking a small village of elves that contained just women and children was easy. A man with a sword and look like he could use it was a different matter. Still, he could not allow this man to insult him in front of his comrades. In his drunken state, anger overcame his normal cowardliness. He lunged at Aldren who easily parried the move and brought the tip of his sword under one of his opponent's chins. Eyes bulging in fear the man leaned slowly back and away. The rest of the cowards had been frozen in fear. Scaring locals was different from confronting three feet of deadly steel wielded by a man knew how to use it.

Aldren backed out the door, and then hurried to the stable where his horses were. He threw the blanket and saddle on the stallion, the packs on the mare. He led them out the door and mounted. The local bullies probably would not come after him unless they were drunk enough. However it was better not to take a chance. He moved out onto the road

and past the inn. The other patrons had not come out. He moved along the road until he was swallowed in the darkness of the night. At least he had eaten a meal.

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Yes, his temper did cost him a night's sleep in a bed that wasn't on the ground. Aldren grumbled to his mount about the loss of the good coin that he had prepaid the Innkeeper for the bed of straw in one of the Inn's upper rooms.

As he traveled on, the darkness of the night was broken by the appearance of the moon. Its silvery light pierced the canopy of trees that overhung the road. To his sensitive eyes it was more than enough light to pick out the details of the forest. Finding a break in the trees, he turned off the road looking for a campsite. Crossing a small stream, he came upon a clearing of dying grasses. There was enough room that he could camp away from the forest and have some warning if any of the creatures that hunted in the night happened to be around.

He finished unloading the horses, then set about preparing to sleep. He had found a ring of rocks that indicated others had stopped here, but the damp ground indicated that it had been some time. He decided that it would be in his best interest to take a final look around the border of the clearing. He was near the far edge when he thought he heard something. Turning toward the forest, he listened intently. His sensitive ears picked up the sound of a low moan. He had ridden far enough that the stupid town's people would not come out, but the forests contained dangers nonetheless. He cocked the crossbow and loosened his sword in its scabbard then moved quietly toward where he thought the sound came from.

Moving cautiously toward the source of the sound, he saw a figure lashed against a tree. Its arms suspended from above and its body bound to the trunk with rope. Coming closer, Aldren could make out that it was a female. Her lithe figure and the clothing indicated that she was elvish. Her tunic was sliced in places and her limbs showed cuts that proved she had been in battle. The wound on her side looked the most serious. She was still alive, but not for long. He could hear the sounds of the night creatures coming closer.

He stepped into the elf's line of sight, but she did not look up immediately. When she did look up she started cursing him in her native tongue.

*"Do not fear. I am not of those who did this. I will help you if you let me."* he answered in the same tongue.

*"You do not look of the kindred"* she whispered, her throat dry.

*"My mother was of the kindred. She taught me much."* Aldren replied as he cut her arms free from the overhanging branch. He caught her as she fell, her muscles refusing to respond from their lack of blood.

Slinging his crossbow across his back he stooped and lifted her to his chest. She was light, her lithe frame limp in his arms. The wound in her side saw not deep, but had bled freely. He started toward his campsite, anger building within him. Anger for the priests that had brought on this carnage. More them than even the actual perpetrators of the carnage that had delivered this beautiful woman to him.

He made it to the campsite and laid the elf on his blankets. She had lost consciousness on the way back to the campsite. Probably just as well for the pain of the wounds and her captivity against the tree would be considerable. Gathering up dried grass and twigs, he soon had the beginnings of a fire. He only had to go a short distance to gather enough fuel to keep a fire going big enough to scare off the nasties that roamed in the darkness. He struck the flint to steel, but the tinder was damp enough that the sparks would not catch.

Grumbling, he bent close to the small pyre and spoke in a quiet voice. In the center, a white-hot orb appeared first scorching then catching. In seconds, the flames consumed the tinder and lapped hungrily at the sticks and limbs he fed it.

He pulled a small pot from his pack and half filled it with water. He dug to the bottom of his pack, pulling out a pouch of medicinal herbs. He selected the ones that would bring strength to the elf. He hated using the 'gifts' that he had inherited from his mother. The instilled need for hiding them was hard to break, but there were times that they were useful.

When the brew was steeped, he drew off a small cupful and took it to the blankets. He lifted the elf's head just enough to pour a little of the mixture

on her lips. She roused herself enough to sip what he had brought. He bound her wounds being careful not to cause any more bleeding. Since he had to lower the top of her shirt, he could not help but notice the soft roundness of her breasts. The gash had missed her right one by fractions of an inch. He bound her torso, packing *horshun* leaves on top of the wound. That would quicken the healing and prevent infection.

Having done all he could, he settled down with his head on his saddle. He lay long in thought. He could not leave the elf here alone. To his thinking, once he had rescued her, he was bound to protect her until she was well enough to fend for herself. There was something else that he needed to do, a futile gesture, but in his mind he was honor bound to do. He rolled to his side and drifted off into a fitful sleep.

This meant that he could not continue toward the north and the Tower of the Guard. If the tales were true, the Tower was one place where the old ways were still practiced. It was on the furthest borders of the kingdom, a place that once separated the civilized part of the world from the wasteland. Once a huge garrison of loyal men was stationed there, but they had been called south and the place was now home to those who rebelled against the corruption of the old Kingdom and the priests of the new Gods. If he could get there, he would be safe and content.

He had awakened twice during the night, hearing the elf move. Those times, he got more of the brew down her and would see her pained face soften, as the brew would take effect. In the firelight her feature took on a beautiful glow. Typically elven, her face was elongated with delicate features. Flawless skin and soft full lips. She was the model of perfection to his thinking. And he could not afford to do anything about it.

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When Ameni woke, she tried to take stock what had happened to her. She remembered the attack on the village. Her father and the rest of the men had left to travel east, looking for a safe haven for their people. The rumors of the trouble South had reached their notice and it was decided that a move would be best. They tried to live a peaceful life, practicing the lesser forms of magic. The use of the Dragon Magic had been outlawed for many generations, and the ones who had remembered it had passed on. But the men in her village had been gone for almost 2 seasons.



The young and the women of the village had gone on with the duties that were needed for survival. Ameni and her brother, who was barely out of childhood, did what they could to protect the members of her clan. She had taken over the leadership of all the younger members, did what hunting had to be done, and tried to provide whatever was needed.

The attack had occurred just before dawn. She and her younger brother had both tried to repel the attackers, but there were too many. They had shot her brother as he yelled for the rest of the village to awaken and run. She had grabbed her Grandsire's sword from its place by the hearth and ran out to see her brother fall, a feathered shaft lodged in his chest. She wounded three of the men before they overpowered her and held her down. She saw her kin raped and murdered as she struggled to free herself. Since it took four to hold her, she decided to drag her out to a tree and tie her there until they were done. They must have forgotten she was there for they never did come back to kill her.

She had spent the day trying to escape the bonds and then passing out from the effort. She did vaguely remember a large man coming toward her and speaking Elvish. He had cut her bonds and she had passed out again.

She forced her eyes open and looked about. She was lying on some rough blankets. To her right was a small fire that was burned to just embers. Also next to her right side was a cup of some kind of tea and a plate of bread and dried fruits. Staked a little ways away, was a roan mare quietly munching on the remains of the grass in the clearing. She took a sip of the tea and ate a little of the bread. Then she lay back to rest.

She awoke to the sound of a horse coming close. She tried to sit up but only managed to move onto her side. The pain was severe, but it did remind her that she was still alive.

A tall man came riding up on a gray stallion. His powerfully built body was stooped and he dismounted as if he were exhausted. Seeing she was awake, he moved in slowly, speaking in the language of the Kindred.

*"I am glad to see you are awake. How bad is the pain?"*

"I am grateful for your care. The pain lets me know that I am still alive." Ameni answered in common speech.

Aldren moved toward the fire, stirring the coals and adding fuel to bring the blaze back to life. He then pulled some cured meat from the saddlebags lying on the ground. He threw some slices into a pan along with some wild berries and tubers that he must have found close by. It was only then that he approached Ameni.

" I am sorry to have to do this, but I really need to check your wounds. I don't want you to catch a fever from them." He hesitated then asked, "Can you lower your shirt or would it be easier if I did it for you?"

Ameni blushed as she realized that he had already seen her bare on the top. How else would the bandage have gotten around her torso? She reached for the clasps, but found the movement made it a very painful if not impossible task. She sank back down.

Aldren gave her some of the brew from last night. Being warmed by the fire made it more palatable. The liquid drove the pain level down to where she could sit upright. He carefully worked the clasps and opened her top to her waist. He was trying very hard not to look at her breasts and succeeded for the most part. He did brush up against them as he gently removed the dressing. The feel of the side of her breast was like touching warm silk. He adjusted his posture so she would not see the affect she had on him. He had to concentrate on the gash on her side. He peeled the wrapping off, careful to not pull on the edges of the wound. It looked much better than it had last night the edges were starting to close. He heated some water and bathed the area, then replaced the Horshun leaves with fresh ones. He then rebound her with the bandage. He then gently replaced her top and reset the clasps.

Ameni was in a quandary. Even through the pain, she had felt his touch on her breast and it had given her a warm feeling. The back of his hand as it brushed against her nipple had been exciting. If the pain would go away she felt as though she could rather enjoy even more contact to her bosom. She studied her rescuer closer as he worked around the campsite. Tall for a human he was not bulky as some she had seen. Compact was the word she was looking for. His broad shoulders and chest revealed well developed muscle and he moved with a grace and power that she was certain would be devastating.

He wore his dark brown hair to his shoulders and his face was covered with a beard of a few days growth. His features were not chiseled but softer and more elven. He told her that while the stew was cooking, he needed to wash in the creek at the edge of the clearing.

Aldren, for his part was just as flustered. He wanted to touch her even more, but was still bound by the old code that said not to force a woman. Anyway this was not the time. Since the swelling in his leggings was still evident, he decided to wash the death smell off of his body and left for the creek.

Aldren finished the meal and served them both. He was running low on supplies. But the next village where he could get the things he needed was a 4 day trip and he could not leave the elf here for that long. At least until she was stronger. And that time was several days away, even with the healing power of the herbs.

She finally broke the silence. "I have yet to thank you for saving my life."

"Thanks are not required. I am glad that I heard you when I did. It was luck that I had decided to stop in this glen." He smiled at her, happy that she was able to remain awake and that she was not in too much pain.

He then remembered the items he had brought back from the village. He walked over to the pile he had removed from the stallion and sorted through it all. He came back to the fire with a large bundle.

"While you were asleep, I went to your village. I hope that some of this will fit you and that the blankets will make you a little more comfortable."

She looked at the pile of clothes and a look of sadness crossed her face. She recognized many of the items as belonging to friends that had once been living and productive. All her friends and her family now gone. And her brother was dead! He was barely into his approach to adulthood. She bowed her head as the tears trickled down her cheeks.

Aldren moved over and put his hand on her arm. She looked up at him and asked, "Was anyone left?"

He sighed. "I found none alive. I did the proper burial of the dead. The reavers and the wargbears will not feed there."

They sat in silence again each lost in their own thoughts. She was mourning her friends and kin, he reliving the carnage that he had seen. Again she broke the silence.

"For all you have done for me and I do not even know your name."

He grinned at her. "You have not been in any condition to observe any formalities. I am Aldren, late of the king's muster. Now a traveler." He placed his right hand across his chest in the formal greeting of the kindred.

She repeated the gesture. "I am Ameni of the North Wood clan."

*"Ameni, it is indeed fortunate that our paths crossed. I am honored to have the presence of your person."* He stated in elvish.

Ameni looked at him closer. "I thought I heard you speak in the tongue of the kindred when you first approached me. Then I had decided it was due to my impending passing. How is it you know the language?"

Aldren slowly pulled the long hair away and back revealing that his ears were slightly pointed on the tips and little longer than a full blooded human. He let the hair fall back into place. "My mother was a Sky clan elf. My father found her after she had been banished from her village by the elders for delving into the Dragon Magic. The marriage of elves and men was not frowned upon at that time and my father was a captain in the old king's guard. I was the result of their coupling."

"That does explain how you knew of the herbs. Did your mother teach you much of the ways of her kindred?"

"All that she felt I could understand. And I still carry her personal books. I refrain from using what she taught me, especially since the priests have gained control."

"This I understand. One must be careful in these times."

Aldren then moved toward the fire. "When you are more healed, I will take you to wherever you wish to go."

He handed her some more of the brew then checked the area for any danger. Finding no sign of any, he came back and stretched out on the

ground. They both were asleep within a few moments. But Aldren's sleep was light and fitful.

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Aldren awakened just before first light. He stirred the fire into life again. Then he moved toward the woods to drain the pressure in his groin. He found one of his snares had captured a small hare. He cleaned the carcass there so the scent would not attract any predator close to the camp. Roasted meat would be a welcome respite.

It had been almost 3 sevendays since he had found Ameni tied to that tree to die. She was making rapid progress and would soon be fit to travel. He feared that day. They had talked often during the evening hours. She telling of her family and clan and their life. He spoke of life among the court and then of his adventures abroad. He enjoyed her company and that she was his ideal of a woman to his eyes made it that much better. But soon he would lose her. She would probably wish to find members of her own kind to live with.

He walked back into camp to find Ameni up and moving about. He greeted her and then got the hare over the fire to roast. It would be ready before the sun reached its zenith.

"You look well today." He told her.

"I want to go back to my village, or what is left of it."

"I would spare you that pain, but if you wish we will go after we eat."

They spent the morning doing small things around the camp, each lost in their own thought. She was thinking of those she lost in the village and he about losing her. His mind was at war with his heart. His mind was telling him to get her where she wished to go and then get back to his journey. His heart was trying to find a way to stay close to her or keep her close to him.

After a meal of roasted hare, he saddled his stallion and placed a blanket on the back of the roan mare. As an elf he knew Ameni would not need a saddle or bridle. With just a word or motion any horse would obey. They moved slowly since Ameni's side was not completely free from pain even

though the dressings had closed the wound. The sun was peeking in through the trees breaking the gloom with shafts of light. The somber mood seemed to be reflected in the silence of the woods as the two figures moved forward silently.

The village appeared suddenly at the edge of the clearing. It looked to Ameni that everyone vanished, and with the exception of the dried blood, it was the same as it had always been. She slid off the back of the mare, wincing in pain as her feet touched the ground. Aldren stayed in the saddle watching as Ameni wandered between the cottages wrestling with the memories of those who were gone. He watched as her lithe frame moved into a building. He scanned the area, looking around for any sign of danger. All was clear and he settled back to wait. He knew that as much as he wanted to help her, Ameni must work through this alone.

As she entered the door of what had been her home since she was born, Ameni felt like she had gone back to when she had been a child. She could almost hear the sounds of her elders moving around the hearth, talking of days of old and what the future would bring. The scuffle of children playing. She turned back toward the doorway expecting to see the figure of her father come striding in the night's meat, his bow in his hand. He would put the carcass down, stand his bow in the corner next to the sword that had belonged to his father, then bend down and speak to her. She would then get to tell him of the things she had done, bits of knowledge she had picked up. Minor to most, he would listen to her intently like everything she said was of major importance.

Tears streaming from her gray eyes, she moved on in to the quarters. There was nothing left of her old life. Everyone was gone. The realization that she was now alone in the world hit her. But even alone she would survive and cheat the ones who did this. "They would not win as long as even one of the kindred was alive. She had cried herself out and mourned, as she should. The memories will be part of her for the remainder of her life, but she had to now go forward into the present.

Aldren had dismounted and was moving toward the building he had seen her go into. He had wanted to give her all the time she needed to grieve but it was getting late in the afternoon. As he approached the building, he was struck immobile by the vision in front of him. In the doorway, Ameni stood, no longer in the flowing garments she had been wearing, but in the

garb of an Elven warrior. The leather breastplates molded to her breasts, coming down to cover the rest of her torso. The pants were of soft leather and her boots came up to mid-calf. There were braces on her forearms. In her belt were a couple of short swords of the type that the Elves favored. They were curved with ivory handles, the blades were elegant but incredibly strong. Across her back was an Elven bow and quiver. He envisioned her as one of the warrior Goddesses that had come from old. She carried a sword that looked to be ancient. Its hilt was carved with runes in elvish.

"Are you alright?" He asked.

"I have come to the decision that I cannot sit and mourn forever. I intend to be able stay alive and fight and have my revenge against the ones that caused the destruction of my family and friends."

He wondered if she knew how to use the weapons that she carried, but thought it best to wait and see. He nodded to the horses, but she shook her head in the negative. "We should take with us all that would be useful. Weapons and coinage would be good for trade. I do not intend to return here."

They then went through the homes, asking the forgiveness of the former occupants, then taking what could be bartered and what would be useful. Ameni found one book amongst her mother's belongings that she tucked into her shirt. With both horses loaded down, they had to walk back to the camp. It was well past dusk when they made it in. Ameni was now insisting on helping run the camp, so she started fixing a meal from the dried supplies they had brought back. Aldren sorted the things that they brought back with them.

Ameni asked him to bring some water from the creek, so he grabbed the four water skins he had and walked toward the creek. He filled the skins at the small brook that wound its way through the forest. He turned back to the clearing when he heard voices. There were 3 male and one female. The female was by now familiar to him. He dropped the skins and drew his sword. Running up the small rise, he pulled up short. There were three men who the voices belonged to standing in a semicircle. In front of them was a very defiant Ameni. Before he could take two steps, the center man reached for his sword. Nearly faster than the human eye could see, both

swords were out of her belt and the thug's head was falling toward the ground. The one on the right now bore a slice that ran from his sternum to his shoulder. The third had stepped back and drew his sword, but before it was clear of the scabbard, Ameni's left sword was imbedded in his heart.

Aldren walked toward Ameni sheathing his own weapon and a smile on his face. "You were taught well."

She spun around braced for another attacker until she realized who it was. The fire in her gray eyes slowly dissipated. She slowly relaxed from her defensive posture. "My sire had foreseen the trouble that was approaching. Though the elders protested his teaching a female, he did so. Seems to have paid off."

"I must admit that the speed and grace that you showed was very impressive. I am considered an excellent swordsman, but after seeing you, I feel as clumsy and stiff as a new recruit"

"If you had been raised by the kindred, you would have been taught such as I. It is called *Hanbra*. If you wish, I could teach you as we travel together."

"Are we going to travel together? I figured we would be on the road together only until we found another village that are your clan."

"Most of the North Woods clan is gone. Father had left on his journey to try and locate some of them reported to be East of our village. The other clans would take me in, but I do not think I would be comfortable there." She bowed her head and in a hushed tone said, "I would rather ride with you."

Aldren put his hands on her shoulders. "I am somewhat an outlaw. I fled the King's court. I am considered an outlaw by most. I live mostly in the wilderness taking on tasks that will pay some coin. It is a rough life and not much to look forward to."

She looked up into his eyes. "Then you do not wish to have me along?" He could see the moisture pooling up in her eyes.

"Gods, it is not that. I just wanted you to know whom you were throwing your lot in with. I would be honored to have you as a partner." He then



put his fist over his heart and bowed his head and gave the formal elvish greeting between two warriors. "*Hail fellow warrior and friend!*"

Ameni repeated the gesture then grinned up at him. She then pointed to the bodies. "What do we do about them?"

"We will strip them of weapons and coinage. If we can find their mounts, we will take them as well. If you feel up to it, we should move camp before the dead of night. No telling what will be attracted to the smell of their blood."

Aldren found their mounts at the far edge of the woods. Leading them back in, he found that Ameni had the camp packed up. Ameni decided that she preferred Aldren's mare to any of the animals the robbers had. They packed the rest of their possessions on a couple of the horses and moved out. After a few miles they found an area that would do for the night. They set up a cold camp and took turns at watch.

The settlement of Archers Point was about 30 miles away and they decided to make for it to unload what they did not need and to trade for what they did.

## Chapter 2

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They approached the settlement from the Southwest along a ridge above the town. From this vantage point they could survey the area for miles around. The terrain was rocky where they were, but lower down there were tended fields that lay fallow after giving their bounty earlier in the year. The main road continued away from the village and toward the forest. A smaller path that led to the gates of the settlement. Small huts dotted the landscape, the homes of the farmers that tended the fields. With no sign of troops and no movement other than a few carts, they started down the ridge.

Archer's Point was the largest settlement in the area. It grew up around an ancient outpost. The crumbling towers and the ancient wall were the only sign of a time when it was a wilderness outpost of the kingdom. Long ago abandoned by the troops that built it, now it housed the only village within 3 days ride. Built up inside the walls were shops and an inn. Aldren was hoping to be relieved of some of the burden they carried in exchange for much needed supplies and perhaps some coin.

They picked their way carefully down the slope. There was a barely discernable path that was really little more than an animal trail, but was better than slipping on the loose rock on each side of them. Once down, they rode side by side through the tall brown grasses.

Aldren once again stole a glance at his partner. Her fine features were highlighted in the mid mornings sun. She was beautiful and carried herself with a confidence that was astounding considering just a few weeks ago she had been near death. Her physical wounds had healed. The wounds in her mind would take longer, if they ever healed at all.

His mind shifted toward the present and specifically the village ahead. He was wary of the small villages toward the northern part of the kingdom. He was not sure how far the influence of the priests extended. Were these people friendly to the kindred? If they weren't, did they want to fight their way out of the village? These thoughts were racing in his head as they moved down the main road.

As they approached the fork in the road, Ameni voiced the concerns that Aldren had been thinking. "I think that you might better go in alone. We do not know how the townspeople would react to having an elf come riding in."

Aldren sighed. "You are probably right. It just galls me that you cannot ride in. I will get what we need and feel out the folk. You can wait just off the road about a mile past."

They were at the fork in the road. Ameni continued on leading the packhorse they had chosen, while Aldren veered off toward the gate with the other three loaded with the excess.

He entered the town as casual as possible, but it was a lost cause. Even trying to blend in, a large man in leather and mail leading three horses that were piled with weapons was not a normal sight. Children and animals shared the space within the open areas, darting between the buildings and the adults that were moving about their business. The adults would stop and stare as he approached, muttering among themselves in hushed tones. His concerns were confirmed when he spotted the sign mounted on one of the broken turrets that indicated a priest of the upstart Gods resided here.

Aldren reigned in at a shop that looked as though it was the local tavern. He knew this would be a place to get information about where he could sell his wares as well as getting a feel for the general attitudes of the populace. As he dismounted, a group of children gathered around to stare. One older child was toward the back of the pack, trying to be a part of the group, but obviously was not accepted as part of their core. Aldren looked at this child and spotted the signs of elvish blood in his background. That would be enough of a reason for his being outcast, at least in the south. Aldren pointed to him and gestured for him to come forward. "What is your name?"

"Mirgan, sir"

"Ahh a man with courtly manners. Aldren then looked him up and down. "How old are you then young Mirgan?"

"I have 14 winters sir." The young man drew himself up to his full height.

"That many eh? Would you watch my horses and keep them safe?" He produced 5 coppers from his belt pouch. "I will pay you fairly."

Mirgan's eyes lit up at the sight of the coins, but he kept his mannerisms in line with his duties. "That I will sir. They will be safe or my life will be forfeit."

Aldren looked the young man up and down. "You are not carrying any weapon. Any guard needs a weapon." He then reached into one of the blankets and pulled out a short sword. For a full-grown man it would have been not much more than a large dagger, but it fit the young man's stature well.

Mirgan hefted the blade feeling it's balance as he had seen the men in the village do. He broke into a big smile, and then sobered. "All will be as you left it on your return."

With a smile Aldren turned to the open doorway and entered the tavern. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness of the interior, he could see it was in many ways the same as other inns and taverns throughout the kingdom. The open beam ceiling was blackened with the soot from the candles and the fireplace that was on the far wall. A few long tables that were scarred from knives and rough use. The floor was rough planking with gaps along the edges. The man behind the counter was Aldren's height but larger in girth. His face showed the fights that he had broken up and the ruffians he had tossed from his establishment. His voice was gruff but his manner was pleasant enough when he asked Aldren his preference.

Ordering a mug of ale, he wet his thirst then asked the bartender if there was a merchant in town that would be interested in trading some articles that he had picked up from the trail. The man directed him to a building across the courtyard. Finishing his ale, Aldren strode out into the daylight to see a rather strange site.

It seemed that Mirgan took his vow to keep Aldren's possessions safe. Standing with his feet braced, the boy held two men at bay. There was a crowd starting to form laughing at the two for being wary of the boy. The marks on their arms, and the slice in one of their tunics demonstrated that they had every right to be cautious. He could see the sword in Mirgan's small hand tremble in fear and rage.

Aldren walked up beside the boy and drew his own sword. The two would-be thieves decided the odds were no longer in their favor and left. Aldren sheathed his blade and put his hand on Mirgan's shoulder. The boy lowered his sword and still trembling, knelt on the ground. Mirgan finally looked up. "Thank you sir. I wasn't sure how much longer I could hold them off."

"Mirgan, you showed more courage and honor than you would find in the courts of the King. The odds were against you and you stood firm. No man could ask for more than that."

Those words seemed to give the boy strength. He stood, once again tall and proud. The two untied the horses and headed to the shop that the tavern owner recommended.

The shopkeeper had come out to see what the commotion in the courtyard was. Aldren approached and greeted the man. He was short but wide, with a jolly face that belied the sharp wit of a businessman. Aldren asked if he was interested in some barter for some weapons and goods. As the load was revealed, he could tell the man was itching to know where he came across such a horde, but knew enough not to ask. The two set to bargaining, with Mirgan keenly watching the proceedings. When the shopkeeper made some excuse about the cost of an item, the boy rolled his eyes. Aldren caught the movement and pressed the point. The shopkeeper relented and a deal was struck for all but the ponies.

When all was done and they had sealed the deal, he had traded for all the supplies they could use, 15 gold coins of the realm, and an extra something for his new partner. Mirgan beamed in pride when Aldren handed him a new cloak and scabbard for the short sword.

"A man needs a good scabbard for his sword." Aldren replied to the boy's question. "Now you will join me in a meal before I continue on my journey." Talk of the earlier incident had spread through the village and they were greeted with stares and whispers that, following Aldren's example, Mirgan ignored. His shorter legs were stretching to keep up with Aldren, but his step was proud.

The happiness Mirgan was feeling was flattened when they reached the inn at the edge of town. The owner refused to allow Mirgan to enter.

"You can come in, but I won't allow a worthless half breed in my place. I don't want them to disgrace my establishment!"

Once again, Aldren's temper almost got him in trouble. " This boy... No, this man has served me above and beyond any duty that I had laid upon him today. He has shown more courage and honor in a few hours than you will in your entire miserable life. Perhaps you had better re-think your position before I let my companion run you through."

Mirgan just looked disgusted at the skinny little man. "Lord Aldren, sir? I know of a place that we will be more than welcome. He isn't worth the trouble."

Aldren looked at him and nodded. With one more black stare at the innkeeper, he turned and strode away, letting Mirgan lead him to the location he preferred. They moved through the gate and immediately turned to the left coming to a halt at one of the small huts just outside the wall. A beautiful woman appeared at the door her simple dress showing the smudging of flour from her day's labor. A little older than Aldren in actual years, her pretty face showed the concerns and worry of someone much more advanced in age.

Mirgan approached her. "Mother, this man was turned away from the inn because of me and hasn't eaten. Can we spare enough for him a meal?" The woman looked at her son in surprise. His serious tone and the formality of his words shocked her more than the stranger that stood behind him.

"Of course, we always have enough to share with a traveler."

Aldren turned to one of the packhorses pulled out a small bundle. "Only if you will allow me to contribute to the meal." He handed her a bundle that contained cured meat. She took the package and ducked back into the house, motioning them to follow. The inside of the building was sparse but clean and tidy. A fire burned in the hearth over which a pot was heating, its cover dancing as the contents bubbled away inside. The smell of a stew filled the room and Aldren realized that he was indeed hungry.

The men sat across from one another on low benches as the woman ladled the stew into bowls. Combined with the coarse bread she had made earlier it was a wonderful meal. As they ate Mirgan gave her the account of what had happened in the town. Dulca, for that was the woman's name, listened

to the tale her son told with the air of disbelief. She looked at Aldren for confirmation.

"What he has told you is indeed true my lady." He said. "This young man proved that he is honest and worthy of the trust I placed on him. You have taught him well."

Dulca looked at her son who was beaming at the praise. It was as though she was seeing him in a new light. He had suddenly grown from the little boy playing in the dirt to the young man who sat at the table. She got a sad look on her face as she realized that he was now of the age to make his mark in the world.

Aldren then took his leave from the woman. Ameni was waiting on the road for him and he was anxious to meet up with her again. Mirgan had already gone out to bring his horses to the door. As he started out his ears caught the sound of many feet moving along the road.

Looking out, he saw a mob of about 15 men heading towards the hut. In the forefront was the innkeeper and what had to be the priest of the village. Aldren cautioned Dulca to stay inside and then loosened his sword in its scabbard.

Mirgan also saw the crowd and stood in front of the horses, his new scabbard hanging from around his waist. When the crowd got close enough the innkeeper started shouting about how Mirgan had threatened him, and that he wanted the boy punished for such things. Apparently the crowd had come along to participate in the fun.

Mirgan stood his ground. "I did nothing wrong. In fact, I asked my lord Aldren not to run him through, though he deserved it."

The priest then spoke. "We will not abide any sort of talk from such as you. A public beating will teach you to keep your lying tongue in your head." He then reached down to grab Mirgan only to be met with the point of a sword.

"I will not be beaten because of the lying words of some skinny little man." The priest reached again to grab him and Mirgan laid open his forearm. The priest screamed in pain and ordered the mob to seize the half-breed.

Before anyone could get close enough to touch the boy, Aldren stepped out with his own sword in his hand. "You touch this boy, and your blood will be soaking the ground." His eyes were blazing. The crowd hesitated briefly, but the lust for blood overcame any caution and they moved in.

Aldren took the first one with an upward slice that left the man on the ground holding his organs in his hands. He parried the blow aimed for his neck, and then decapitated his opponent. Another lost his sword arm, and a fourth was run through and fell back into the dirt, his heart pierced. Aldren stole a glance to his left and saw that Mirgan had already dispatched one attacker and was working on another.

The fight ended quickly when the mob realized that their numbers were falling without the results they had anticipated. They backed off, carefully watching the defenders, pulling the bodies of the dead and wounded with them.

Dulca came out of the hut and ran to her son. She checked him for wounds, but found that he only had a small cut on his scalp. The blood that covered him was from his foes. Aldren watched the retreating crowd, then turned back to Mirgan. The boy was looking at him and the fire in his eyes was startling in its intensity. The warrior that had been under the surface was unleashed. Little did he know it was the same look that he bore as a young man.

Aldren suggested that the young man go and wash the blood off. Mirgan was still shaky, but moved toward the small barrel at the side of the house. Dulca looked at the warrior that was in front of her.

"Lord, I fear that my son's life will now be forfeit here, as well as my own. We must go to my brother, but he lives in a town called Ramas and that is four days ride."

"In which direction does this town lie?"

"North and East of here."

"I am sure that you can ride with us for that time, since my companion and I are heading that way. Pack only what you need and we will wait for you on the main road."



Mirgan came up about this time. The thought that he had killed someone, and that he could have been killed had set in on him. He knelt down on the ground and started to shake violently. Aldren gave him a few minutes then bent down to touch his shoulder.

"Mirgan, you did well today. You did what you had to do to protect yourself and your mother. The world is filled with dangers now, especially for ones such as us. Your mother has asked to go to her brother. What you need to do now is to help her get what you must have and then leave. We will wait for you on the main road."

The young warrior stood and wiped the moisture from his eyes. He knew that Aldren was right and to stay here would mean death for him and his mother. Aldren left the spare horse for them and he moved out across the fields to meet his companion.

Ameni was sitting on a boulder between two trees awaiting his arrival. He almost missed seeing her until she gave a soft call to him. She signaled him into the grove and he made his way into the brush.

As he dismounted, she took note of the blood that was still fresh on his mail. He gave her a quick account of what had happened and let her know that they would have a couple of traveling companions for a few days. She readily agreed to the change of plans. They broke out some of the fresh rations and settled down to wait for the new refugees to show up.

Within an hour, they heard the sound of three horses moving along the road. Aldren stepped out to the edge of the trees and greeted Mirgan and his mother. They both had dressed for traveling and carried what looked to be the barest of possessions on the third horse. He led them back to the clearing to meet Ameni.

Ameni took stock of the two strangers. Both were dressed in rough woolen cloaks hiding their tunics. The woman appeared to be still young for having a child the age of the one riding next to her. Her golden hair was curled in ringlets that hung loosely around her face. Blue eyes that held the fear of the day's events. The cloak could not hide the fullness of her figure though. Her large breasts were evident and the tight leggings she wore showed that her legs were still shapely though they did not carry the

muscle tone that was evident in Ameni's own. She had to wonder in the back of her mind if Aldren had thoughts of bedding this woman.

The young man who rode at her side was definitely half-elven. The characteristics of the kindred were prominent in his face. He had the sadness in his eyes of one who had just had to kill for the first time. At his side was the sword Aldren had given him.

She noticed all of this in the time it took for them to stop and dismount. As soon as they were on the ground, Aldren made the introductions. Mirgan was speechless staring at the elf maiden. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. It took him a few seconds to realize that she was speaking to him in greeting. Remembering something that his late father had taught him, he brought his arm across his chest in the greeting of the kindred. It was clumsy, but he did it with such seriousness that there was no doubt about his sincerity. Ameni hid her smile and returned the salute. "*Hail fellow warrior and friend.*" She spoke in Elvish.

Mirgan was startled at hearing the language. It sounded like the words were wound around all the living creatures in the world. It seemed to touch something deep within his soul. He had heard his father speak it only a few times, and it stirred the memories long past. Finally he was able to speak. "Forgive me my lady. I do not understand the speech of the kindred. My father never taught me."

Aldren spoke up to relieve his embarrassment. "What Ameni said was the formal greeting that one elf warrior gives to another when they meet. She is acknowledging your status as a man and a warrior."

At this, Mirgan smiled. This beautiful woman considered him a man, not some little boy. He drew up to his full height that was still less than the elf in front of him. "My Lady, You have my gratitude for allowing us to travel with you and the Lord Aldren. May our journey be swift and free of danger."

Ameni smiled down at the young man. His speech and mannerisms were more for the courts of kings, not some little village. But his mannerisms were stiff. She decided to put him more at ease. "I appreciate the fine manners that you possess, but on the road like we are, you may call me Ameni. Aldren wasn't actually a Lord of the lands; rather he was a captain

of the King's guard. You may find that during a fight, it is easier to shout just a name without the title."

Aldren then asked the young man to help with the setting up of the camp. Mirgan moved off to get some wood for a fire. Ameni and Dulca prepared a meal from the supplies that had been acquired earlier. They soon settled down around the fire. Dulca told of her marriage to Mirgan's father, an elf of the Wood clan. They had lived in harmony near his father's settlement for a while, moving when their only child was born. He had been killed and she and Mirgan survived from her skills as a healer and a small plot of land. The priest had arrived and established himself as the authority in the town and that is when the trouble had started for Mirgan. His appearance was much like his father's and he was shunned then persecuted by the priest and his followers. She had been in fear for him for some time and today was the final straw.

The rest of the conversation was of the adventures of the two companions to date. During a lull in the conversation, Mirgan asked Aldren about how he had survived being half-elven.

"It was no problem for most of my childhood," he explained. "It wasn't until the new cult took power that things started going bad. I had taken some taunts when they first started growing, but I was a big child and my father being in the guards was a help. Also my mother was well respected as being a wise woman and a healer. She taught me much of her magic, but certain things she refused to even speak of. Once the old king was gone and his son in power, the cult wormed its way into the court. I had planned to leave, but it happened suddenly when the priests ordered someone very close to me killed for disobeying them. I went into a rage and slew four priests and several more of their followers. I grabbed what I could and took off. I am sure there is a price on my head, but no one has lived long enough to claim it."

There was more talk, but soon they bedded down for the night. Aldren took the first watch of the night waking Ameni several hours later. Then he lay down to sleep.

It was just before moonset when Ameni touched his shoulder to awaken him. He was instantly awake. She touched her finger to her lips urging him to be quiet. "We have visitors." She whispered in his ear. He slipped

his sword into the scabbard and rose up. Ameni was urging the other two up and to slip quietly into the bushes.

"Two men approach from the road. They are very inept at stealth, stomping in the brush and talking much too loud."

"Where and how close?"

She pointed to the trees just ahead where the path had veered from the road. He listened as she whispered her plan. He watched as she moved silently and disappeared into the woods. Aldren then walked into the trees then started circling toward where the would-be robbers would emerge into the clearing.

He crept up to a stand of trees and waited. Two men, the ones that Mirgan held off in the village were sitting behind the low shrubs planning how to ambush their quarry. He looked to his right and spotted Ameni holding her bow at the ready. He grinned and silently drew his sword.

Finally deciding on a plan of action, they both stood but one was having trouble getting his short sword out. They peered into the clearing seeing the fire and remains of the camp but no people. The taller of the two asked "Now where do you think he could have gone, Rafe?"

"Right here boys." Aldren shouted. The two turned to see him standing about 15 feet away and slightly uphill. They looked at each other then back to him. From their actions, Aldren could tell that these two were not the brightest ones from the litter.

"You gonna come down here so's we can rob you, or do we have to come up there?" This was Rafe who apparently had found his voice but obviously not his wits.

"Neither. You are going to walk back down the road toward town and think seriously about if you are really cut out to be robbers."

Rafe was trying very hard to think of a plan so they would not have to go back empty handed. Finally he figured out that there were two of them. "Com'on Gar, they's two of us and only one of him. We can take him anyways"

Gar, who had the quicker mind looked at his friend. "But he's got a sword. See it right there in his hand. We could get hurt real dead like."

Rafe thought about this. "Yer right. Why don't you go first and see what happens."

"Well I'm thinkin' you outta go first, since this waz yer plan."

"OK We will both go."

Aldren finally interrupted their conversation. "That is not a good plan at all."

They both turned back to him. "And why not?" was Rafe's reply as he took a step forward. An arrow passed within inches of his face, sticking into the tree next to him. The feathers were still quivering from the impact.

"That's why. Now move before I turn you would be robbers into the robbed."

They both turned toward the road. Gar turned back and said, "What about our horses?"

Aldren grinned and told them he would turn them back toward Archer's Point in the morning. They would be smart enough to find their way home. With that the 'robbers' headed out in a slow dejected trot.

Ameni asked, "Do you think they are smart enough to make it back?"

"Those two are probably not smart enough to walk and talk at the same time. They were the ones who tried to steal the stuff I took into the town to trade. Mirgan held them off and even took a few cuts at them. They must have figured that I was alone. Not good as thieves. I wonder if they can handle any job?"

With that Ameni slipped onto the mare's back to make sure they had indeed made it back to the road. Aldren called the other two back down and they started packing up to continue their journey. They broke camp and headed out to the road.

The sun was dancing on the hilltops that showed to the west of them as they moved out. The day promised to be clear and warm. The trees were growing thicker and taller around them now, creating an archway through which the road wound. Mirgan rode next to Aldren in front and the women coming up close behind.

Ameni had seen Dulca watching Aldren in the camp earlier. She wasn't sure if it was gratitude or lust, but it worried her. She wasn't sure if Aldren was interested in her or not. They were almost opposites in build and he hadn't tried to bed her, so she was unsure of his preferences. She was still hopeful that he would see her in that way and at least make some sign of interest. Again she saw Dulca watching as Aldren rode lightly in the saddle. "He does cut quite a figure doesn't he?" Ameni stated.

"Hmmm? Yes he does. Reminds me of my late husband, but larger. I hope that Mirgan will some day grow up to do as well."

"He is a fine man."

"Are you two bonded?"

Ameni was reluctant to answer. "No. We have been together only as companions"

"Sounds as though you would wish for more?" Dulca smiled in answer.

"Perhaps you are right, but I am not sure of his thoughts."

"I was watching last night. He was looking at you with such admiration and even lust. He cares even if he does not say so."

Aldren turned in his saddle and glanced back. She then saw what she had missed before. He did have a special look when he saw her. It filled her heart with a joy but also a fear. She had never been with a man before. Would he be repulsed by her lack of experience? She had never had the urge to mate with a man, but now her loins seemed to be constantly in a state of excitement. The rhythm of the horse did not help and she was confused by her lack of concentration. But she would also wait until he took the first steps. She was too proud to even have the appearance of the girls who sold themselves to any traveler with coin.

For Aldren's part, he was just as unsure as the elf. Ameni was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She had the mystique of the kindred. He had known the girls around the King's court, but most were too soft and flabby for his tastes. Now this woman with her lithe figure turned his head. Combined with her grace, she set him on fire. But he didn't just think of her as a bed partner. He had dreamed last night of a bonding with her. But he said nothing in fear of her reaction.

They rode far that day, stopping only to rest the horses and stretch their legs. By nightfall, they had found a clearing to set camp for the night. Dinner was a quick affair and Aldren chose first watch. Mirgan asked to watch with him and to the boy's surprise the request was granted.

Long into the night the two stood guard. Aldren taught the young man many things that would help his survival. Such as standing facing away from the fire so his eyes would be more adjusted to the dark. how to blend in closer to the foliage, and how to determine the best spot to see everything. "How did you learn so many things?" Mirgan asked.

"My father taught me much about being in the wild. I learned much from both of my parents. My father had a small sword in my hand as soon as I had the strength to hold it upright. From him I learned the things that I needed to survive. My mother was strong in magics and healing and she passed those skills to me, at least as much as she felt I would understand. Since the times are against magic, I keep that part hidden except for the healing."

"My mother was an elf, and Ameni reminds me of her in many ways. Her death was the cause for my departure from the service of the king."

"You mean that the priests had your mother killed? But why?"

"Fear. They were afraid of the power and influence she possessed. She was a barrier to their control in the court and through the court the kingdom."

"Is that why they want to destroy the elves? Because they fear them?"

"Exactly. They know the elves have the power to resist them. And that would give others the courage to do the same. They must have fear and obedience to control, not justice and equality among all the known peoples."

They stayed together for the rest of the night talking of the problems and advantages of being half-elven. Aldren woke Ameni for her watch, and then bedded down for the night. Sleep was difficult though for his conversations with the young man had stirred up many memories.

Mid afternoon found them in the village of Ramas, and Dulca's brother. He greeted her warmly and welcomed them to stay with him and his wife. He thanked the two warriors for bringing his family there safely. He was a big man large in girth, but solid due to his profession as a smith. He asked for Aldren and Ameni to stay overnight and he would check their horses in the morning. The evening meal was lively with the smith's children begging for stories from the travelers, and plenty of ale being passed around.

Aldren did get a few minutes to question the smith about the climate of tolerance in the area. The smith, Donnal, said that the new religion had not taken hold around here and Mirgan would be able to grow up in peace. He also promised to continue to teach Mirgan as much as he needed to know.

The next day Aldren and Ameni bade them farewell with a promise to return some day. They had sold the last horse for a good bit and had split the coin, the same as before. The air was turning cooler as the season started to change but was still comfortable as they moved away from the village. Side by side they headed North keeping a bearing on the goal that Aldren had originally set out for.

During the next few weeks they had a continued spell of good weather. They spent the mornings practicing and sparing. Sometimes they stayed in the same camp for a few days, but most of the time they would use the afternoon moving North.

Then the weather had turned foul. It had been raining for two days, and this day had dawned there was a heavy mist. The moisture had worked its way through their cloaks, leaving skin cold and clammy. There wasn't anything that was dry in their camp. By mutual agreement, they broke camp early and headed toward the road. The travel was miserable, and they moved like ghosts, the only sound was that of the hooves of their mounts. Aldren was moving toward the foothills looking for an empty cave where they could dry out. He was hoping to avoid contact with a Wargbear, which used the caves as dens. With their bowstrings wet, the



only defense was a sword and there was too much a risk of injury. Aldren had seen a warrior that had been caught by a Wargbear. The poison from the claws resulted in a horrible death. He learned that there was a cure for the poison and he made a special effort to carry the supplies he needed.

They made it to a cave that was gouged into the cliff face. Aldren coaxed a branch into flame. He peered around the corner of the entrance half expecting a deep bellow of rage, but the cave was empty. It was large enough to get all three horses into the back and seemed very snug and dry. Stepping in he did not see any signs of occupation so he stepped back into the entrance and beckoned Ameni to enter.

While Ameni unpacked their gear, Aldren moved back out into the forest and gathered enough wood to make a good-sized fire. Again he used his magic to start the blaze and they soon had a good fire warming them. Aldren felt comfortable enough to strip down to a loincloth to let his mail and under padding dry. As he pulled his shirt off Ameni got a good look at his chest. He was as powerfully built as she expected, but she was surprised at the amount of scars he had on his chest and back. When he had stripped down he turned to Ameni.

She hesitated a moment then began to remove the armor. She got the leather off and removed the outer layers of padding, but left her shirt and breeches intact. He could see her breasts through the damp fabric. Suddenly he realized that he was staring, and immediately dropped his gaze to the floor. She looked at him in surprise, then down her front and realized just what he had seen. She turned her back to him. He cleared his throat, and then grumbled. "I am sorry to be staring. But I will not try and force myself on you." When she turned to look at him, her arms covering her breasts, he grinned at her. "Besides, I would not be in my right mind to try and ravage a woman who could remove my head before I could touch her."

She returned his grin and then lowered her arms. He gave her another quick glance then turned his attention toward the pot of stew that was bubbling next to the fire. He wanted this woman like no other he had ever met. It wasn't just for her beauty, though she was indeed the most beautiful, sensual creature ever, it was her whole persona. She was smart in the ways of nature. Quick and deadly, yet she was gentle when given a chance. Her strong will had caused a couple of disagreements between

them, but she would listen to his reasoning. He had learned to listen to hers as well, for more than once she had been correct. But he could not lust for her. They were friends and partners. He did not want to lose her over something alike this.

For her own part, Ameni was having her own war with her thoughts. She was grateful for his saving her life. He nursed her without ever trying to take advantage of her weakened state. He was ruthless in a fight. He had taken on a couple of ruffians that had tried to steal their horses. That battle was short and bloody. Before she could grab her bow he had disemboweled one and removed the head from the other. Yet he showed remarkable compassion when he had buried her kin. And his dealings with the local farmers were fair, even to the point of being generous. He was courteous to those who deserved it. Yet he had not made a try for her, or even made lewd comments to her. She thought he might be interested because when she would catch him looking at her, she could see a bulge in his breeches. Maybe it was because she was an elf and a fighter. He had to see that she could be both and still be a woman. Sighing, she shook off the thoughts and accepted the dish of stew.

Later they were both sitting near the fire, tending to tasks that kept their minds and hands occupied. Ameni was oiling and checking her body armor. She stopped and looked at Aldren. "May I ask a question?"

Aldren look up from sharpening his sword. "Of course."

"What was the cause for those scars you carry? I can make out the ones from battle, but there are too many too close together to be made by a weapon."

He set his sword and stone aside. "When I was young, in my mid teens, I had gone out hunting with some of the other lads. Their fathers were in high regard in the king's court and I believe they only had me along was to tease. We camped out intending to return to the keep with the game we had killed. I knew of reavers, but when I wanted to camp well away from the kills, I was over ruled. Late that night we were attacked. Fortunately there were only 10 or so. I grabbed the long knife that I carried and moved with my back against a large rock. The older boys were terror stricken and slow to move. One other lad moved toward me. The others did not even get weapons out before they had been killed in the frenzy. It was sure luck

that this other lad and I survived. We had killed several of them and the rest retreated. Daylight came and we headed to the keep to call out the guard. I was laid up for quite a while, but my father was very proud that I had defended myself as well as I did. That is when he started my weapons training in earnest."

"You must have been frightened."

"What frightened me most was that when they started toward me, I came into a battle rage. I did not remember much of it, but my friend swore that I looked like a bezerker, swinging my knife and at one point grabbing one of the creatures with my left hand and dashing its head repeatedly on the rock. He said that when they broke off, I was screaming for them to come back and fight. And losing control like that scared me the worse. I swore I would not do it again."

"And have you?"

"Only once. After my father had been killed. An evil git of a priest and his followers had followed my mother when she had left the keep to visit her kin. He got the followers to catch her and hold her while he tortured her. I came upon them just after he had choked her. None of them lived to tell what they had done."

He fell silent afterwards, lost in the dark thoughts that the last memory always seemed to bring out. Ameni moved over to where he sat. She touched him lightly on the shoulder. "We are alike in that we have both had to see family taken from us. Even though I cannot remove your pain, I do understand it."

Aldren felt her fingers touch his arm and it was like a small bolt of lightning to him. He turned his head and saw compassion and sadness in her blue eyes. He could tell that she was thinking of her kin again. He placed his arm around her shoulders. She leaned into him a bit, and they sat for a long time in a companionable silence.

Eventually Aldren's mind climbed from the pit of hatred and despair, and he realized just how close she was sitting to him. Her arm was around his waist, her fingers slowly rubbing in lazy patterns. He looked down and saw her eyes were unfocused, lost in her own thoughts. He could not longer resist and moved his head and kissed her cheek.

Ameni looked at him with a startled expression. He thought he had really messed up his friendship when she slowly brought up her hand to touch where his lips had just been. "Why did you do that?"

"Well, uh... err... You looked so forlorn that I just did it. I am sorry if I offended you." He started to lean away.

"I am not offended. I am just surprised. We have been together for several weeks, but you have never treated me as anything but a companion."

"You are a companion to me. The finest companion that I could hope for." He held up his hand to stop her reaction. "And I was fearful to try and make anything more from this because I did not want to lose you."

"So you do see the female under all the armor." She whispered. In answer, he kissed her full on the lips. They sank down on the blankets devouring each other's lips. Side by side they were exploring each other as they kissed. He felt the strength of her muscles combine with the softness of her skin and hair to produce the combination that was his dream lover. He worked her soft breeches off her hips and touched the skin that was revealed. Her moans and the rhythmic movements assured him that she was as excited as he.

For her part she was exploring his back and trying to remove the loincloth that he had on. His hardness gave her the assurance of her sexiness that she craved.

They were both too excited to waste time. In the back of his mind he remembered a tryst with a maid in the keep. She was the most excited when she would be on top. He moved onto his back, pulling her on top of him. Her wetness made a trail over the top of his manhood as she jerked her pelvis against it. She did get her top open and off. As she leaned forward to position him against her entrance, he covered both breasts with his hands, kneading the firm flesh. Her nipples already stiff became harder than ever. She moaned as she slid down his shaft until she was firmly seated upon him. He could not believe how intense he felt their coupling. He had been with several women, but they were just quick flings to satisfy his lust. There was something more here, and it was so intense that it worried him.

As Ameni started moving, she began to feel sensations that she never knew existed. She had never been with a man and she could not believe how full, how complete she felt. It was like she had discovered something that she never knew she needed. Between the sensations she felt as he caressed her breasts and the fire that was building in her loins, she was sure that her entire body would burst. Suddenly she felt something building, starting deep inside her core and it spread throughout her body. "EyyyyyyeEEEE..." Her voice became higher until it was a high-pitched scream. Then her body became wracked with spasms as she experienced the first orgasm of her life. Just as she started to regain her senses, she felt Aldren's manhood grow even larger and harder, then start to spasm. He was moaning her name as his hips thrust up to push himself even further into her body.

She collapsed on his chest as he started down from his orgasm. She had never been this exhausted before. But she also had never felt so close to anyone before either. She pressed her face into his shoulder and smiled. "That was the most wonderful feeling I have ever felt. I didn't know it was so great."

Aldren raised his head. "You mean that was your first?"

The question caused her to rise up with her arms on either side of his chest. Her hair had fallen around her face. "Are you disappointed?"

"NO!" Then he added in a lower voice. "If I had known, I would have taken more time. I have heard a woman's first time is very special."

"I cannot think of anything that could be more special."

"Well if you are interested, we can experience even more."

She grinned down at him. "I am very interested to know even more." With that they fell back into kisses and caresses, more gentle now that the edge of their lust was dulled. They made love again before falling into a well-deserved sleep.

Aldren awoke during the night and rolled over to look at the woman next to him. He had been lonely since his mother had been killed and he had fled. Now he had someone to care for and that cared for him as well. He had a mate now and he would never feel the pain of loneliness.

## Chapter 3

Posted: February 15, 2004 - 03:06:15 pm

They spent a total of a week in the cave, dressing only to venture out for firewood and water. They learned much about one another, each recalling their past and their immediate plans for the near future. One thing had become certain. They would continue to travel together. In addition to their skills as a team, their newfound affection for each other was a deciding factor.

The weather had cleared to become sunny but still cool. Ameni could sense the changes that were coming, and told Aldren that they should try and find some shelter that was more secure than their cave. He agreed and they broke camp.

The valley they were now descending into was more forested. They had been traveling for 4 days still heading north. The trees were shielding them from the cool wind that was blowing from the mountains and the temperature was comfortable. Their cloaks were tucked to the backs of the horses and they rode in the open with little fear of attack. The weapons they carried guaranteed robbers would think twice.

Ameni was in the lead at the moment and Aldren was staring in wonder at the form in front of him. Not only the lithe shape of her body (which was pleasant enough on it's own), but the person who was within that body. To any person they met she would be an elven warrior cold and deadly, and she was. Only he knew what was beneath the exterior was a female who was passionate in love making and deeply caring with him. Remembering the time they spent in the cave was having the normal reaction on him and he shifted in the saddle to relieve the discomfort in his groin.

He was so deep into his thoughts that he didn't notice her sudden stop. He pulled up just short of running his horse into hers. She slid off the mare's back and motioned him to follow.

The clearing just ahead was occupied with several figures hooded and cloaked in black. They were heading into an archway cut into the side of a small knoll. These were priests of the new God. Aldren had seen the rituals that they performed in public for their followers. There was always talk of

sacrifice and obedience and praying to the symbol of their God, the body of a man wearing a mask of gold, the face surrounded by rays of light. The burning of herbs and lots of smoke always came along with the words of man being the chosen race and that the other races that shared the lands needed to be driven out or exterminated, for they were the cause of all the evil that cursed the humans.

Now he wanted to see what the high councils consisted of. As the last of the robed figures moved in, the two warriors slipped up to the archway and peeked in. A raised dais with a long altar dominated the small room. Upon this altar was a small but powerful form of a dwarf. He was strapped down on the altar unable to move against the heavy leather bindings. Ameni could see in the dim light that even though his face showed defiance, his eyes showed fear. She started in, but Aldren stopped her.

"Wait and learn." He whispered. The priest at the center of the dais wore the same mask that was depicted on the symbol. Another priest to his right started to speak.

"Brothers, you have been called to witness the punishment of this spy to our great God. He was captured when he entered and defiled this temple. It is decreed that any but the chosen who enter the temple must be put to death. Now witness the justice dealt in honor of He-who-controls-all!"

A low chant started as the priests bowed their heads. The figure in the mask stepped forward clasp a three-bladed knife. The chanting was increasing in volume as he raised the knife, preparing to thrust it into the dwarf's chest. Aldren nodded to Ameni. The arrow left her bow and lodged into the center of the priest's chest. He fell backward into the stone bench at the back of the dais.

There were several seconds of stunned silence then a roar of rage erupted. Aldren stepped through the archway swinging his sword hacking limbs and bodies with impunity. Ameni was working her way toward the figure still bound to the altar, her long knives carving a path of destruction. She beheaded the priest that had announced the death sentence as he was retrieving the ritual knife. She slit the bonds that held the little man down and looked up.

The sight they both observed was of Aldren in full battle mode. He was yelling battle cries in both the common tongue and Elvish. The dwarf picked the long knife and joined the fray. The rest of the battle was swift and bloody. Within a few moments, the priests had either been slain or had fled. Aldren however was still in the grips of battle. He started out to catch the remaining priests, intent on taking them down as they fled.

*"Aldren, don't! You do not need to spill their blood!"*

*"Aye, I have killed enough today."* Was Aldren's reply.

The trio exited from the temple, Ameni calm and calculating as normal. Aldren was slower, the battle rage rapidly disappearing from his body. The dwarf cleaned the knife he had used on the grass.

"I am in your debt warriors. I would surely be dead if you had not come along. However I fear that you may have put yourselves in jeopardy for it."

Aldren grinned at the short, stocky man. "That had happened long before we came to the temple."

"Ah yes. I can see the elf maid would be in danger, but why would you be?"

"Besides being bound to the 'elf maid' I am halfelven and I had to leave the King's Court to save myself from a death sentence." Was Aldren's reply. He was still angered by the priests but was trying to regain his composure. He had not meant to let the 'bound' part sneak out. He hoped that Ameni did not catch it.

Glancing over at her he knew that was a false hope. He saw in her eyes even though her features remained impassive. But whether it was hope, anger or fear he couldn't tell. She broke the gaze and returned to getting settled on her horse. The dwarf chose to walk to his home and both warriors decided to follow to assure his safety. It would not be long before the priests got a mob together to come after them all.

During the long trek Murdaek, as the dwarf called himself explained how he became to be in the position that he had been rescued from. His voice was deep for his size and his speech was accented as he told his tale.



"I was returning from a journey from the Gorroth Mountains when I stopped to rest in that glade. The archway had not been there before when I had last been there. I went in and saw the altar. I was then grabbed from behind by two humans and bound. They tortured me for several days trying to find out what I was seeking when I came in. They would not believe me that it was nothing more than curiosity. They held a conclave and decided that I would be killed as soon as they could get the council together. It took a couple of weeks for them all to gather and during that time I was held in a room behind the altar. I almost escaped twice but was held by some sort of magic. I was pulled out and strapped to the altar and then you two appeared."

The signs of hot iron were apparent on his body, long red lines along his arms, legs and torso. The marks were still fresh enough to be losing the skin that had been burnt. Aldren knew also that the dwarves were a vengeful race and that this could trigger a war. A war that, on their own, they could not hope to win. The dwarves were not many in number and the battles and skirmishes could reduce them to extinction.

They traveled late into the night, Murdaek trudging along paths only known to him and his kin. Ameni followed along on the mare leading the packhorse. Aldren brought up the rear, often stopping or riding back to check for pursuit. They finally stopped to rest, each standing watch. At the false dawn they started moving again. The trail was moving closer to the mountains in the west where there was rumored to be a dwarf stronghold that was burrowed deep into the mountain's very roots.

No human had been there as far as anyone knew for the dwarves kept contact to a minimum being a self-sustained race. Truth be told, little was known about the race. They were the half the height of Aldren and stocky. Very strong and tireless they were excellent allies and formidable enemies. Other than an occasional trade dispute the race was peaceful, trying to be neutral with all other races and their wars.

It was nearing dusk on the third day after the rescue when Murdaek signaled for them all to halt. They were at the base of a cliff whose sheer rock face stretched upwards for hundreds of feet. Dark gray and smooth in the daylight, in the dusk of the evening it took on an ominous black presence. In the center, at its base was a set of doors made from a metal that was as dark as the rock face. Upon either side were baskets that

contained wood fires that cast flickering shadows on the surrounding area. With a low word, Murdaek told them to stay where they were. He went forward and knocked on the doors with the pommel of his short sword. A small window opened and words were spoken in the native language.

A few minutes later Murdaek walked back to the warriors. "You have been requested to enter the city and speak with the council. It has been agreed that afterwards you are to be the quests of our king. Your horses will be tended to by the men over there."

Arden and Ameni both dismounted and followed Murdaek through the doors. As soon as they were clear, the doors closed, moving silently on their great hinges. The guards, dressed in full battle gear resumed their positions on each side of the archway.

The sight in front of them caused both of the warriors to stop and stare. The hallway they were in was about 20 paces across and columns of black volcanic thicker than three men lined it. Behind the columns the shadows hid areas that would allow for scores of warriors to lie in wait for any enemy that survived breaching the outer walls.

The torches that were fitted in the columns created a trail of fire reflecting on the polished surfaces. Any enemy that made it past the first defensive line would be easily cut down before they could ever make it to the doorway at the far end.

It was to this doorway that Murdaek was heading. His confident strides were echoed by Aldren's booted tread and the light step of Ameni. The doors silently moved on hidden hinges as they approached. On the other side of the doorway was room vastly different from the outer hall. The use of crystals along the ceiling and walls turned the torchlight into a brilliance that rivaled a summer's daylight.

Aldren and Ameni could see the looks of awe as they passed through this hallway. On each side there were doors and archways that led to rooms that were used for the everyday life of these beings. There were storerooms and armories, but most seemed to be the living quarters for the families that populated the keep. Normal movement stopped as they passed and every head was turned in their direction. It gave credence to the rumors that no human or elf had ever passed this far into the keep.

The hushed tones of the dwarf-speech would start as they passed toward another heavy door that was down another hallway.

This door opened into what must have been the seat of power. The room was not as well lit as the outer areas, but the walls were covered in rich tapestries that muted the stark blankness of the stone walls. Heated by a huge hearth the chamber was uncomfortably warm. Murdaek moved toward the back wall where a dwarf was seated on a massive stone throne. He was wearing robes of dark red velvet and a crown of intricate interwoven designs was on his head.

Murdaek stopped in front of the seated figure and bowed low. Aldren and Ameni followed suit. Murdaek then spoke in dwarf speech to the Lord of the Keep. What sounded like a question was asked, which Murdaek answered.

As the conversation continued Aldren took note of the guards that were around the outside perimeter, as well as the courtesans that were standing to the side and just behind the throne.

The conversation between the two ended and the Lord motioned to a dwarf to come forward. Then the lord would speak and this dwarf would translate into common tongue. "The Lord Morgatan states that he is in debt to you outsiders for the saving of his son's life. In payment for this service, you will be guests of the lord for the evening meal and will be given shelter."

Two other dwarves appeared and led them down a long hallway and into a large room that contained two beds and pegs along the walls for their possessions. The dwarves bowed out of the room closing the door. In the corner of the room was a large cask that must have just been filled with steaming water since there were wisps of steam coming from the surface.

Ameni began removing her armor and garments determined to feel the warmth of the water as soon as possible. Aldren smiled at her enthusiasm, but began removing his clothing as well.

The sigh Ameni gave as she slipped into the warm water was almost passionate as the tensions of the ride and the uncertainty of the situation melted away. She motioned Aldren to join her. It was a tight fit but they both settled in and proceeded to clean themselves and each other. Between

the natural reactions to Ameni's naked beauty and the closeness caused Aldren to become almost painfully erect. It didn't take long before Ameni to notice, then to willingly accede to his advances. It was not long before there was as much water on the stone floor as there was in the cask as Ameni straddled her lover and rode as she would a wild horse.

Their lovemaking was swift and passionate due to the limited time before the feast but the kisses afterwards hinted at a more satisfying coupling later that night.

By the time they had dried off and dressed again, there was a knock at the door. Aldren opened it with knife in hand, not from fear of attack, but mostly from habit. A guard was there to escort them to the Lord of the Keep. As a courtesy, they left their weapons in the room after receiving the solemn vow of one of the guards that nothing would be touched.

The meal was served as the guests were seated on cushions in a rough circle. The food and drink were served from large vessels that were presented to each of the guests, starting with Lord Morgatan. The food was hot and flavorful, and the guests ate as much as was polite.

Conversation was formal and difficult due to the language barrier. Murdaek did his best to make his rescuers feel welcome, but his father was not helping in this matter. Aldren was asked about the changes that were happening in the real world, but his descriptions did not seem to have any affect on Lord Morgatan. He felt secure within his keep and did not see any reason to care about what was going on beyond his walls. It was rare indeed when any communication with the other two dwarf cities was initiated.

Murdaek was quietly explaining this to Aldren and Ameni when an ancient dwarf came into the chamber from one of the side doors. Tendrils of his long white hair escaped from the hood of his cloak. He was bent over from age and moved with a shuffling step. As he neared the circle a place was prepared for him at the right hand of the lord. He glanced in the direction of the two outsiders as their presence was being explained to him. When his eyes locked onto Aldren, he felt like he was trying to bore into him.

Suddenly, he turned very pale and started to shake. He then spoke rapidly in dwarvish, and then moved as faraway as the room permitted. At the same time, Lord Morgatan's distant mood seemed to change as well. Instead of being just disinterested, he looked almost fearful. Murdaek finally translated for the two outsiders.

"The ancient one is a seer. He uses what little magic that the dwarves still retain. I don't know why, but he is frightened of you. He says that you hold the remaining threads of a wild and forbidden magic. A magic that could change the face of the world. He believes that you will face peril and return from the darkness stronger than before."

Aldren scoffed at that warning but continued to be concerned about the reactions of the lord. Ameni was watching the guards carefully now. Neither one had their weapons, but she was already plotting their escape.

Lord Morgatan recovered some decorum and at least on the surface was once again his distant and cordial self. Through the translator he told them that they had his appreciation once again, and understood that they would no doubt be tired. Then lifted his goblet in a final toast, thus ending the feast.

Aldren and Ameni followed the guard back to their room and were gratified to find all their gear was still as they had left it.

With the door barred, they prepared for sleep. As a precaution, their swords and knives were placed within easy reach. Their promise of lovemaking was replaced with wariness and they decided to keep watch. Aldren took a position in the shadow of the wall and Ameni drifted off to sleep.

They switched places midway through the night, but it didn't seem all that long before Aldren was awakened by a knock on the door. A servant girl came in with a tray laden with food to break their fast. She kept her eyes lowered and was silent. When Ameni thanked her she smiled in appreciation, but quickly resumed her previous posture as she left.

As soon as they both ate and were dressed, another knock came on the door. This time it was the dwarf that had served as the interpreter the day before.

"My Lord Morgatan instructed me to say that while he appreciates your bravery, he understands that you will be anxious to continue your journey. To this end he has your horses awaiting you at the entrance to the keep and he wishes you a good journey."

The warriors strode from the room following the guard that was to guide them out. The population of the keep seemed to have heard of their departure for every doorway was filled with eyes that would turn away when either of the outsiders would glance in their direction.

Just outside the huge gates of the keep they found their horses being held by Murdaek. He explained that he wished to talk before they left. Aldren signaled for him to speak.

"First my friends, I wish to apologize for the behavior of my father and the people of the court. He is mired in the old traditions and ways. We have been self sufficient for as long as any history goes back and have been wary of strangers. I have been an emissary for the keep for a long time and I understand that we can't stay isolated from the rest of the world for much longer."

"Unfortunately, my sire will not listen to me. He is too entrenched in his outlook to even listen to reason. I know that when I ascend to the seat of power I will be looking at a completely different world and that we will either have to adapt to or die out as a race."

Aldren placed a hand on the dwarf's shoulder. "I am afraid you are right. The world is starting to change and not for the better. I don't know what will happen, but I do know that we can never go back to what it was before."

Then Ameni spoke up. "You have shown yourself to be wise in the ways of this land. The kindred did not see the danger until it was too late. But it is well that you and your kind have a place such as this to retreat to in danger. May it withstand the forces that will soon come to cause its demise."

With those words the warriors mounted their horses and turned toward the path that would take them back toward their earlier goal.

They had decided to avoid roads that could possibly be traveled by humans for the time being. The road would be quicker, but also more dangerous. They knew that word of the battle with the priests would spread and though confident that they could handle most situations, it made sense to avoid them.

They headed back east, planning to skirt the edge of a settlement of the Kindred. By the time they came back close to human settlements, the distance would cloak who they were.

The first couple of days went easily. The trail they were riding was open and often they rode side by side talking quietly. The sun was shining through the trees and kept the days comfortable for the pair. The nights were cool but not to the point that it made sleeping uncomfortable. The watch at night was kept only out of habit, as they did not expect trouble this far away from human settlements.

The riding was easy and it gave Aldren time to ponder what the seer was talking about. He didn't want to think about what it could mean. He had seen what his mother had endured by being outcast for her magic. One memory in particular haunted him.

He could not have been more than nine or ten when one night he awoke and heard voices from his bedroom window. An evil mage seemed to be threatening his mother. A ball of pure energy flew from the mage's hand and toward Avliene. It seemed to flow around her and dissipate. She just laughed at his attempts to do her harm.

She then spoke in a strange language, seeming to grow larger. The mage was frightened, his face ashen and his eyes huge. Avliene pointed at him and a tongue of flame shot from her hand and into the mage's chest. He collapsed without a sound and Aldren watched in horror as his body smoldered and disappeared leaving nothing. The shadow of his mother seemed to change and shrink back to her normal size. When he asked her about it a few days later, she told him that it must have been a nightmare.

Now he was not as sure. Lately he had felt something growing within him. A hunger or maybe a longing for something that he didn't understand. Physical confrontation he could cope with. Flesh, bone and tendon he could deal with, it was the idea of magic frightened him. Even what he

used he kept hidden from most. Magic had been the ultimate reason for his mother's demise and He did not want to go the same way.

It was toward the evening of the fifth day that they were looking for a place to camp. As they had moved further east, the forest became denser. The trail had narrowed to a path as they got further away from the settlement of the kindred. The trail that led to that settlement was now over a day's journey behind them and they were figuring to move away from the foothills tomorrow and try to pick up the main road.

It was close to full darkness and they still had not found a good place to camp for the night. The trees did not thin enough to allow for a fire and even stretching out to sleep would be difficult.

Ameni was in the lead her eyes scanning the trail ahead and to the sides looking for a break in the massive trees that would indicate a clearing large enough to allow them to camp for the night. Aldren was following several lengths behind watching Ameni as she moved on the back of the horse. Since he was occupied with her lithe form swaying, he did not hear the branch move behind him.

Ameni jerked her head back around when she heard the scream of a Hellcat. She saw as the creature leapt from the branches overhead and toward the back of her lover.

"ALDREN!!!" she screamed as the tawny body made contact with the warrior - its claws sinking deep into his back and shoulder as their momentum sent them both to the ground.



## Chapter 4

Posted: March 26, 2004 - 06:27:06 pm

Aldren's concentration was broken as he heard a scream coming from above and behind him. Before he could react, he felt something hit him in the back, knocking him from the saddle and sending him sprawling on the trail.

He felt a severe burning sensation as the creature's claws dug deep into his back, snapping the chain mail links. He tried to roll away to escape and managed to stagger upright, but the creature sank its talons into his calf, tripping him back to the ground.

Ameni pulled back on her bowstring, but the writhing mass of the two bodies locked in mortal combat made it impossible to get a clear shot.

The tip of the arrow followed the frantic movements. Finally, the huge cat raised up to get a better hold and Ameni released the arrow. The cat moved and, instead of piercing the cat's body behind the shoulder, the tip entered the base of its neck and went through the brain, coming out just below the left ear.

The hellcat fell onto Aldren, instantly dead. Ameni ran to her companion and lover, who was struggling to move the carcass off of him. She rolled the beast to one side and took stock of Aldren's injuries.

The chain mail had protected his neck and shoulder from the fatal first attack, but he had deep slices from the claws. The scratches along his arms were more superficial, but there were some deep ones in his calf.

Had it been any other type of creature, Ameni would not have been as concerned. But hellcats carried venom in their claws that would cause a slow and painful death.

She cleared a small area and built a fire. Fortunately, the horses had not run far at the beginning of the attack and she tethered them close by. Pulling the cooking pot and the water skins, she heated some water.

Aldren told her to take the *Horshun* that was in his bag and steep it in the water. As soon as that was done, she bathed Aldren's wounds with the water, and then used the leaves to pack the worst of the marks.

Aldren was in considerable pain, and the blood loss was causing him to slip in and out of consciousness. Remembering the Kindred had a settlement within just a few miles, and knowing that she did not have the knowledge to stop the poison, she decided that they had to get there as fast as possible.

She roused Aldren enough to get him onto the back of her horse, since the stallion was taller and more likely to bolt. The horses were still nervous from the smell of blood and the scent of the cat, but Ameni spoke to each of them, calming them. She mounted the stallion and they took off back up the trail.

Even with her excellent vision and hearing, it took several hours for them to come near the settlement. As she was approaching where she remembered the path to be, she spotted two elves coming from her right. She flagged them down, and they moved toward her diffidently.

*"Hail, fellow warriors and friends. My companion was attacked by a hellcat and is in need of healing."*

The two came over to where Aldren was slumped over in the saddle. He was almost comatose now, as the poison slowly took its toll on his body. The older of the two elves made a quick assessment of the wounds and his general condition. He then looked up at Ameni, his eyes filled with concern.

*"My lady, he is almost past our aid. We must make all possible speed. Marden here will ride ahead with your companion to the settlement. He can take paths that will assure that their arrival will be in time. He will make sure that he is taken care of until we can get there ourselves."*

With that, the younger Elf mounted the mare behind the slumped figure of Aldren. He gave a soft word to the horse and they took off through the trees at full speed. Since the other Elf, Gwryyan, was on foot their progress was slower.

As they walked toward the settlement, Ameni told Gwryyan of the events of late in the areas they had traveled. The older Elf grieved for the loss of Ameni's clan and assured her that the leaders would be keen to talk to her as well as to the human. That is - if he survived.

As they passed through the gates of the settlement some time later, Ameni was first aware of the size of it. Much larger and certainly older than hers had been, there were buildings of stonework, their intricate carvings pitted and worn with their age. The main pathways were of close fitted stones, wide enough for several men Aldren's size to walk comfortably shoulder to shoulder. Even with the late hour, there was quite a bit of activity. Elven children, about the age of her late brother, moved among the various buildings, apparently running errands for the elders.

Gwryyan led her to a large dwelling on the far side of the main hall. Moving into the doorway, she was assaulted with the scents of many different herbs, salves, and other concoctions of the healer's art. The room was fairly large, as big as some of the residences in her village. It looked as if every nook and cranny contained something. Herbs, many of which Ameni did not recognize, hung from shelves and from cords attached to the ceiling. Jars of various sizes and shapes lined shelves that took up most of the wall space. In the center of the room stood an open hearth upon which a large cauldron of water simmered.

Gwryyan spoke a few low words to the old woman and Ameni was taken to a smaller room where Aldren was lying on a bed. His wounds were covered with linen bandages. A small Elven girl was on the opposite side, keeping vigil.

Ameni moved toward the bedside her fear slowing her steps. He was very pale and the sweat upon his brow was glistening in the light from the candles that lit the small room. The girl raised her gaze from her charge to Ameni, and then quickly left the room.

Ameni moved over to the bed and knelt down, taking Aldren's hand in her own. She was caressing it when an ancient female Elf made her way into the room.

"*This is you bondmate?*" The ancient one asked. It was not so much a question but a statement. Ameni thought about it for a few seconds, then

nodded in the affirmative. *"It was close, but we halted the spread of the poison. He will be weak for some time, but the wounds will heal and he will be whole again."*

Ameni thanked the woman. She rose to remove her weapons and armor, then knelt back down by the bed, taking Aldren's hand once again.

She was still there when the young Elf came back. The apprentice was but a few years away from adulthood. When Marden had brought in the stranger, the healer had bidden her to help prepare the human. It had been she who had realized that he was half-Elven, at the least. This had been glad news to the healer, for the herbs used to cure hellcat venom would be deadly to most Humans. But still, the man had been very weak, and had suffered from the venom for hours. He was very close to passing from this plane of the world and into the Shadow Realm.

The ancient healer had spoken to him softly, calling his mind and spirit back. Her withered hands stroked his temples as she repeatedly called his name and spoke spells that had all but faded from memory. She finally moved from over him and sat back, clearly exhausted from the effort. She had called to his spirit, she explained to her apprentice, and now they must heal his body.

The young Elf then cleaned and packed his wounds with a mixture of *Horshun* and *Cansuell*, then held him down as the potion the ancient healer had made was forced down his throat. His body twisted and jerked as the brew entered his bloodstream, and when he calmed, she stayed, watching him as his body fought the poison.

She was still keeping vigil when Ameni had come into the room. The basic design of the battle gear worn by the beautiful Elf maiden was familiar, the differences indicated that she came from another clan.

As the warrior maiden came into the room, Isowan went for the healer. Now she was back to tend her charge as well as the Elf who was bonded to him.

*"M'lady?"* Isowan spoke softly to get Ameni's attention. *"I do not wish to disturb you, however, I do need to moisten the herbs that cover your mate's wounds."*

*"Then come in and do what you need. I am Ameni of the North Woods Clan, and I am in debt to you and the healer for doing what I could not."*

The girl smiled then answered as she moved toward her charge. *"I am known as Isowan of the North Mountain Clan."*

The girl then dripped a small stream of water on the linen wrappings from a small ladle. When she finished, she placed a cold compress behind his neck and across his forehead.

There was a knock on the door and Ameni spun around, as if she was expecting danger. It was only a small lad of maybe 10 or 12 winters. He stared first at Ameni then at the form of Aldren, who gave a soft groan. He looked down, embarrassed, when he caught himself staring. He placed the bundle of blankets and a padded fur on the floor before he scurried out.

Isowan nodded to the bedding. *"If you wish to rest for a while, he will probably not awaken for several hours at the earliest."*

Ameni tried to take advantage of the offer. The padded fur cushioned her from the hard floor but, though her body cried out for rest, her mind refused to stop replaying the attack and the events that followed. She had refused to shed tears since the day that she had returned to her own settlement. Now they came to her eyes unbidden and rolled down, wetting her cheeks. After losing her family, she could not even contemplate losing her lover. She had no doubt that he could handle any visible foe, but she feared the hidden ones. The thoughts finally faded as her exhaustion took over and she fell into a fitful sleep.

It was close to dawn when Ameni awoke with a start. She quickly took in her surroundings, and the events of the day before came flashing back. She stood and moved over to where Isowan was sitting on a small stool near the head of the bed. Her head was nodding in near sleep, jerking upright when she caught herself.

She convinced the girl to let her take over and told her to make use of the padded fur. The girl lay down and, within a few heartbeats, was sound asleep.

Ameni and been on watch for a couple of hours and the first rays of the sun were seeping into the room when she heard Aldren whisper her name.

He was still unconscious, yet he was calling to her from within the depths of his mind. She leaned over and kissed him softly. She was surprised and elated when he seemed to respond. She called his name in his ear and, once again, he moved closer to consciousness. He started to move a bit, then moaned from the pain.

Ameni quieted him. She brought a ladle of water to his lips and, after he drank that much, she called to Isowan.

The young healer jumped up immediately and rushed to the bed. In the common tongue, she bade him to be still while she went for the healer.

Within moments, Isowan came back. The old healer followed her, shuffling over to Aldren. She examined him, removing the bandages to look at the wounds. Satisfied with the progress, she placed her hand on Aldren's forehead and spoke quietly into his ear. His moaning ceased and he fell into a restful slumber.

She gave Isowan instructions to redress the wounds with a salve and sent the young girl to the hearth to find what was needed. Then she turned to Ameni.

*"You must be Ameni. When he first came, in he worried more for you than for himself. I could hear his thoughts and had to reassure him that you would be arriving soon before he would rest."*

*"You have my gratitude, Healer. This man found me half dead and nursed me back to health after my settlement had been massacred. We have been traveling together ever since. I am relieved that he will soon be well again. I do not know how I can express my appreciation, Healer."*

The old woman's bright eyes were dancing. From her contact with Aldren's mind, she understood the relationship between the two warriors better than either of them. *"You may address me as Belwin, my dear. I have too many winters and have seen too much to stand on ceremony with any but my apprentices. Now, be frank: you and he are more than companions, are you not?"*

Ameni found herself telling Belwin of their relationship, how Aldren had told the Dwarf that they were bonded, but had not made the request to her in the Elven tradition. Belwin then said something that caused her to stare in bewilderment.

*"You should think carefully before you accept any request for bonding. For he is more than just a half-Elven warrior. His road will be long and dangerous, and you will be swept up in his path if you remain with him."*

Ameni considered her advice, remembering the words of the seer of the Dwarves. She remembered the prophecies that were taught by the elders when she was still a small child. They spoke of one who would seek the Dragon Magic that had been lost. But they also talked of the toll that this magic could take on an Elf.

While she pondered this, Isowan returned and set to her tasks. Old Belwin assured her that he would sleep for several hours more, then would awaken more alert and on the road to recovery. As she left, she told them both that she would have food sent to them.

After Isowan finished her ministrations to Aldren, she asked Ameni if she could talk some more about their adventures, as she needed to practice her command of the common tongue. Soon, they were like old friends, trading stories back and forth, Ameni correcting her words and phrasing when needed.

Aldren did awaken several hours later, and he was in full control of his senses. He was hurting from the torn muscles, but the poison was gone from his body. Belwin came in and declared that he was to have whatever he wanted to eat and drink, but was not to try to do more than absolutely necessary for another week.

Food was brought in and he ate well. He was still weak and soon fell asleep. Isowan was called away, but promised to return to change the bandages when necessary. Exhausted, Ameni moved over to the bed and stretched out her body against his, careful to avoid any of his wounds. She fell asleep within moments.

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In all, it was more than a month before Aldren was even close to his former self. For the first week he was almost completely helpless, needing assistance for the most basic of needs.

Ameni did not mind doing those tasks for her lover. But doing small chores within the Healer's cottage served as a reminder of the life she had

envisioned she would have been leading if her village had not been destroyed.

With Ameni sleeping in his bed each night, feeling her warm, soft skin against his was causing Aldren to have reactions that his body was not yet ready to perform. It frustrated him, but also gave him incentive to push for his complete recovery.

Ameni was feeling the same frustration. Since Aldren had first taken her maidenhood in that cave, she had felt a hunger for his body that she would never had thought to dream about before. She would lay at night after Aldren was asleep, his hard manhood touching her hip, and try to recreate the feelings of their lovemaking on her own.

Her hands would move over her body, touching the places where she imagined Aldren touching. Her long fingers searching for the places where his manhood had often brought her to feelings of completion. She was able to bring herself to release, but it was not what she craved so deep in her being. As soon as the wounds were closed completely, Belwin gave permission for him to start moving around more and to start working the injured muscles.

The evening after Belwin's announcement that he could resume activities within reason, he and Ameni made love. As soon as the healer had left the room, Ameni was removing her clothes. She bent over Aldren, smothering him in kisses as she ran her hands over his torso. Disregarding the soreness in his arm, he pulled his lover against him and stroked everywhere he could reach. She rode him to protect his leg and shoulder. They were both anxious but careful in their movements. As she sat astride him to take his member into her, he reached up to caress her breasts, then down her side to her hips. She placed the head of his cock against her opening and slid slowly down until he was buried to the hilt. She had her eyes closed, savoring the exquisite sensation. When she heard him moan, she watched his face to make sure she wasn't hurting him. When all she saw was contentment, she started moving.

Her own excitement was evident in her wetness and her moans as she moved up and down, riding him with more force with each stroke. She could feel her climax approaching rapidly. She gave in to the feeling,



forcing her clit against the base of his cock, and then grinding her hips to extend the sensation.

As soon as she started to come back down, Aldren grasped her hips with his hands to guide her moves. She caught the rhythm he wanted, and soon she was on her way to another orgasm, this time Aldren was right with her. His leg prevented any movement, but he stiffened as his cock went rigid and started pumping his seed into her. This triggered her own climax. She slumped forward onto her elbows as her body shook in spasms of pleasure.

She fought to regain her senses. She remembered the ancient healer's words and decided that, no matter what was in the future, she would stay with him if he wanted her. And, with the way he was slowly caressing her back and hair with his good arm, she was pretty sure that he would want her with him.

She moved her pelvis up, letting his softening cock slide out and moved off him to stretch out next to him. There were some bandages next to the bed. She took some and placed them between her thighs to catch the overflow of their combined juices. He pulled her over until she was against him with her head against his chest. He wrapped his good arm around her and they fell into a deep, satisfied sleep.

Isowan came in the next morning to find the two lovers naked and fast asleep. She marveled at their forms, Aldren's lean muscular body and Ameni's softer womanly curves. She quietly moved back out and closed the door. Then she knocked loudly and waited. She heard Ameni's startled gasp and the rustle of bedclothes. Then she heard the Elf's call to enter.

Aldren was covered from the waist down and Ameni was wrapped in a sleeping cloth. When they saw who it was, Ameni turned and started to dress. Isowan told them that, since Aldren was well enough to get up, they could break their night's fast in the main room, at the end of the corridor.

In the following weeks, Aldren often voiced his displeasure at the slow pace of his recovery, even though old Belwin assured him again and again that he was progressing faster than he had any right to expect. Once he was deemed to be fully recovered from the poison, he and Ameni took up residence in a small building that was close to the Healer's residence.

Ameni oversaw his recovery, making sure that he did not push himself too much and cause more injury to the torn muscles. She also took the time to teach him more of the *Hanbra* form of fighting.

She was highly surprised when several of the settlement's warriors asked to learn as well. *Hanbra* was apparently only remembered in a few of the clans and had been lost here. She welcomed them and taught what she could, thus allowing these to train the others.

When they were not training, they both spent time in the healer's dwelling, learning as much as she would teach them. Though Ameni had not paid much attention to these things in the past, she now saw the need for it, considering their current circumstances.

Nights they spent in their dwelling. A few of the elves that they had become acquainted with would visit, but mostly it was a time for them to enjoy each other's company and to make love. Ameni reminded herself that she had to ask the healer for the herbs she needed to prevent pregnancy. It would not do for her to be on the trail with child. And she intended on staying with him on the trail, wherever it would take them.

There had been a light snowfall one evening when Belwin arrived at their door. With her were the head of the village and two other elders, explaining that they would like some private words about the rumors that they had been hearing about from the south.

Ameni offered them the wine that they had bartered for when they had departed from the last village before they ran into the priests. After all were served, Aldren began to answer their questions.

They talked for some time about the events in the outside world, about the general sense of unrest, and specifically about the decimation of the elves at the behest of the new priests. The elders were very concerned about the news. They were still a powerful force in the area, but human villages were becoming more commonplace, and where the humans settled the priests were sure to follow. The talk then turned to how best defend themselves and tactical defenses.

Belwin brought up their use of magic and how defenseless they would be if they didn't revive the magics that had been left to disuse. "*Once we had control of the elements and could call upon them for defense. The qualities of the*

*animals around us could be used to heighten our awareness. We lived in harmony with all within the land, rock and tree, water and beast. Then we, as a people, became fearful of the magics and they fell into disuse. Now, only a few even remember the simple spells to make our lives more bearable."*

She looked at Aldren. *"Please tell us of your relationship to the Kindred."*

Aldren looked uncomfortable. He never talked about his mother, about who she was. He had hidden it so long that he was having trouble speaking about that part of his past. He stumbled a bit and Belwin placed her hand on his forearm.

*"Perhaps I can tell you something."* She then turned to the elders. *"His mother was Sky clan. She was very powerful in magics that passed from memory of the Kindred many generations ago. Her power was strong enough to withstand the magic used by the priests. That is why they killed her, out of fear."*

Aldren sat in shock. He finally asked how she knew these things, and she answered that, during the worst of the fever, he had talked of many things. By the time Ameni had arrived, he was over the worst.

*"You are still troubled about many things concerning your mother. Her journal will clear many things up about her, but you have not had the courage to read it. I would advise you to do so now, so that your mind will be at rest about her and what she has passed to you."*

After the elders and Isowan departed for the night, Ameni reminded Aldren of what the healer had said and tried to encourage him to read the book, were it but to ease his mind. An argument ensued that finally ended when Ameni asked if he was afraid to know the truth. This stung his pride and he pulled the journal from his pack and sat near the fire, opening to the first page.

Ameni then left him alone and went to bed. She knew this should be personal. Her last look was of him sitting close to the fire with the leather-bound journal between his knees, the firelight reflecting on his bearded face as he concentrated on the words written on the pages.

She awoke just after dawn and came into the room to find him in roughly the same position, but the bulk of the pages were now on the left side of the book. He must have moved during the night, since the fire was

burning brightly with new wood sitting in the grate, but otherwise it was as though she had not left the scene at all. Aldren's eyes were bloodshot and swollen. He looked up slowly and gave a wry smile.

"What she had to go through to gain the power she had was nothing compared to what happened to her afterwards. Her own clan shunned her. Their fear of her power overcame the fear of the priests. And they were destroyed because of it."

Ameni came to him and started to rub the stiffness out of his shoulders. He moaned in pleasure as she worked the knotted muscles. After some thought he finally concluded, "I do not think I would want that kind of power."

"There are times when we have no control of our paths. Our fate is controlled by something other than ourselves." She replied cryptically.

She left him where he was and started to prepare something to eat. She grabbed the pail and moved out the door and toward the well that was to the side of the healer's house.

The snow had continued during the night and now had drifted into soft white mounds against the sides of the buildings. It was very quiet in the settlement. There was no movement in the square and few tracks in the snow to show that others had been out earlier.

She quickly filled her pail with the rope and bucket, and then returned to the warmth of their hut. She found Aldren still in the same spot, but now staring at the fire. She busied herself, warming up leftover hare stew, slicing bread, boiling water to steep a stimulating tea. She moved next to him to put the cauldron on to heat when he finally spoke. His tone was distant, as if thinking out loud rather than actually speaking to her.

"My mother was wise to hide her true power. The things she taught me were child's play when compared to what she was capable of. She was able to draw strength from the elements themselves, to use their energies, their most basic forces to do her bidding." He now turned to Ameni, staring at her with bloodshot eyes.

"I now understand so much better why she kept it hidden. And why the Kindred forbade the teaching of this knowledge. While it takes much from

the one who attempts to wield it, it would be a terrible force in one who wanted to control others." He then went back to thinking about what he had learned, acknowledging the food and drink that Ameni served him, but saying little. He finally lay on the bed, exhausted. He was asleep within moments, and she followed a short time later.

The next morning, they both went to see Belwin. The healer answered many of the questions they asked. Before she queried Aldren on what he had learned, she explained the ways of Dragon Magic. She took an ancient scroll from a hidden shelf. As she unfurled it Aldren noted that it was written in the script of the elves, the graceful letters painstakingly drawn.

The old Elf used it to refresh her memory as she told of how the Ancient Ones, the first Elves, had discovered the power that resided within all creatures. They were able to draw upon the physical traits of the different creatures, using their abilities to survive.

The most powerful of the creatures were the dragons. Able to control the elements, they were all powerful. It took one of incredible courage and heart to harness the magic of these creatures, first to gain the magical power, then be able to refrain from losing their own spirit in the process. But how to gain this power was not explained.

Through the eons, the knowledge of drawing power from the world around them died out amongst the Elves. The ones who came after were wary of those that used the magics. The other races looked upon it with fear and, in a move to avoid constant struggle, the major magics were banned. Only the healing arts and the minor magics, merely useful tricks, were allowed.

*"One thing I can assure you of is that you have, deep inside you, the potential to revive Dragon Magic. When I healed you, I felt your life force, and it was different from any I have touched. Within you resides the hope of stopping the destruction of all the races. When the time comes, you too will realize that you have. You have the potential, all you have to do is unlock it."*

Ameni could see the uncertainty in Aldren's eyes. He had told her earlier that he was content to just be a sword-for-hire. He did not yearn for power. Yet, others saw power in him. The Dwarf seer had spoken of him "holding the reins of a wild and forbidden magic". She could tell that the thought terrified him.

Finally Aldren spoke. *"I have felt something stirring within me for some time. I thought that I had to get to the Tower of the Guard to align myself with those who fought against the forces that want to destroy the old alliances. I am not sure of what I may become if I allow myself to succumb to the lure of what lies before me."*

Belwin placed her hand upon his arm. *"You must trust your own sense of justice and compassion for, no matter what power you gain, you must never lose your sense of who you really are."*

Aldren mulled over this for many minutes. He knew he was drawn North. Now he understood why. But was he ready to accept what the fates apparently were throwing in his way? Though he would accept the idea that he had power, he decided that he was not going to seek out more. He was a warrior, not a mage. That he could be both did not enter into his thoughts.

As they were leaving, Belwin had one final piece of advice. *"You must at least learn the orders of protection. For if both I and the seer can feel your strength, a mage or priest certainly can and will try and destroy you."*

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By the time the snows had melted away, Aldren was feeling anxious to move on. They were comfortable here, and were for the most part accepted. They had hunted for the village and helped out in other ways as well. Now it was time to move on.

They left on a crisp clear morning, with Marden to lead them to the pathway and Isowan waving farewell from the doorway of the healer's building.

The night before had been another talk with the elders, and then a more private one with Belwin. She regretted their departure, but was assured by Aldren's promises that he was now well versed in the defensive spells. She smiled and raised her hand to them, palm facing out to signify that she was satisfied. It was the last time they would see her.

There was still snow along the trail, holding on in the shadows of the trees. They bypassed the place where Aldren had been attacked and came out on the road several leagues further on. They were now out of the higher elevations of the mountains and the sunlight of the afternoon shown

brightly in the winter's sky. They were alone once again and Aldren took his place to the front.

The scratches on his shoulder and leg had healed. It had been just over 2 moons since the attack from the Hellcat and the torn muscles had been slower than normal to heal. The new skin itched though. They had decided not to push too hard on the trail, rather there were frequent stops to keep the skin and the muscles from tightening up too much. He would have another set of impressive scars.

They were taking one such break when they heard the clatter of hooves coming rapidly from behind them. Aldren could see the road from where they were sitting and, within moments, a group of the King's garrison came into view. Banners displaying the blue and white of the realm fluttered in the breeze as they rode in formation. As they came closer to the area where Aldren had led them off the road, the leader called a halt. He signaled for the rest of the troop to wait and he started following the track up toward where Aldren sat among the rocks. The leader dismounted and followed the trail on foot, his drawn sword leading the way.

He stopped short when he saw Aldren sitting directly in front of him. Since Aldren made no move to reach for his own sword, the leader lowered his. Then he looked closer at Aldren.

"Don't I know you? Your face is familiar."

"As you should, Vabryn, for we trained together in the guard."

Vabryn took a closer look, and his face registered his recognition. "Aldren, you old dog. I had figured you for dead by now. I never thought we would ever see each other again. After you finished off those priests (and he said that word like it stuck in his throat) and took off, the whole place was in uproar. They hunted for you for months and finally, the high priest got the King to place a bounty on your head."

"Are you here to try and collect that bounty?"

"Not at all. We were chasing a couple of thieves that killed a shopkeeper and the chief of the town not far from here. Actually, we wouldn't be out here at all except we were all bored." Then he looked thoughtful.

"Although, from the way you just sat there, I imagine that you had some trick up your sleeve. You seemed to be too comfortable."

"You are correct my friend. You would not have made two steps before having an arrow through your throat." Aldren then gave a signal and Ameni appeared from next to a rock a few lengths away.

Vabryn started when he saw that she was an Elf, and a very shapely one at that. He had never understood the hatred borne to the Elves, so he held up his hand in greeting. Ameni just smiled and moved to Aldren's side.

"I must say, Aldren, that when you decide to break from all things courtly, you do nothing halfway. I should call my men and take you in. But I am of the mind that you are more just than the priests and the backstabbers that are running the court now. Furthermore, I would say to you that it might be for the best that I have not seen you at all. My men are all still loyal to the Crown for now, but that loyalty is more from habit than for honor and justice. There is talk among them about heading north to the Tower of the Guard."

Ameni looked through the boulders and then turned to the men. "Your troops are getting restless. Might I suggest that you let them know that you are alright before they come looking?"

"You are quite correct, Lady. I will be going back. We will return to town as well. The next village to the north is not friendly to the garrisons of the King."

He and Aldren clasped hands and Vabryn went back down the hill. As soon as the troops had changed direction and started back south, the companions headed in the opposite direction.

They came upon the village Vabryn had mentioned just before dusk. It was small, as villages went. There was an inn, a smithy and a few small, worn-down houses set along the side of the road. Aldren went to the inn first.

The innkeeper was a couple hands shorter than Aldren and rather portly. He was pulling a huge joint of meat from the spit when Aldren entered. He dropped the roast onto one of the tables, causing the other end to jump into the air. His round face was flushed when he walked over to Aldren,



wiping his greasy hands on the equally greasy apron he wore. "Welcome, traveler. How can I be of service?"

Aldren told him he would require a room and some dinner for two. Then he added that the second was an Elf. He waited for the innkeeper's reaction and, seeing nothing more in the man's eyes than hope for more coin, he relaxed a bit.

"Most of us around here do not hold with the traveling priest's talk. We are rather independent, being this far away from the court." When Aldren produced the five silver coins they had agreed upon, the little round man beamed with delight. He promised to have them plenty of meat and ale and the warmest bed in the inn.

Aldren then went with Ameni across to the smithy. This man was the opposite of the little innkeeper. He was at least a full hand span taller than Aldren and probably twice his weight. The muscles in his chest and arms were large and hard from his years at the forge. He took their horses into his stable and even offered to fix the rings on Aldren's chain mail that the hellcat had snapped. The price was agreed upon and the mail was left along with the coin.

There were several men sitting at the tables when they walked into the inn. The innkeeper came over and had them sit near the hearth. He brought out a platter of meat, probably from the chunk Aldren had seen earlier. A loaf of bread and a couple of tankards of ale completed their repast and they set to work on it.

There was small talk among the locals about the weather, the quality of the crops that they had harvested over the summer and fall, and the general state of their lives. Other than a few looks at Ameni, the two were left alone. They had finished their meal when one of the locals called out to them, asking for any news from the trail. Aldren gave them what little he knew in general terms, including the news that a troop of the King's garrison was looking for a couple of thieves.

This seemed to satisfy the crowd. They were just looking for news away from their little village. One of them did divulge that the priest would probably be through here in the next day or two. This brought a chuckle

from the rest of the crowd, but it did warn Aldren that they should probably be on their way in the morning.

Soon, the innkeeper led them to their room. It was directly above the hearth, and the chimney made up part of the wall, radiating warmth. There was a small bed and some pegs in the wall to hang garments on. They undressed, but set their weapons next to the bed and within easy reach. There was a bolt on the inside of the door, but it did not look very reliable. They moved closer under the covers, at first for warmth, then, as Aldren became excited at the feel of her naked skin, their passions arose. They made love with Ameni astride him, her body rising and falling in a rhythm that increased in speed and intensity as she brought first herself then her lover to a crashing climax. She slid off of his slowly softening cock and moved up next to him, following him into sleep.

If Ameni had been of another race, she probably would not have heard the scraping of wood as the bolt on the door was slid back. She picked up her long knives and waited in the pre-dawn light as the door slowly opened inward. A small man, his face hardened by years in the elements, crept in through the partially opened door. He crouched down low and Ameni could see the dull glint of a knife as he started across the room. He turned suddenly to see her standing there, her own knives at the ready. Her naked body tensed as she awaited his next move.

With a low snarl the little assassin turned to charge her. Before he could get close enough to do any harm, her blades flashed. His head fell from his neck and dropped to the ground, his body following.

The man's movement had awoken Aldren, and he was rushing in with his own sword when the assassin was decapitated. They slipped into their clothes and Aldren went in search of the innkeeper. He appeared looking rather sleepy and frightened. He swore that the body lying on the floor was not one of the local folks, and he had never seen him before. They searched him and found a piece of rough heardbeast-skin parchment. It proclaimed Aldren as the murderer of several priests and offered a reward of five hundred gold pieces for either his capture or his head.

They followed the innkeeper down to the hearth room, where he roused his equally portly wife and they served the companions a meal to break their fast: a bowl of thick, hot cooked grains covered with honey and a loaf

of bread with the drippings of the eve's roast. Served with mead, it made for a good meal to start the day. All during the meal the innkeeper apologized for the "awful happenings" that had awakened them. He wished them to understand that they never had any trouble here and that it was terrible that such things could happen to his guests.

Aldren offered payment for the meal, which was refused, and they went across the road to the smithy's. News of the attempted murder had already made it to the big man. As Ameni got the horses ready and Aldren slipped on the repaired mail, the smith affirmed that the man was not from around here. They had no use for the likes of him and, in his opinion, Aldren had done the land a favor when he dispatched the priests.

They both thanked the smith and started down the road at a trot, planning to put as much distance between them and the village as possible. Once they were well away from the town and any prying eyes, they slipped off the road and into the trees that lined the road. They knew that the further North they rode, the wilder and more dangerous their path would be. Civilization and courtly manners were for the South. The King's men had not inhabited these lands for more than a few generations, and the only rules here were to survive however you could.

## Chapter 5

Posted: May 23, 2004 - 04:00:01 pm

Aldren and Ameni had been in the wilderness for a couple of sevendays when in the distance they saw a column of smoke rising through the trees. Aldren had recovered his strength and agility. The wounds had turned into a set of scars that matched the others on his body. Somehow they just seemed to belong on him.

Aldren decided he wanted to ride to see what was going on, but it was Ameni who cautioned him about the last few times they had investigated strange happenings. After some discussion, Aldren realized that his mate was not against seeing what was going on; only that she was urging caution. And she was right. From the clothing of the assassin that Ameni had dispatched they had discovered that their descriptions were being circulated throughout the lands and that there was a large price for their heads. To keep their freedom, they would have to practice more caution.

The smell of smoke was stronger as they approached the edge of the woods. The trees broke away in a line into a large field that had been hacked into the wilderness. The saplings that were trying to encroach on the cleared area told of how much of a struggle keeping the fields in this part of the country was. Now fallow, Aldren could see the remains of the crops that had once been grown here.

At the far edge of the field the source of the smoke was evident. What once was a small hut was now a pile of blackened embers. They slowed their approach even more, Ameni listening for any sign of who had done this and perhaps for the sounds of any survivors.

There were no survivors. Dismounting, they found the remains of a man and a woman probably the ones who had farmed this land. Their bodies had been viciously hacked and the woman had been partially burned from a timber that had fallen from the roof.

It was also evident that they didn't die without a fight. Scattered around were bodies of large man like creatures. "*Hirgana*" said Ameni, spitting the word out like it left a bad taste in her mouth. Known in the common tongue as the Arpuk, they were thought to be a race of creatures that was

not so different from man at some time in history. However instead of progressing they became more primitive. They no longer seemed to have the intelligence to have a civilization instead they moved around in groups of a dozen foraging and killing without any reason. They usually stayed away from a large gathering of humans attacking lone travelers or at the most a pair. Their size and aggressiveness made them dangerous to have in the area.

Neither one of the travelers wanted to meet up with what was left of the group, so they stayed only long enough to burn the bodies so the scavengers would not find them and then they hurried on in the direction opposite of the creatures trail. As they rode, Aldren kept thinking about why the Arpuk were in this part of the kingdom. They normally stayed close to the mountains in the south. Something or someone must have driven them out. If they were this far north what other creatures had migrated as well?

They forged ahead, taking turns sleeping in the saddle. They did not make a lot of progress, but at least they were moving. As dawn was approaching they stopped long enough to let the horses rest and to get something to eat. The path they were riding on had widened into a rough road, the twin trails showing as deep gouges in the packed earth. They decided to follow the road and see what the settlement that it led to looked like.

What they came upon was a festival in progress. Within the village square and scattered between the buildings were tents that contained the wares of tradesmen and artisans all proudly displayed. Local farmers were selling the remains of their harvests and in general there was an air of gaiety. Aldren watched a group of children play a game where the rules seemed complicated and ever changing as they squealed and laughed. The shoppers seemed to be in their finery, the women looking in the stalls and the men watching them in groups of their own.

Aldren dismounted and led his mount toward the watering trough that was just on the edge of the square. They tied their horses to a nearby tree and started into the crowd. Besides being a break from the wilderness, this was a chance for them to find out some information about the area and even to get a feel for how loyal to the king the locals were.

They stopped at a Tanners tent to glance at the wares he had displayed. The man on the other side of the table was tall and thin with dark hair and a hawkish nose. His dark eyes darted quickly over the pair that stood before him.

Aldren started the conversation with him by inquiring about a pair of boots for Ameni. The soft leather of her calf-length boots was showing wear from the rough trails they had been on.

"Aye, I may have something that would fit the foot of one so fair." he said as he looked through several pairs behind him. Ameni blushed at the compliment. For all the rough living they had endured, she was still woman enough to enjoy being commented on.

Turning back to the pair the tanner shook his head. "I am sorry, but I do not have any that would be up to the quality you would expect. However, I will be happy to make a pair from this soft doe hide that I just traded for."

"I do not believe that we will be here long enough for you to do so." was Aldren's reply.

"It is still in the early part of the day. If you could come back just before dark, I would have them ready. And they would be of a quality worthy of an Elven maid"

With that, they bartered on the price, and the deal was sealed. Aldren gave him half the amount with the promise of the remainder when they picked up the boots. The tanner called to his apprentice to watch the booth, then he measured Ameni's feet and set to work.

The couple then wandered through the maze of stalls and tents, looking at goods and sampling the foods that were offered. Ameni bought a couple of meat pies hot from the oven while Aldren secured a skin of the local wine. They found a bench near the well in the center of town and had lunch. The pies were full of meat and vegetables and were just hot enough to singe their tongues. The wine was dark red and had a sweet but woody flavor.

As they finished their meal, a young girl and a few of her companions stepped up to the couple. The leader looked to be around 7 or so winters old with long brown hair and big blue eyes. She stood with her hands folded in front of her shifting from one foot to another.

She looked at Ameni and spoke in a twinkling voice, "Please could we ask a question?"

Ameni smiled at the child and nodded her acceptance.

"Are... Are you really an Elf?"

"Yes, little one I am an elf" Seeing that the leader was not in trouble, the other gained courage and moved closer.

"Mother said that there were no elves left in the land. She was very sad about it. She will be happy to know that you are not all gone."

"You may tell her that the elves have not gone from these lands. They are just harder to find in these days."

Another girl spoke up. "Are all the elves as pretty as you?"

Ameni ducked her head as she blushed, but Aldren spoke up for her. "All the elves are fair in appearance, but Ameni is among the fairest." He grinned down at the girls, which made them giggle.

"Thank you my Lady, my Lord" said the leader.

"You are entirely welcome."

With that, the group ran off talking excitedly among themselves. The rest of the day was spent wandering through the festival, watching the dancing that had started up in the square. Ameni pulled him into the edge of the crowd and they had a turn or two before returning to the winemaker's stall for another skin.

It was toward dusk when they returned to their horses to leave. They had talked to many of the buyers and sellers and found that the "dealings down south" were of little interest to them. The influence of the priests was minimal here. But that outside of the village there were bands of rogues and raiders that wandered around pillaging the outlying farms. The biggest threat so far was a band of mercenaries that were also into the trading of slaves. They were for the most part a peaceful village but the men had taken to keeping their weapons at the ready.

They had made it past the sounds and smells of the village when Aldren remembered the boots that had been made for his mate. Ameni said that she would wait for him at the side of the road after she found a clearing for their camp. Aldren turned back and rode back to the village.

He got to the Tanner's booth just as he was beginning to close up. He did have the boots ready and they were as good as he stated. A light tan leather, soft to the touch and well sewn. The inside was lined with hare skin so they were warm as well as soft. He had also sewn a sole of heavy hide to the bottoms so they would withstand the rigors of travel.

Aldren praised the craftsman and promised that if they were in need and in the area they would return to him. Paying the remainder of the price, they shook hands and Aldren headed back to his mate.

Aldren rode down the road that he had left Ameni on watching carefully for any sign of her. What he found was the bodies of several men and Ameni's bow. Anger, then fear pushed up through the depths of his being as he dropped from the stallion's back.

He started checking the bodies one by one searching for a clue as to where Ameni had been taken. These men looked like they had been living dangerously for some time to judge by the scars and missing digits. Their clothing revealed very little other than they were well worn. These must be the raiders that the villagers had been talking about.

He stood and started looking for the trail that showed their direction of travel. Even in the dark it was easy to make out. They were apparently not worried about being followed which meant that they felt comfortable in their numbers. He once again mounted and turned to follow when he heard a groan from one of the bodies that lay there. He moved closer and peered down to see that this man was close to death. The wound that had been inflicted had been made from a slicing weapon, so he was sure it had been Ameni that had done the damage.

Bending down in the saddle he told the man that he would ease his passing if he would tell where the rest of his band was bound. The wounded man just spat curses at Aldren. With a final look of disgust, he turned and left him for the Reavers to consume at their leisure.



He followed them into the forest following the trail of broken branches and trampled grass. They were going in a more or less straight line heading southwest. They were riding hard and it was clear that they had a destination in mind. Aldren covered close to 50 leagues before the sun was clearing the tops of the hills to the east of him. He stopped to rest and let the stallion rest as well. It would not do for him to be tired when he did catch them.

He arose about the time that the sun was midway to its zenith. He retightened the saddle and mounted up once again. He set off at a pace that he felt the stallion could keep and ate and drank in the saddle as the leagues melted away. The light of the day was almost gone when Aldren came upon their base of operations.

The trail had ended at an ancient fortress. The high walls were still intact as well as some of the buildings. Built from the surrounding rock, it had stood for hundreds of winters. Once the dwelling of some nobleman, it was now the stronghold of the kidnappers. Aldren looked closely at the battlements, searching for some way in. Only one man guarded the rampart. The rest of the group was in the compound judging by the sound of revelry drifting over the walls.

The warrior moved along the back of the keep, finding the base of one of the corner towers that had crumbled leaving the start of an opening. He quietly moved some of the smaller stones until he could squirm through the opening. As his eyes adjusted to the dark, he found where the door had been that opened into what was probably the courtyard. When he tried to shove against the rotting wood, he felt the wood give but he could not get any further because of rubble on the other side. Then he spied the staircase that would take him up and onto the rampart. The stairs were stone but the winters that had passed since their making had taken their toll. After the first one tried to crumble on the edge, he proceeded with more caution.

A few years of battle had taught him that his strength, speed and skill would not be enough if they caught him before he was ready. So he had to rely on stealth to find some way to rescue his companion. Slipping up the stairs, he pulled his blade from the sheath on his back.

Looking out the dark archway he saw the same sentry that he had spotted from the outside. The man was careless, watching the courtyard instead of an attack from the surrounding fields. Aldren got within a few feet before the man had sensed him. As the man started to turn, Aldren's sword moved in a swinging arc toward the guard's neck. With the power of a double handed swing behind it the steel blade sliced through the man's throat severing his head before he could utter a cry of alarm. His body slumped as his lifeless legs collapsed. His head hit the wall with a muffled crunch then rolled a few feet down the causeway before it stopped.

Aldren then turned toward the commotion in the courtyard. He saw the raiders sitting around a small fire that illuminated the area. He finally spotted Ameni trussed up and propped against the wall. He was trying to plan his attack, thinking the best plan would be to wait until they fell asleep, kill any guards and free Ameni. However, his plan abruptly changed when one of the men decided he wanted some female companionship before they turned her over to the slavers. Aldren knew he needed to do something fast.

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The leader of the raiders was lounging against the stone post that marked the outer wall of some building that had long since collapsed. He was comfortable in the knowledge that they had captured at least enough strong people to make the raids worthwhile. There were a dozen more tucked safely in the building behind him. He was not sure of the amount they would bring, but it would help make up for the men that the Elven She-devil had dispatched.

The Elf slut had been a tough capture. He had taken a dozen men with him and she had killed six before Ceak had stopped her with his sling. The rock had stunned her enough for them to get her tied up. He looked over toward where she was tied. She was awake and alert. He could see in her eyes the anger and hatred, but shrugged it off. He was just happy that the ropes that bound her were well tied. This one was dangerous.

One of the new recruits, Larab, got up to move toward the captive. The leader started to call him back, but thought better of it. She couldn't get away, not with the 8 men that were here. Besides the new boy could use a lesson on playing with the captives, especially one such as this.

Larab knelt down where Ameni was tied up. He put his ugly face down close to hers, and she could smell his fetid breath. "You not gonna try anything is ya?" He asked leering down at her breasts. His eyes moved up to her face and saw her shaking her head. "That smart. We all may want a turn on you and it will just go easier if you lay back and enjoy it."

He rolled her over and untied her legs first, then her arms. Moving her onto her back he watched for any movement signaling escape. That she would fight never entered his mind. He stood near her feet and started to remove his leggings. The thought of having his way with this elf-bitch had him excited and nervous. As he knelt down to spread her legs, Ameni brought her foot up and caught him solidly in the stones. His descent was more rapid than he intended, and he dropped on his back, holding his crotch with both hands.

The rest of the men laughed at his sorry state. The laughter of his comrades along with the idea that she had hurt him enraged Larab. He picked up his knife aiming to maim her since the leader had stated he wanted her alive.

He had barely struggled to his feet when he heard someone yell in a strange language. They all looked toward the wall to see something come flying out of the shadows, landing near the fire. Everyone stared as the head of their companion came rolling to a stop at the edge of the fire.

Frozen at the unexpected sight, they were slow to react to the large, mail clad figure that was rushing from the same area where the gristly remains had come from. At first they thought it was some sort of demon since he seemed to have a fire glowing around him. He was also speaking in a strange language. Ameni recognized it as Elvish, but the words themselves were unfamiliar. She thought it must be an ancient form of Elvish that had been thought lost for time uncounted.

Aldren had seen Ameni kick the mercenary and saw the reaction. Up until now he had been pretty calm. When Larab had pulled out the knife, he once again had felt the battle rage overcome him. His enemies were slowing down in their movements and he felt the power within him come to the surface. With every step he felt some power growing within him. It felt as though he would burst if he did not release it somehow.

He had made it most of the way across the courtyard before anyone could mount a defense. The first man to reach him was immediately falling forward holding his organs that were coming out from the slice that Aldren had put in his midsection. When he contacted fire seemed to erupt from his sword. The next was left with blood spurting from a gash that went from his groin to his shoulder.

Ameni had jumped up from the ground and had dispatched Larab before he knew what was happening. She grabbed her knives from the doorway where they had been placed, and joined the fray. She dispatched the one called Ceak and looked up to see where Aldren was. As soon as she spotted him she froze in her tracks.

She had heard legends about ancient elven warrior/mages who could call the elements to them. They would be surrounded by fire, which made them nearly invincible. But this came only to the most powerful. Yet she was seeing it first hand in the form of her mate.

She shook herself out of her shock in enough time to block a thrust from one of the few raiders left. She then slit his throat and kicked the body in the chest to get him out of her way. She turned in time to see Aldren kill the leader. He poised his sword as if to pierce the raider's heart, but the sword never touched the man. Instead, a tongue of flame shot from the sword's point and shoot straight into the man's chest. The man screamed in agony as his entire body burst into flame, becoming a pile of ashes in just seconds.

With the death of the raider's leader the fire surrounding Aldren started to dissipate. As it left, Aldren dropped to his knees totally exhausted. His sword fell clattering to the ground and he slumped over. Ameni ran to him checking to see if he was injured. She tried to pull him up, but he fell into her arms unconscious. She found that he was still alive, but totally exhausted. She gently lowered him to the ground and tried to make him comfortable. Then she went to release the other prisoners.

The dozen women and young men were in varying states of health. All wore the marks of torture and were in dire need of food and drink. Those that were the most able were sent to find food and water for the others. She then went about gathering up the weapons.

She was still pulling items from the bodies when she heard a moan of agony from Aldren. She ran over to him and knelt down. Every muscle in his body was pulled so tight they looked about to burst. She tried to knead the muscles to relax them but the cramping was so widespread that she could not keep up. Frantically, she shouted to one of the prisoners that was walking in the courtyard to come and help her. Together they worked feverishly until they both developed cramps in their own arms. Suddenly, the muscles went slack and Aldren fell into a more normal slumber.

Ameni stood and went to check on everyone and to get food and water for herself. When she returned to Aldren she found him in a restful slumber. She pulled a blanket over them both and fell into a fitful sleep.

As the light of the sun peeked over the walls and into the courtyard, Ameni stirred. Remembering the events of last night, she awoke completely and checked on Aldren. At her touch on his face he stirred and groaned. Opening his eyes he saw his bondmate looking down at him with a worried stare.

He smiled at her and attempted to sit upright. He made it, but he could not believe just how sore and stiff his body was. It was if he had fought a daylong battle. Ameni's gentle touch helped him to keep his balance as his muscles refused to cooperate. Eventually, he found his bearings and started to move around a little bit. Ameni brought him some stew that had been cooking over the fire and a draught of wine.

The prisoners were now starting to stir. After a good meal they had recovered a great deal though some were still too weak to walk far. These were the ones that had been in captivity the longest. It would take a day or two more for them to recover enough to start back to their villages.

Aldren asked for someone to go out the gates and bring in the stallion. He was tied in the trees just beyond the castle. Knowing the temperament of the horse was likely to be skittish, Ameni went herself. She found him and calmed him down before bringing him back.

While she was gone, Aldren succeeded in standing and finally walking. At first he moved like an old man but by the time Ameni returned, he had worked most of the stiffness out. He was examining the bodies of the men that had been slain when Ameni returned.

When walked up to where he was squatting. He looked up at her puzzled. "I recognize a few of the wounds as coming from you. But these others seem strange." He pointed to the first man he met in the courtyard the night before. "Look at the edges of the wound. They looked like they were charred by a fire."

Ameni looked into his face. "Don't you remember at all what happened?" When he shook his head she continued. "You came across the courtyard yelling in what I think was an ancient form of Elvish. You were moving at a great speed, and were enveloped in fire. It surrounded you. The raiders did not stand a chance. Their leader..." She hesitated as she relived the sight, "You didn't even touch the leader. A flame shot from your sword and burnt him to ashes!"

Aldren looked at her in disbelief. "I remember nothing from when I saw the scum lunge at you with the knife. I threw the head of the guard to try and distract them, and then I felt like something was building in me. Then I woke up stiff and sore this morning."

Ameni grasped his upper arms. "Remember what Belwin told you? That you had tremendous power and that you would have to harness it. I think you unleashed that power in your battle rage without any control on it. And this is the result."

Aldren knew that he had to learn to harness that power and to learn to make it do his bidding. He felt that if it went uncontrolled again, it could kill him. He went to the stallion and pulled his mother's journal out hoping to find something to help him. He spent most of the day alone reading and thinking.

They set a watch around dusk using the most able men and bade the rest to sleep for they were going to leave in the morning. Then the rest settled down for the night. The excitement of going home was rampant but most were soon sleeping.

Aldren lay awake for some time deep in thought. The source of his power was still a mystery to him, other than perhaps coming from his mother's blood. That much he could understand and handle. What caused him the most concern was that he couldn't control when it showed itself, and especially when it was let loose. He had learned from his mother's journals

that it was probably a form of wild magic and among the hardest to harness. But when controlled, it was one of the most powerful. Lying still he concentrated on the feeling that had overcome him and he felt the tingling beginning again. He quickly stopped but vowed to study and work harder on it in the future.

The trek that Aldren had made in less than two days took almost a week. The weakest were set upon the horses that had belonged to the raiders but the pace was still slow. On the evening of the fifth day from the castle, the town came into sight. There was rejoicing when families were reunited. Fathers back with their children and wives, young sons and daughters were again with their parents.

Aldren and Ameni were both treated like royalty. They were offered anything in the village including several of the daughters for Aldren's pleasure. They were given a small house for their private use and the best of what the village had. The first night Aldren remembered the boots and presented them to Ameni. She was delighted in them and decided to thank him in a way that would give them both a vast amount of pleasure.

After kissing him soundly, she pushed him down upon the bed. She untied his breeches as he removed his tunic. When he was naked, she stepped back and started to remove her own clothing. When she had finished, Aldren once again stared in wonder at her perfect body. Her skin was flawless except for the scar that ran from her left breast and along her side. Her hips, backside and legs were still perfect. He called her over and started to caress her skin as she moved up to lie beside him. Her own hands were exploring him as well as she reached up for another kiss.

Their coupling started out slow and tender. She was soaked with her excitement and he slid into her easily while they lay side by side. He was moving slowly enjoying the feel of her breasts rubbing against him as he moved in and out of her. She matched his movements, rocking her lower body in rhythm to him, trying to pull as much of his manhood into her as possible.

As their passion started to climb, Ameni rolled onto her back, pulling Aldren over her. No matter how capable she was in other things, she still enjoyed the feeling of her bondmate covering her, protecting her in a way.

The sight of his large body over her was almost as exciting to her as feeling his manhood moving in and out of her body.

Aldren felt his release was coming closer and he started moving faster. Ameni felt the change in speed and pulled her long legs up rolling her lower body. The new sensation was immediately felt by both. The added tightness caused Aldren to go over the edge and he groaned as he shot his seed deep inside her. For her part, Ameni felt his manhood rub and stimulate parts of her that had never been touched. When she felt him swell and erupt into her, she felt her own release start. Her body tightened as the muscles within her lower body went into a rhythm of release. Their groans and cries mingled as much as their combined fluids mixed together.

Aldren collapsed onto his elbows above her. Her eyes were still closed as she came down from the clouds and he kissed both of her eyelids before moving to her lips. She smiled then reached up and returned the kiss. As he felt himself slip out of her he rolled off her and onto his back. She moved over to where she was laying on her side partially draped over him. It was in this position that they fell into a deep and dreamless slumber.

They stayed in the village several days enjoying the hospitality of the grateful people. In the evenings, they ate with a different family enjoying the company and the food. In return they would tell tales of things they have seen and the places they have been. The young women would flirt with Aldren and the young boy could do little more than gaze at Ameni in a mixture of awe and lust.

The day finally came that they both agreed that it was time to move on. These people were not wealthy by any means and the harvest had not been the best this last season. In addition they were both feeling a strange pull to be once again alone in the wilderness. They packed their saddlebags and donned their armor once again.

The villagers that had grown used to seeing them just in tunics and leggings were awed once again when they appeared in their full apparel. Their horses were saddled and waiting for them. The smith had cared for them well trimming their feet and brushing them until they almost



glowed. They mounted and once again rode from the village, the cries of well-wishers fading from their ears as they moved on.

The road was wide and they rode side by side for most of the distance. The sun was warm and their horses were in fine spirits as they trotted northward once again.

Ameni broke their silence by asking if he had figured out what had happened during the fight. Aldren tried to explain what he felt, but ended up falling into an uncomfortable silence.

"What I do know is that I must control whatever it is. I can get the start of the tingle that I felt, but I have not pushed to see if it will come back or not."

"Maybe if you can hold the rage down, keep control of it, you won't be hurt so bad afterward."

Aldren thought on this while they were riding. If he could keep his wits without going into a full-blown battle rage, perhaps it would work. Problem was, he never knew when the rage would overtake him. And the lifestyle of an outlaw and sword for hire would put him into situations that could trigger it.

They found an open area near some trees and decided to camp there. They were many leagues from the village and were tired. After the evening meal they were sitting near the fire, Aldren sharpening his sword and daggers and Ameni replacing the damaged string of her bow.

Aldren decided to try to bring back the power that had appeared when he rescued Ameni. Concentrating on what emotions he was feeling at that time, he brought the anger and fear to the top. The tingling started as just a feeling of power starting deep in his body and radiating out to encompass his arms and legs. As the power increased and moved out, he tried to control it with his mind. It wavered a bit, threatening to take over, but he fought it.

Into his mind came words that he could not speak, but instinctively knew they were the words of control and power that would allow him to work with the magic he was summoning. He used the words in his mind to contain and finally suppress the magic, and he felt the power die back.

When his mind came back to the present he realized that Ameni was staring at him with just a hint of fear in her eyes. Then he felt his muscles try and cramp up again.

This time it was more of tightness rather than the spasms of horrible pain that he had felt before. The cramping subsided and he was hit with a feeling of exhaustion.

Ameni came over to him to massage his arms and shoulders. "I have to tell you that was a scary sight to see. You seemed to grow taller and I could almost see you drawing power. The air was cracking like thunderbolts all around you."

"I controlled it. I could feel it coming into me, trying to take over. I was fighting it in my mind when some words came to me. I couldn't pronounce them, but somehow I knew they would hold the power in check. I used them to drive it back down."

He stretched his legs out starting to recover from the feeling of exhaustion. "I am not sure if it is a good thing or something that I should try to use. It leaves me as weak as a newborn babe." With that he lay back and was asleep within minutes. Ameni set herself to watch until he recovered.

Aldren dreamed of his mother that night. It was about when he was young and had seen his mother battle a mage that was intent on destroying her. The shaft of flame that he remembered seemed to be just like what Ameni had described when he had destroyed the leader of the raiders. More importantly, the words that he had heard in his head were the same ones his mother had used when she had destroyed the mage. Now he understood that it was an ancient tongue that was the basis of the power that had been in the lands long before the present days.

Ameni woke him midway through the night for his watch, and he was surprised that he felt no effects of his working the magic. The rest of the night went quietly, with the far off sound of a wargbear screaming breaking the silence.

Once they were on the road, he told Ameni of the dream and what he had discovered. He could tell that she was uneasy with the power that he seemed to possess. She would be stiffer in her posture and her movements less relaxed. He questioned her about it.

She rode in thought for a moment then pulled up for him to come along side of her. "I think it comes from the fear of powerful magics that had been all about me most of my life. Our clan shied away from any but the most simple, thus the most safe of spells. And the sight of you when you become enveloped in flame is frightful indeed."

Tensions eased then as they rode forward. They were getting closer to the northern rim of the lands. The sight of the high mountain crags was becoming clear now. The destination that Aldren had been trying for when he first met Ameni was supposed to be at the base of those mountains. He was still headed there in the hopes of joining the group of rebels that were said to be massing there.

Ameni had agreed to accompany him there in the beginning, but since their relationship had become more than just friends and companions, the situation became one of mutual consent.

He asked her about it the next morning during their practice. She moved out of her stance, thought for a second then answered. "At first there was nowhere else I could go. Since we have become much more than just companions. If you wish to go on to the Tower of the Guard, then of course I will go with you. Even though we are not officially bonded for my part I believe we are. Besides where else could I go to get this much adventure."

Aldren leaned on the hilt of his sword. "For my part we are bonded closer than any ceremony could make us. We have been through life and death together. Where some would look askance at you weapons skills, it is something that I cherish in you. For I can see both sides of you and fear neither. Once we get to a settlement that has an Elvish council, I would like to make our bonding official."

He had finally said something that had really been on his mind since she had been captured. The fear that he would lose Ameni and once again be alone had caused him to realize that he needed to have their bonding made official in the records of the elvish clans.

Ameni was very happy and very relieved. She had wanted this since the first time they made love, but felt she could not bring it up. She did not want him to feel trapped and that it was of his own free will. Now she

knew that he wanted her forever since the Elven bonding was considered to transcend just this plane of existence. Elves never bonded more than once.

They stayed where they were for the day, taking advantage of the secluded glade they were in to rest and take stock of what supplies they had. Ameni's bow had brought down two hares that they roasted for the evening's meal. They were seated on opposite sides of the fire when Ameni dropped the scabbard she was oiling. She grabbed her bow and knives and moved into the darkness.

Aldren had seen her first movements and reacted by pulling his sword and moving back to where the horses were. It was a few moments before a voice called out from the direction of the road they had been following. "Hello near the fire. I wish to come in."

"What be your need and who are you?" Aldren bellowed out.

"I am from the Tower of the Guard and I must ask what is your business here?"

"I am searching for the Tower of the Guard. I fled from the King's garrison and seek to find safety."

"What is the name you go by?" Asked the voice as he approached the light.

"I am known as Aldren, son of Harcon and Elisene."

The movement stopped dead. Aldren could hear the man chuckle quietly. "So they haven't got you yet, you old cur. I thought I recognized the voice, but I had to be sure. It is I, Vabryn."

The leader of the men stepped into the light. It was indeed Vabryn. A couple more men came up behind him. Aldren was still unsure as to if this was a trap, so he did not speak of Ameni's presence. He did however step into the light so his old friend could see who it was.

The two clasped forearms in greeting. He then introduced the men behind him. They settled by the fire and Vabryn gave Aldren the tale that led to his leaving the service of the king.

"The king is no longer in charge of his own court. The high priest has slithered his way in like a snake and now makes the decisions. I think that Baralas that priest had stolen what little mind the king had.

I can tell you that he was livid when those priests were killed in their temple. Word was sent to us to capture the killers and send them to the court for interrogation, which of course meant torture and death. I was pretty sure it was you and the elf you were traveling with, but I wouldn't tell them that.

Rather than hunting you, me and several in my troop left and came straight to the Tower. By the way, where is that Elf woman anyway. She sure was a beautiful woman."

Aldren grinned at his old friend. "Probably with an arrow aimed at your back." With that he whistled and called out in Elvish, "*They are friendly. It is safe to come in.*"

In less than a moment's time, Ameni appeared at the edge of the circle of men. A few were startled with her silent appearance and reached for their sword hilts. Vabryn told them to relax. They did so but kept a close eye on her. The looks ranged from the wary, to the lustful as she moved gracefully over to where Aldren was seated.

One of Vabryn's men, a rather tall and stocky fellow spoke up. "I don't think bringing women, elven or no into the tower would be right. After all she may be dressed like a fighter, but she wouldn't be much good in a fight."

Aldren started to rise but Vabryn's hand stayed him. Vabryn then spoke to the man. "Kaldon, you have no experience with elves and especially this one. I saw her notch a shaft and pull a bow on me before I could blink. Since she is traveling with Aldren I am sure she can use those knives in her belt. She could best any two of you."

Kaldon stood laughing at such a thought. Ameni stood and before the big man could take a breath, she had both of her curved blades out and on each side of his throat.

His eyes bulged in terror as he realized just how close he had come to death just then. The others in the troop started to rise, but Vabryn calmed

them down. Ameni just smiled at the man and slowly replaced her weapons and returned to her seat.

Kaldon sat down much slower and with less grace. He looked at the elf for a moment rubbing his throat. "My pardon Lady for doubting you. I would never have believed it if I had not seen it with my own eyes."

Ameni nodded her acceptance of the apology and things settled down. The troop decided to escort the warriors to the Tower in the morning and after drawing lots for watch, they all settled down for the night.

Aldren thought he would be relieved to make it to the Tower, but strangely he felt that rather than the end of their journey, it was just starting another path.

## Chapter 6

Posted: June 27, 2004 - 08:43:44 pm

The road to the Tower had to be the easiest that Aldren and Ameni had traveled since they had come together. The troop of men that rode with them provided for fewer watches at night and the chance of being attacked with a group of this size was not likely. They were known to Aldren and the ease with which they integrated into the group was amazing. After what they had endured in the past months, it really felt good to relax a bit.

The first night, they made camp in a site that was used often by men from the tower. There were supplies cached and plenty to eat along with mead to wash it down with. One of the men grumbled that since they had a woman with them, she should do the cooking. Vabryn quickly put a stop to that. "Any woman who can fight with the speed and cunning that the Lady Ameni has shown deserves respect. Besides, do you think you can force her to cook for you?"

After dinner, Ameni was oiling the leather in her armor when a huge shadow passed between her and the fire. She looked up to see the scarred face of Kaldon looking down at her.

"My Lady, I would like to speak with you."

She smiled at him and bade him to sit near. Aldren, who was on the other side reading his late mother's journal, looked up in interest as well.

Kaldon set his great frame on a large flat stone and in his deep gravelly voice started to speak. "I am not much in the way of smart, but I have to say that there are very few that can best me in a fight. From what Captain Vabryn said during our journey today, Lord Aldren is probably one of them. But I never would have thought a woman could have taken me as fast as you did. I need to know how you could do what most cannot."

Ameni set down her rag and replaced the stopper in the container. She thought for a minute before she spoke. "I believe that it comes from my race. The Kindred are physically stronger and quicker than the average human. For all your strength, you would be equal to the average male elf. Do not feel that you have been bested by a mere woman, for my sire

taught me to fight in the elven method of *Hanbura* since the time I could handle a weapon."

Kaldon looked a little more at ease. It had bothered him - a lot - that this young and shapely female could have taken him with no more trouble than stepping on a bug. His people had been taught that women were always weaker and nowhere near equals with the men.

This was no ordinary woman in his eyes though. He had been watching her all day, first with anger then curiosity. Now that she had explained herself, he decided that she simply was more of a goddess than a mere mortal being. That had to be the explanation. No woman could do what she did. Of course to his simple thinking, a goddess should be revered and protected. He decided that he would do his best to do just that.

Having made up his mind, he stood, bowed to her and Aldren and then took his place in the watch. Ameni looked over at Aldren. "Could you tell me what that was about? He looked at me like I never seen anyone else look before. It wasn't lust, I know THAT look."

Aldren was trying to keep from smiling. "For some reason, Kaldon worships you. That was a look of awe. Of course I worship you but for an entirely different reason."

Ameni shoved his leg with the side of her foot. She grinned at her mate, and then went back to her oiling.

They were making good progress and Vabryn figured that they would arrive at the tower by nightfall. Aldren and Ameni rode together in the middle of the troop but the men were giving them some space. They both rode in an easy silence, comfortable in their own company and the ones they rode with. Suddenly, Ameni stopped and cocked her head. Far off in the distance, Aldren could faintly hear a sound that did not seem of this world. Deep as though it was coming from far inside a well.

Far in the distance was a creature in the sky. Even at this distance, they could see that it was huge, probably the length of five horses standing nose to tail. It circled once then dove out of sight.

The rest of the troop had stopped as well. The sighting of a dragon in the sky was a rare sight. It was only thought to happen when the creatures



were in a mating flight. Though there were legends of dragons attacking a group of humans, there were no eyewitness tales since nobody survived a dragon attack.

In the lands of the South, dragons were thought to have died out an age or more ago, if they had ever existed at all. Now, Aldren had seen the legend in the flesh. Many things had happened to him since he had left the court of the King, but this was one of the most awe inspiring as well as frightening.

The troop slowly shook off their emotions and once again started up the trail. As they got closer to the tower the landscape changed. Gone were the forests, replaced by smaller bushes stunted by lack of nourishment among the huge rocks. They were now riding close to the northern mountains and the trail was following along the sheer cliffs. The road was wide enough for four horses to ride abreast and bordered on the side away from the cliff by a low wall of hewn stones set tightly together.

The "tower" was actually two towers built into the face of the mountain. They were octagonal with two of the sides buried in the face of the cliff. The massive stones that made up the structures were fit together with such precision that one would have to inspect them closely to see the breaks that defined each block. They rose over a hundred feet to a parapet that would give an unfettered view of road and the valley below.

The towers guarded a set of gates made of wood and iron that closed the way into the interior of the keep. As tall as 5 men and as wide as the road, they looked to be able to withstand any battering ram known to man both ancient and modern.

The sentries at the top called down from their protected positions and the gates were opened. The troop rode through the main gate, into a tunnel about 50 strides long and under another gate that was designed to be dropped in case the first was breached. They rode out into a huge bowl several leagues across, its sides raising several hundred feet and surrounding the entire complex. Several thousand men could be housed here with room for training, drilling in formations and tactics, and any other needs of a standing army.

At the left side and again built into the cliff was a stone palace with a single tower rising above it almost to the height of the walls of the bowl. Most of the troop headed to the barracks leaving Vabryn and his second in command, an older and rather surly man named Halicot, to escort Aldren and Ameni to meet the leader of this enclave.

They passed through the open doorways into a long receiving hall. There were guards standing at their posts at regular intervals along both sides of the hall. At the very far end a man who looked to be several years older than Aldren sat in a tall and ornately carved chair. He was average in height and well dressed. His graying hair was brushed back and held in place by a gilded broach.

Aldren did a quick scan of the rest of the room. Off to one side was a table that held maps and various other parchments scattered in a haphazard fashion. There were tapestries on the walls made of rich fabrics depicting the ancient legends and creatures that were once thought to have walked in the lands. Otherwise, the only other feature was a fireplace large enough to heat the hall and a few chairs surrounding the table and hearth.

The leader, Kendrich, rose to greet them. "Aldren, late of the King's garrison I take it." He offered his hand in greeting. As Aldren grasped his forearm he continued. "Your reputation precedes you."

"As does yours Kendrich. But I am not sure how much of what Vabryn has told you is plain truth or embellishment."

"T'was not just Vabryn, I have sources all over the lands. I know of why you left the King's employ, that it is believed that you have earned the wrath of the High Priest of the new cult for the killing of several priests. I have been told that you are a fair man, honest to a fault, and quick to take retribution when wronged. Such qualities make you a leader of men."

He then turned to Ameni and brought his arm across his chest. "Welcome to the Tower of the Guard, Ameni of the kindred."

Ameni returned the salute. "My thanks to you for your hospitality. May you live long for the span of men."

"I am sure that you are weary from the journey. We shall find you rooms so you may rest. I imagine that tomorrow you will wish to stretch your

limbs and sharpen your skills in the practice fields. Vabryn, take them to the captain's quarters for the night. After tomorrow we will find more permanent dwellings."

Vabryn gestured for them to follow. He led them out of the palace and to the first building to the right of the entrance. He found a set of rooms that was empty and sent orders that all of their belongings be brought in. He started to leave when Aldren spoke up. "Vabryn, stay while we are waiting. I need to know what is going on. The invitation to the practice fields sounded more like an order."

Vabryn turned to his old friend, his face somber. "There are those among Kendrick's inner circle of advisors that do not believe you are as good as your legend has it. Others that believe too much of the gossip they hear and fear you I think."

"Legend? Just what legend?"

Vabryn looked surprised. "You have not heard? You are supposed to be the one that can defeat the king and the priests then restore peace to the lands. Ever since you left the king's employ, rumors have abounded about you laying waste to those that oppose you, and giving aid to those that deserve it. The wildest tales have you as one of the Ancient Kindred reborn"

Aldren would have laughed if it were not for the seriousness of his friend's face. This could be dangerous. Expectations of this magnitude had a way of getting one killed if they were not fulfilled. "You know that the only thing that I have done is to survive. And that is with the help of Ameni. I am not the long awaited liberator of the legends. I am just a man."

"I know that. But I am afraid that you will be tested on the practice field tomorrow so be at your best." Then he turned to Ameni. "My Lady, you may be challenged as well. I have seen you fight but the attitude of most here is that women of any race are only good for comfort after a fight. As well, most have never encountered an elf."

A knock on the door signaled the arrival of their belongings. Vabryn took that opportunity to take his leave as well. Following the packs was a meal of roasted meat, roots, and mead. The companions ate, checked their weapons and then settled for the evening. Ameni took a look around the

set of rooms that had been assigned to them. There was a large bed, a round-top trunk for their belongings and a small table that held a basin and pitcher of water. A small room was attached containing the facilities that would be needed. A constant stream of water flowed through the facilities to remove the waste. The stonework for these facilities was like that of the towers. Satisfied with their arrangements as well as their safety, Ameni began to get ready for sleep. Watching her remove her armor and leggings, brought feelings of arousal to Aldren and when he touched his mate he found her of the same mind. They made love quickly and quietly as they were both feeling the long days on the trail. Afterwards, they settled into a comforting sleep with their limbs entangled.

Aldren awoke just as the rays of the sun kissed the tops of the walls of the bowl. Ameni was already dressed in her full armor with her knives in her belt and her bow and quiver draped across her back. Aldren dressed quickly, checking his own weapons. They then left the rooms looking for the dining hall for something to break their fast.

The hall was serving hot cereal with honey and roasted meats that had been spiced. Warm bread and a brewed herbal tea completed the meal. When they had arrived there were few in the hall, but before they were finished, the place was full of warriors of all types. Even with the crowding and fighting for a place to sit, Ameni noted that one and all gave them plenty of space. As she looked around at the faces, she noted that the expressions ran from the friendly smiles of Vabryn's troop to some of actual fear. Aldren had also seen this and they finished quickly and stepped out into early morning light.

The walked over to the large field that was used for practice. The area was deserted except for an old man sitting on a rock shelf wrapped in a cloak. His covered head was bowed almost to his chest. He completely ignored them, and they soon forgot about him. Ameni set her bow down and slipped her knives from their sheaths as Aldren pulled his sword from its scabbard. They faced off and started a set of *Hambra* movements that would loosen their muscles and focus their senses. Soon they were moving in the grace of the exercise, each motion beautiful but very deadly.

After they finished, Ameni suggested that Aldren work on the control of his 'gift'. He had been quietly bringing up the feelings often only to push them down. Each time, he would feel the power become stronger, but at

the same time his control was even better. He whispered the words of the ancient tongue in his head and felt the now familiar tingle as he drew the fire of the elements to him. Ameni was standing back watching intently. He seemed to gain a shimmer, almost a glow that surrounded him. He moved into a defensive position and started to battle an imaginary foe. As he moved the aura became stronger and he moved even faster. Like a voice in the distance, he heard Ameni shout to him to control it at that level. He concentrated and found he could stay at this level without losing the thought needed to fight effectively. He forced it back down before anyone showed up. He felt the tingling fade as he returned the power back to the elements. He noticed with delight that the muscle cramping was nonexistent now and the fatigue dissipated faster than before. He was restored after only a few minutes of rest.

Sitting back, Aldren glanced over remembering the strange old man. He was still there wrapped in his cloak, but the hood was thrown back revealing a head of long white hair and a pair of dark eyes that were dancing as he nodded and smiled at the pair.

Aldren was back to his normal energy level when others showed up on the field and began to pair off for practice. Ameni wondered off to the archery range with her bow while Aldren stayed where he was. Vabryn approached and asked if he would spar for a bit before training of the younger men started. They squared off and had a friendly match, both remembering a time many years ago when they were both being taught by the swordmaster in the King's garrison. Aldren had always been the better of the two because the swordmaster pushed him harder than anyone else. After all, Harcon would expect nothing less from his only son. They were soon sweating even in the cool of the morning. Lowering his sword, Vabryn moved to Aldren and clasped him on the shoulder.

"Aye Aldren, it's been many a moon since I have had someone who could make me work in a sparring match. It feels good to be challenged, my friend."

Aldren smiled at his friend. "We both have come into our own, I believe. No longer are we the young boys under my father's eye. Experience has taught you well."

They noticed then a rather large group had gathered to watch them. As the pair turned to face them, there were cheers and congratulations on such a fine display. There seemed to be a look of awe in some of the younger faces. They had just seen a pair of court-trained swordmasters prove their skill, and the newest realized just how far they had to go to attain that level.

But now it was time for Vabryn to start working with the inexperienced troops. Aldren followed Vabryn as he began pairing recruits together to measure their progress. As the pairs would spar, Vabryn would correct mistakes and cajole those not working to their potential. After being asked to help, Aldren started to teach as well. Many of the mistakes he remembered committing in his youth were to be found in these troops today. Sometimes correcting a problem was as simple as changing the grip they had on the sword or perhaps showing them a better way to stand.

Watching one pair he suddenly stopped them. "Do not over extend your sword arm when you thrust. Your balance is off and it is harder to protect yourself. Let your opponent come within range of your sword, don't try to extend your range to them. Let me show you." He drew his own sword from his back and asking the man's partner to come at him, he demonstrated just what he meant. "Learn your range and then you can keep anything out of that area."

As the two went back to sparring, Halicot came striding up. The pair stopped at his approach, as did most of those in the area. He sneered at Aldren for a moment. "You talk a good fight, but can you do what you talk about?"

Aldren knew this was the challenge he had been expecting. "Is that a challenge?"

"It would be if I thought you would really be a challenge."

Vabryn came running up to them. Turning to Aldren, he spoke quietly. "Besides me, Halicot is the best swordsman here. You showing up with your reputation preceding you, he is afraid that you will take that honor. He will come at you with everything he has."

Aldren just nodded. Again Vabryn spoke but this time loud enough for all to hear. "The challenge has been given and accepted. The bout will

continue until one is disarmed or calls for quarter. This challenge is not to be to the death." This meant that the battle was to follow strict rules and traditions that had been followed for generations.

The students formed a rough circle about 15 paces across with the two men in the center. The combatants stood 5 paces apart swords pointing down, their tips touching the dirt. There was silence all around as Vabryn stepped into the center of the circle. He raised his arm to start the battle, but Halicot ignored tradition and charged Aldren before the signal was given to begin. He took a huge overhead swing designed to cleave Aldren into two pieces. Aldren's own sword easily blocked the blow and the battle was on.

It was soon clear Aldren was playing with Halicot, easily blocking the series of blows and countering with moves that had Halicot scrambling to defend against. It was also quite clear to all watching that Halicot was getting frustrated and angry. His best moves were being turned and his opponent had done nothing but an unhurried defense. He was now past the point of trying to beat this man and now was ready to kill Aldren if he could. He stepped back and grabbed a knife from his belt intending to bury it in Aldren's gut.

"Enough of this!" Aldren growled, and moved in. Before Halicot could realize what had happened, he had to block a blow so vicious that his sword was torn from his hand. The next instant, Halicot felt the tip of Aldren's sword pressing against the base of his throat. He let the dagger drop from his upraised hand.

"Say it!" Aldren snarled in a voice just loud enough for those closest to them to hear. Halicot swallowed, his eyes filled with surprise and fear. "Quarter!" he managed to get out. Aldren lowered his sword and backed away the required three paces.

Vabryn called the match done and declared Aldren the winner. He also sent Halicot from the field in shame for disregarding the rules of the ritual challenge. The students made way for Halicot as he stomped off defeated and humiliated. They went back to their pairings, but were more interested in discussing what they had seen than actual work.

Aldren was feeling the effects of the battle so he moved off to try and calm himself down. He was moving toward the archery range when a cheer rose from the crowd that had gathered there. Peering through the crowd he realized that Ameni was busy proving herself as well.

She was standing calmly with her back to the target. Her opponent took careful aim and let loose with a shaft that hit the man-sized dummy in the middle of the chest. There was a cheer from the crowd as he turned to the elf wearing a satisfied smile. Ameni returned the smile. Then, in one swift movement, she drew a shaft of her own, notched, spun around and fired hitting the dummy in the head. Before the crowd could react, she had fired again leaving the shaft sticking obscenely in the dummy's crotch. There was a loud gasp and then wild applause as her opponent conceded the match. He extended his hand, which she grasped.

The crowd started moving away and Aldren moved toward his mate. "That last shot was a little overkill wasn't it?" He grinned down at her.

"I was running low on arrows so I wanted to end the competition. How did the challenge go for you?"

Aldren's face clouded with concern. "I had no problem beating him, but he tried to cheat and I ended up shaming him. I think I have made a dangerous enemy."

"Then we will have to watch for him." She went to the targets and pulled her arrows and replaced them in her quiver. They walked off the field together heading on to their rooms.

Aldren and Ameni emerged from their rooms for the evening meal. They arrived at the dining hall as most of the troops were coming in. In a complete opposite of the morning, there were numerous offers for them to come and eat with a group. They settled with a group that included the man Ameni competed against, and several of the students from the archery range. Ameni was blushing from all the compliments and the retelling of the match. One of the younger ones told of the gossip that grew from Aldren's battle. He had to inform them that it was nowhere near the tale that they had heard. Nonetheless, the tales just kept growing. The conversation soon turned to more enjoyable subjects, talk of the games of chance that were going on that night, the possibility of trying to find some



pleasure in the arms of one of the ladies of the camp, although this talk was stopped as soon as they remembered Ameni was sitting there.

They mumbled embarrassed apologies to her, but she laughed and stated that she was going to retire for the evening so they could discuss the night's activities. She stood, and they all said their farewells. Aldren also rose from the table and bade them a farewell.

The two walked out into the cool night air. Away from the noise of the dining hall, the bowl had a serene quiet. The only sounds were from the sentries by the palace, and the scuffing of their own boots. Aldren stopped and looked up at the sky. The stars were clear showing as bright points of light. He felt like he was safe for now, not having to press on to another destination, not having to watch for enemies during the night. He wrapped his arm around Ameni's shoulder, pulling her to his side. She gave him a squeeze and then moved back so they could continue on.

They had made it to their rooms and were removing their weapons when there was a quiet knock on the door. Ameni had her knives at the ready, and Aldren unsheathed his sword before giving permission to enter. The door pushed open and in the frame stood the old man that they had seen that morning. He motioned for permission to enter the room and Aldren gave it putting away his sword.

The old man moved with a speed that they would not have counted on considering his years. He moved into the room and took a seat on the large chest that stored their belongings. They both stood expectantly waiting for him to explain his appearance in their room.

"I am Kal-angurr. I know your names and where you come from. I have lived here for more than three of your lifetimes, making my home in the tower and studying the ways of the old magic. I knew you would come here."

Aldren was wary even though he could feel that this Kal-angurr did not mean them any harm. "How would you know that we were coming here?"

"The voices in the tower spoke as you approached this place. I came tonight to take you there so you may learn of the things you are troubled about." He rose, expecting them to follow.

They followed Kal-angurr across the courtyard and to the side of the palace. They stopped against the outer wall. There were no visible lines within the wall but with a touch, Kal-angurr released a catch and a low door swung back silently on well-oiled hinges. The old man led the way using a torch that was by the entrance. They ascended a flight of stairs that wound around the inside of the wall, until they found themselves in a large chamber at the very top of the tower. It was octagonal and made of a polished stone. All around the outside walls were openings that would look out over the bowl and to the tops of the cliffs. In the center was a firepit that contained only embers.

Kal-angurr bade Aldren to move into the chamber while he and Ameni remained at the head of the stairs. Aldren walked around the perimeter looking out then returned to where the other two were standing. He was about to ask what he was supposed to do when a breeze came into the room from the outside. It almost seemed to carry words within its very air. Barely louder than a whisper, Aldren could tell that the voices were speaking to him. He sat near the firepit and listened closer. It was then that he was drawn into the web of their chanting.

He listened enraptured as the voices spoke of the coming of the ancients, the first ever to inhabit the land. They told of the coming of the Elves and of the alliances and intermingling of their races. How the Ancients taught the Elves to harness the power that was within all things, the strength of the elements: the earth, air, fire and water.

They told of the coming of the other animals including the dragons as well as the harmony of all the races that lasted for winters uncounted. How with the coming of humans, their greed started the disharmony that eventually brought the downfall of all the old alliances.

Most important, they whispered what he would need to know to survive what fate was holding for him. Words of the ancient tongue that would allow him to control those elements. And they revealed to him that he was of the Dragon Clan, the last of his kin. He alone held the secrets that could bring peace and harmony back to the lands.

Lastly, it spoke of a journey, which he would soon have to make to receive the power that would truly make him the leader of the Dragon Clan. This journey would not be measured in leagues traveled: rather within his

mind and his very soul. He asked how he would know the path, but the only answer was that he would have to follow what his heart told him.

As the words started to fade, Aldren found himself lying on the polished stone floor. He was not hurt, but unsure how he got into this position. Once more, the chamber was silent. He lifted his head to see Ameni moving towards him.

Ameni had stood by the top of the stairs during Aldren's ordeal. She heard the wind come through the openings around the wall, and watched as Aldren had been lifted up by them and carried around the room. She too had thought she heard voices contained in the wind, but she did not understand what they said. The noise had risen to a level that was almost unbearable. She had started to enter the room but was restrained by Kal-angurr. When Aldren settled on the floor, she took him for dead and started toward him. He raised his head and looked at her before rolling on his back.

She came to him and cradled his head while he regained consciousness. He leaned against her as he was still a little dizzy, but very grateful for her presence and caring. As soon as he regained his balance, they started the descent. They remained silent until they were safely back in their rooms. Kal-angurr remained to hear what had transpired. Aldren told them the basics of what he had seen and heard in the tower. The ancient words he kept to himself because he somehow knew they would not understand them. The old man told them that the voices would speak to him, but this was the first time that he had ever witnessed such a powerful exhibition.

Kal-angurr took his leave to return to his own chambers. Aldren and Ameni pulled off their armor and fell exhausted onto the bed and did not stir for the remainder of the night.

It was late in the morning before the pair finally emerged from their quarters. From the time they awakened, they talked of the events of the night before. Aldren was concerned about what had happened and what he had learned, especially what he had learned about himself. He never wanted power, only to be left alone to live his life.

"It is hard to believe that the blood of an ancient clan still flows through me. I wonder if my mother knew of this. Why didn't she prepare me for

what she must have known would come to pass? She had the gift of foresight, you know."

Ameni embraced her bondmate. "We have no answers. Tales were told of very old clans that had died out generations ago. Perhaps your mother did not speak of this to keep you from having to bear the responsibility at an age when you could not handle it." Then she looked him in the eye and gave a little grin. "Perhaps soon we can repopulate your lost clan. That would mean many children and much practice in order to conceive them."

Aldren laughed, relieving the tensions in his mind. "Well my mate, if we don't revive the Dragon Clan, it won't be from lack of trying." Then he leaned down and gave her a kiss that carried the promise of doing just that.

They ate a light meal then went exploring the rest of the compound. They discovered the smithy and the armories, and spent time getting to know some of the people that were supporting the rebels. This was a self-sufficient village inside the bowl, able to live for years without having to venture out, and safe in the knowledge that no enemy could invade.

They settled into a routine. They were on the practice field shortly after the morning meal, sharing their knowledge with the new recruits and keeping their own skills sharp. They quickly became popular with most of the troops and the support people. A few of the recruits became favorites of Aldren's and he spent extra time honing their skills.

There were those in the camp that cared little for them. These people were either jealous or had hatreds that were ingrained in their hearts. They were easy to spot and avoid however. Their evenings were often spent within their rooms talking, reading, caring for equipment, and of course, making love.

They had been there for a several sevendays when Kendrick requested that Aldren join him in the palace. He went into the palace hall to find Kendrick along with several of his inner circle of planners. Kendrick spotted him and motioned him to come closer. Aldren could see several maps marked with the movements of different troops on them.

"Aldren, I have a request. I need someone to take a small force and travel down this valley to see if we could set up an outpost in there. We need to

have our troops out patrolling and living in the surrounding area instead of just living within the tower. Spring is coming and we believe that the king will be sending troops out to feel out our strength. I am also hoping that we will be seeing more warriors coming to join us. We will need another place to bring them to."

Aldren studied the map carefully. He had learned much of the territory by going out with Vabryn and his troop a few times. He could see the reasoning for wanting an outpost, but there were several other places that would suit, all of them better than in a valley without an exit.

Aldren told Kendrich that he would go there and check the site for everything they would need for an outpost. Kendrich asked him to be ready to leave in two days and to only take a small force. They were supposed to be just a scouting trip. Aldren took his leave and went to assemble his group.

He picked Vabryn, and two of the newer troops that had showed promise. Ameni was going along with or without his say, and he knew as much. Kaldon insisted of going along as well. He would not allow his Goddess to face danger without him to protect her. Ameni tolerated the worship of the man since he did not directly approach her. They made their necessary arrangements to get food and were ready to depart. Out of habit, Aldren and Ameni packed all their belongings, which got some teasing remarks from the rest of the group.

The group set out at dawn. Aldren and Ameni rode in the lead looking for any problems along the way. Vabryn and Kaldon stayed in the rear to keep watch as well. This put the newer recruits in the middle. The riding order changed often so they would all remain alert. They would first head further west over a series of hills and valleys then south into what looked on the map like a small valley that was enclosed. It looked to be an easy ride of three days. It was still early enough in the spring that natural enemies should not yet be roaming freely. The unnatural enemies had not ventured this far north as of yet. It was not long before the group was out of sight of the tower and once again into the wilderness of the northern lands.

## Chapter 7

Posted: August 15, 2004 - 09:51:10 pm

They arrived at the valley they were seeking late in the afternoon of the third day. The group moved in cautiously. Aldren had been feeling a sense of dread since they had rode into the mouth of the canyon. He could not place a name on the fear, just a nagging feeling that something was not right.

The camp was quiet that night. The hares that Ameni had killed that day were roasted, and the wineskins were passed around. They set a watch with Aldren and Ameni taking the last watch. As expected, there was nothing moving and there were no night sounds except the sound of night creatures following the ancient dance of survival, the hunter seeking his prey. Aldren watched his bondmate as she moved silently on the opposite side of the camp. The grace and fluidity with which she almost floated from place to place still astounded him.

As he continued to scan the area, he took stock of the direction his life was moving. As much as he fought against becoming some kind of hero, he was gaining the reputation of one. Add in that the Dwarf Seer, the old healer Belwin and even the voices in the tower were proclaiming him to be some sort of savior. It was against his will to become what they proclaimed him to be. All he wanted to do was survive and live his life with his bondmate. Yet in the back of his mind, a small voice that sounded vaguely like his mother's was telling him that he will have little choice in the path he was following. The person he was would come through when it was needed the most and he would do the right thing. These were the things that would push him along his path.

Aldren looked into the camp to see someone stirring. From the height of the figure, he knew it had to be Vabryn. He would soon be rousing the rest of the camp so they could continue the mission that had been assigned to them. Sunrise was less than an hour off and they could soon be on their way. This mission seemed to be of little matter. From conversations with Kendrich, he was assured that any assault was an impossibility.

He was still trying to make up his mind about Kendrich. The man was likeable enough, but he seemed to be hiding his plans. Maybe the man did

not trust him as a newcomer. Not that it really mattered since he had no plans for rising in the ranks. All Aldren wanted was a place where he would not have to be constantly on guard. Someplace where he and Ameni could establish themselves and live in relative peace.

Aldren's thoughts were interrupted when he heard a stirring in the grass. He turned to see what it was when he heard Ameni's voice shout in Elvish, "*We are under attack! We are trapped! To arms!*" Aldren turned to see a huge garrison of the king's men rising up from the grass blocking the only escape route. They must have moved into the mouth of the canyon following their trail. Or, and Aldren shuddered at the thought, they had been waiting for them. Someone in Kendrick's court was a spy and gave them the information.

Aldren could not waste any more time on speculation, for the scene was about to erupt into the chaos of battle. Vabryn had heard Ameni's shout and had seen the troops. He grabbed his shield and sword kicking and shouting at the others to move or die. To their credit, they all were up and looking for the enemy within seconds.

Ameni was already taking down the closest troops with her bow. The advancing troops slowed as those in front went down. This gave Vabryn and the others enough time to get their boots and armor on. Soon though, she was out of arrows and dropped her bow, drawing her knives. What power that still resided in her race showed in her as she stood at the ready. Standing on a large rock, there was almost a shimmering aura surrounding her. Aldren thought she looked like an ancient warrior princess. He shook his head to remove any stray thoughts. This was not the time for idle musings; he had to focus on the enemies that were approaching.

As he readied himself for battle, Aldren felt the rising of the power of the elements within him. The numbers of the enemy were so great he knew they could not win. Regardless, he was going to go down taking as many as possible with him. As soon as the enemy came close enough, he attacked.

As leader of the King's garrison, Vorlkin thought this should be an easy capture. The word had come that the traitor who had killed the priests and fled from the court would be in this canyon. All they had to do was let them in then follow. Capture should be fairly easy. He had argued that

they did not need the full garrison, that a troop should be sufficient to capture or kill a few men. Now as he saw the first troops fall he was glad that his superior had insisted on emptying the keep where they were stationed.

Aldren and the rest of the men of the tower were more than holding their own. Kaldon was to Aldren's right using the large broadsword that he preferred to full advantage. He was trying to protect Ameni but there were enough for them both. Vabryn and the recruits were to his left using the tactics that had been practiced over and over to the best advantage.

Aldren was holding the middle. They were all backing slowly to the back of the canyon leaving a bloody trail of corpses in front of them. But the battle was taking its toll on the small group. They were tiring and most had cuts that were slowing them further. In desperation, Aldren released the restraints he had been holding upon himself. The tingling within him increased and he felt the power rush through him once again. Time seemed to slow as he felt the fire spreading through his body and into his limbs. At the same time, he began to chant in his mind some of the ancient words. He was vaguely aware that the words had to do with the dragons of Melagon, but had no time to contemplate it further.

As stalwart as the King's troops were, they recoiled from the sight of the fiery warrior before them. It was no longer a man that they were battling, but some kind of demon. He was coming into their ranks swinging wildly, killing all who were within his reach... Defense seemed to be useless. Any weapon that got close would be sent flying or simply dropped because of the heat that surrounded him.

Even with his power unchecked, he could not protect the rest of his companions. The King's troops that were not completely terrified made their way around Aldren and attacked the rest of the small band. Vabryn had brought them into a loose group with their backs close to the wall of the canyon. One of the recruits had become separated and was down, and another was faltering from fatigue. They all were coming close to their limits of endurance. Aldren was making his way back toward the band when Vorlkim called his troops back to form ranks for a final assault to finish off the rebels.



Friend and foe alike heard a deep roar that reverberated throughout the canyon. The very rocks seemed to tremble with the sound. The King's men fell to the ground in panic when a shadow passed over them in the pale sunlight. Looking up, they saw a huge beast diving toward the main part of the garrison; its huge claws showing talons as big as a man's arm. The ones that were mounted found their horses in a total panic and were soon scattered. The talons of the beast picked up two of the troop members and with its huge wings beating the air, moved toward the clouds dropping the helpless men upon the rocks below. Some of the bravest troops took aim at the beast and unleashed their arrows. One arrow tore through the membrane of its wing causing the dragon to bellow in pain and anger. The dragon then turned and made a pass through those remaining, blasting them with both fire and magic. What few were left fled back up to the mouth of the canyon, scrambling to avoid certain death.

Aldren slumped to his knees as the power drained from his body, returning to the elements from which it came. He sat down on an outcropping exhausted, but without the severe cramping that had always come after his use of that much power. The others in his party kept their distance forming a loose group a little distance away. Ameni came to check on him, but the others hung back, still not quite believing what they had seen. They were fearful of Aldren's powerful magic. It was not the minor tricks that they had seen him do before. The very thought that a man who they thought they knew had sprung into flame and then returning unharmed was simply impossible. This was something that came from times long ago forgotten.

Vabryn moved to dress the companions' wounds. Most were minor cuts with the exception of a deep wound in the thigh of Peryn, one of the recruits. Peryn had survived his first real battle and had done well. The praise that Vabryn gave as he dressed the wound was more healing to the young man than was the binding of his wound. As he worked, Vabryn was thanking the ancients that they had only lost one of their troop. The man who was killed was little more than out of childhood. In his zeal and blood lust, he had pushed too far into the enemy line and they had surrounded him. Vabryn knew that in battle men died, but he still mourned the loss.

All movement stopped as the group felt the inrush of air and a shadow that foretold of the dragon coming toward them. They watched, terrified,

as the creature came to rest on the ground very close to the rocks that Aldren was sitting on with Ameni.

Aldren was frightened but he was just too exhausted to move. The monstrous bulk of the dragon had settled close enough for Aldren to look directly into the great eye. He suddenly felt like his very life force was being drawn into this creature from the ancient legends. He felt the touch of the dragon's mind on his. He found his head filled with pictures and he understood what the creature was telling him. Foremost in its mind was that it (he) had been injured more than the tear in his wing. Ignoring the fearful glances of his companions and the low warnings from Ameni, he stood and approached the dragon.

Moving slowly with Ameni's support, he walked to the left side of the beast. Looking under the huge wing, he saw the broken shaft of an arrow. The head was buried deep between the scales and obviously into the muscle. Speaking out loud but mostly to himself Aldren muttered, "I can remove the arrow, but I don't know how to repair the damage."

Into his head came a deep voice. A voice that was filled with pain. "*You will know what to do. Trust what you have learned and what is in your heart.*"

Aldren stood in a state of shock for a moment. He looked down into Ameni's face. She glanced at the shaft and then nodded. Taking a deep breath, he gripped the remainder of the shaft and pulled. There was a hand's width of the shaft buried under where the scales had separated. It was coming out but slowly. He gave one final tug and with a loud bellow of pain from the dragon, it slid free.

With the arrow removed, the wound started to bleed freely. Both of the humans were covered in the thick liquid. Aldren put his hand under the scale and pushed his palm against the wound trying to stop the blood. He was afraid that he would not be able to stop the flow of the blood and the beautiful creature would die. He dug deep into his memory but could not find a healing spell that would help. In a final attempt, he relaxed his mind.

Aldren felt the powers from the elements coming into him again. This time, the powers felt different than anything he had experienced before. The power was becoming concentrated in his hand. Aldren could almost

feel the muscles and veins healing within the dragon's body. Suddenly he felt very tired. His last thought before he blacked out was "He will live."

Ameni caught her bondmate's body and gently let him down on the ground under the dragon's wing. She felt him breathing, but he was completely limp. She looked up as the dragon craned his neck around and sniffed the unconscious form. She heard a deep voice in her head. *"Do not fear Elf woman. The Clan-Brother will be well in a short while. He has healed me and I will protect him until he awakes."*

Ameni gave her head a shake. "How is it that I can hear you?"

*"It is my wish to speak to you, Elf-woman. You are concerned about the one who lies sleeping. It is proper for me to reassure you that he will recover. The fact that you have been anointed with my blood makes it easier. For being touched by the blood of a dragon, you will find that the magical abilities that you possess from your race will be heightened. Also there will be a bond between us that can only be broken in death. You will hear me, as I will be able to hear your call, no matter the distance between us."*

"Is that what brought you to our aid? Did Aldren somehow summon you?"

*"Yes. He is Dragon Clan. He is already bound to my entire race. He gave a call for aid that had not been heard in many ages of men. I heeded that call. Know this, Elf-woman. Your life as well as his is now entwined with the survival of my race. How you two follow the path that has been laid before you will decide the fate of the world. Heed my words Elf-woman. The clan brother now awakes. I will leave you and move up the canyon to heal"* Aldren was indeed starting to stir. The dragon backed away, moving further toward the mouth of the canyon. Ameni understood that even though the wound had been closed, he would need to rest in order to regain his strength.

Aldren sat up and allowed Ameni to help him move to the rock wall. He still felt the strain of what he had done, but was recovering. Taking a huge swallow of the wine that Ameni had offered, Aldren sat back with a sigh. Of all the things that had happened to him, this had to be the most difficult to understand. The blood of the dragon had dried leaving a thick, black crust that covered most of his torso. Under the crust, he could feel a tingling that was not exactly unpleasant, It was less than the feeling he had when he called the elements but along the same lines.

Aldren lifted himself up and after checking for wounds, moved toward the pool that was at the back of the canyon. He shucked his mail and tossed his tunic and leggings into the pool. Then, he lowered himself into the cool water. The difference in temperature served to clear his thinking and restore his strength. He did not know how, but he was sure of what had happened. And he somewhat resented what the fates had done to him. He was being pushed into a role that he had not sought out or wanted. He could not change what was happening, but he didn't have to like it.

Ameni soon joined him in the pool. For the elves, nudity was not something that bore much thought. As soon as she started to strip off her tunic, the three men that were still dressed stared at the beauty before them. All had seen women unclothed but none with the almost flawless beauty of the elf. Her light skin glistened as the water cascaded off of it. Elves retained their fairly pale complexion even after living out in the elements. Only the scar on her side disrupted the perfection of her skin, giving credence to the fact that she was not a goddess but a living breathing creature.

Eventually, Vabryn came to his senses and berated the others for staring. He left the couple in the pool and gave orders to Peryn to start a fire while he and Kaldon went to retrieve their supplies. They all hurried to their tasks while trying to hide the growing bulges in the front of their leggings.

His bondmate's figure was not lost on Aldren either. As soon as she had washed the blood from her skin and hair, he pulled her into an embrace at the deeper part of the pool. He had always had feelings of lust after recovering from a battle and the sight of her naked body had set him on fire. She was in need of him as well and willingly allowed him to grab her by the waist and lift her body up until the head of his manhood was poised to enter her. She let out a deep groan as he slid into her. Aldren started to thrust into her slowly allowing the water to buffer their movements. Ameni arched her back trying to force him deeper into her. He took advantage of her position to bend his head down and suck on her hard nipples.

Between the abstinence of the trail and the pent up emotions of the recent battle, they both were close to climax. Aldren went first shoving hard into her and then grinding his pelvis against hers as he shot his load deep

inside of her. The pulse in his member triggered her own climax and she let out a muffled whine as she held him against her breast.

As they came down from their orgasms, they slowly slid apart. Remembering that they were not alone they finished up rinsing out their blood soaked clothing and moving out to allow their skin to dry. The warming rays of the sun reflecting off the walls of the canyon soon had them and their clothing dry enough to dress again. They then joined the rest of the troop.

Vabryn and Kaldon returned shortly before the lovers' arrival with what they could salvage from the previous night's campsite. There were enough supplies to last them a week or so if needed. The pool where Aldren and Ameni had bathed was fed by a spring that came out of the canyon wall so water would not be a problem. This was as safe a campsite as one could want.

Peryn had a good fire going and Ameni took her turn at the cooking bringing a pot of stewed meat to a boil. No one dared to declare, "The woman should do all the cooking." She was a full member of the troop and better than some in a battle. It was customary for all to take a turn at making the meals unless one was much better and relished the chore. The food was good, but Ameni had to admit that in this group, the young Peryn was the best cook.

As they all relaxed by the fire, Vabryn stated that he would take first watch. Kaldon pointed to the huge bulk of the dragon that was a darker shadow in the gathering night. "You think anything would get by him?"

They all turned to look at the dragon. All that distinguished him from the rest of the night was his eyes. Those sparkled with some kind of inner fire and they were the only sign of life. Vabryn had been very cautious of going past the beast when he and Kaldon had retrieved their belongings from the previous night's campsite. The dragon did not move other than to watch them closely. They could feel his breath as they passed and could see the dagger like teeth that were exposed. He was laying much like a feline does his head resting between his front paws. Though the group felt that they were safe from him, the ancient fears as well as his recent decimation of the king's troops made them keep a respectful distance.

While the others got their bedding in order, Aldren rose and headed toward the creature. Ameni watched for a moment and followed him. They approached the beast slowly careful not to make any movements that could be taken as aggressive. When they were close the dragon raised its great head.

*"Is there a reason that you have come to me?"* The question flowed through Aldren's mind as if he were speaking to him.

"I wanted to be sure that you would survive."

*"I will recover soon. My loss of blood has weakened me, but my strength will return within a day. It is then that I will depart back to my lands."*

Aldren looked into the eyes of the beast. "Ameni has told me of what you said to her. That part of my heritage was not known to me. Now that I do know about it, I will be careful not to call upon you again."

*"Brother of the clan. I can read your doubts of what has happened and the fear of what will come to pass. This I will tell you. Your road has been set. You can follow it and bring peace once again to the lands, or you can move from your path to the doom of all in the lands. The decision will be yours to make."*

"This is a path that is not of my choosing. I have no wish for power or glory, only to live out my life without having it filled with matters that are beyond my sight."

*"Yet it has been placed before you. For now you are the only one who can control the power that has a chance to halt the evil forces that are moving the land into shadow and despair. Your wisdom and heart can bring balance back. Even now, the forces that you oppose are massing. If they succeed, even the dragons will fall. For generations unknown to man, we have paid little attention to the doings of the other races. Now it is known to us that all the races must band together to destroy the threat. The legends of the Elves have spoken of one who will bring peace when all seems lost. You, Aldren of the Dragon Clan, are that one."*

Aldren was silent as the dragon watched him carefully. In a reluctant tone he spoke. "I will undertake this task, though it is against my judgment."

"Dragon, do you have a name by which I can address you?"

*"My name would be impossible for you to speak, even within your mind. Your inner self already knows it, and because of that you share my power. However for use in these talks, you may address me as Balroth."*

Ameni finally spoke up. "You have our gratitude Balroth. We all owe you our lives." Ameni bowed low, her arms crossed over her chest.

*"As I do to your bondmate Elf-woman. You and those with you can rest this night for nothing will enter here that could cause you harm."* With that the two took their leave and went back to the fire.

The others were waiting to know what had transpired while they had been with the dragon. Aldren remained silent, but Ameni did tell them that Balroth would remain where he was for another day, and that they would be safe. About the rest of the conversation, she remained silent. Finally they all found the slumber that they had earned this day.

They rested the next day, letting Peryn's leg wound heal a bit more and maintaining their armor and weapons. It was near dusk when Balroth moved from his crouched position, stretching his wings. He gave his farewells to Aldren and Ameni... Leaping into the air, he brought his wings downward launching himself toward the top of the canyon spraying dust and small stones on the party. As the dust cleared, they spotted him as a small speck glistening in the late afternoon sunlight.

Kaldon was the first to speak. "I am one of the fortunate now. I have looked upon a dragon and lived to tell the tale. It will be a tale to tell my grandchildren if I survive to have them."

Aldren gave the big man a slap on the back. "Right you are my friend. We were fortunate that he arrived and he goes with our gratitude."

Peryn was getting around much better. He had fixed the evening meal and they all ate with gusto. Then Aldren called them around the fire to decide what to do. They knew that they could not walk back to the tower. It would take a sevenday to do so and they would be vulnerable to attack if any of the king's men had survived. It was decided to send someone to search for horses, and if none were found they would start out on foot in the hopes of catching some on the way.

The discussion came around to why the King's troops had found them. They agreed that it had been a trap, but just who had laid the trap was in contention. It came down to three trains of thought. There was a spy in the tower, Kendrich himself sent them to a certain death, or perhaps one of the priests of the new cult that could divine their movements by magic.

In the deep of the night, Ameni heard the cries of Reavers as they feasted on the bodies of the fallen troops. They were feasting on the cold blood of dead screeching as they fought over the bodies. A few ventured close to the fire but turned away from the elf. There was enough food without taking the chance of a fight. By dawn, the troop could see the cleaned bones of the king's garrison littering the ground leading toward the mouth of the canyon.

Ameni left soon after the sun had illuminated the top of the canyon in search of some horses for them. Kaldon went with her, in his mind as her protector. Ameni had come to tolerate Kaldon's worship of her even if it still made her uncomfortable at times. She knew she was not the goddess that he claimed she was, but could not convince him otherwise. So she accepted it and continued to be kind to him.

Aldren and Vabryn scouted around the walls of the canyon, investigating the caves and outcroppings for possible use in case of another attack. Looking at the lay of the land, Aldren decided that this would indeed be a good place for a secondary keep that would be impregnable if a wall was constructed across the floor where the canyon was most narrow. Vabryn agreed, and together they made some crude drawings of the lay of the rocks, naming it the Dragon's hold.

They also checked what was left of the dead. They retrieved the arrows that were still sound and placed the bodies not consumed by the Reavers into a pile. Adding wood, they set the pyre ablaze in the hopes of keeping the night creatures away. They found what remained of their fallen comrade and placed him on a separate pyre and burned with all the honor that they could give him.

It was mid afternoon before Ameni and Kaldon returned with most of their horses. They had also rescued their saddles and all the tack from the bodies of the horses that had been killed. Since they were once again



mounted, they could leave. It was decided to break camp and head back to the tower at first light.

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In the hall of the tower, Kendrich stared in disbelief at the little, cloaked figure that stood before him. "You say they still live? That is impossible. There were more than a hundred of the King's troops waiting on them. They couldn't kill 5 men and a woman? You had better be quick with as to why this is so!"

The little spy was quivering where he stood. "My Lord. The warrior, Aldren, seemed to become engulfed in flame and was unstoppable. The troops were making progress with the others with the exception of the elf, when a dragon suddenly appeared. It destroyed most of the remaining troops. The rest fled in terror from the creature."

Kendrich stroked his chin thoughtfully. He had heard of the strange things surrounding Aldren. Rumors had started the day after he appeared, of him working some kind of magic on the practice field. The troops all loved this man and took his words as truth. Kendrich had to admit that there was something about Aldren that made all he met wanted to follow him. But what the spy was telling had only been done in legend.

From the shadows behind the throne a tall, black-robed figure moved toward Kendrich. "I heard the report. It is as I feared. This man... this half-breed, has become powerful. The high priest must be told of this."

Kendrich scowled at the priest before him. He cared not for this man, but he had his uses. It was not long since Kendrich had made his pact with the king and the high priests. They would leave him alone and after the cleansing of the land, he would be Lord of the North Kingdom. He was constantly worried about losing his place of power and this pact took one worry away. He was not overjoyed about the destruction of the other races, but he was too comfortable in his position as ruler to worry about it any further.

"So priest, do you think that they will return to the Tower?"

"Most certainly. For I doubt that he has seen your part in our plan to destroy him. He is loyal and too trusting. If he makes it back, I will just destroy him here."

"Just be sure you do. If you confront him here it will tip my hand that I am back in league with the king. I cannot afford to have one so powerful able to rouse my troops."

Neither of these men noticed a small, very old figure move from the shadows and into a hidden stairwell that led to the top of the tower.

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Ameni raised her hand to signal the rest of the troop to halt. They had been taking it easy on the way back, partly to allow time for Peryn's leg wound to heal but also to be on the lookout for any more troops. They were within sight of the Tower after riding for four days.

Aldren moved up to join Ameni. "What do you see?"

Ameni motioned toward the rocks next to the trail. "Someone awaits us in the rocks ahead. I saw the movement."

Aldren loosened his sword in the scabbard. They rode on wary of another attack. As they approached, a voice called out. "Lord Aldren, I must speak to you before you go into the gates. Stop and adjust your saddle, but do not look in my direction." He recognized the wintry voice of Kal-angurr. Aldren did as he was asked and bade the ancient man to continue.

"I have come to warn you. Kendrich has given over to the king and the priests. In exchange, the king will not attack him or the tower. But your life and the lives of any who would follow you will be forfeit if you return to the tower of the guard. There is a priest/mage lying in wait for your return since they know of your victory over the king's troops. Kendrich fears you. He clings to the power he has and thinks you will usurp him and take over. With several thousand standing soldiers that would be at your command, the king fears you as well."

Aldren digested this information. He knew what was waiting for him and his companions in the tower. His first thought was just to continue past the gates and strike out into the wilderness once again. He and Ameni had led

a very good life traveling here and there. It would be more difficult now that they would be wanted from both sides of the struggle. To go in would mean possible, if not probable, death. Even if he came out alive, this would be just the beginning of the battles. Why couldn't the fates have chosen another for this quest?

In the end, he knew he could only prolong the time of confrontation, but he couldn't avoid it entirely. Better to face it now, rather than later. He would just have to work with what came to him. He gave Ameni a cryptic look then turned to his other companions.

"You have heard what is awaiting us within the gates of the tower. You can stand with me or go past the gates and make your way, as you will. I will not hold it against you if you wish to avoid this fight. The odds are we will end up dead."

Vabryn spoke up. "It is my decision to follow you into the very gates of the underworld that the priests talk about. I have not understood all that has happened, but I know you as a man that is just." The rest voiced their agreement.

"Get yourself back into the tower, old one. If the fight goes ill, you will be able to save your skin." With those words Aldren remounted his horse and motioned them forward.

They rode into the opened gates and made their way to the front of the tower. As they rode through the streets, a crowd was gathering behind them. The rumors of what had happened to the group had spread. They were cheering the returning group for their exploits, crowding around the mounted companions shouting encouragement and wonder at their return.

At the edge of the tower grounds, the troop dismounted. With Aldren in the lead, they strode forward with more confidence than the half-elf actually felt. They were halfway across the courtyard when Kendrich came out of the entrance followed closely by a figure in a black robe.

"So you have returned. But I am told that you provoked a battle with the king's troops and caused his wrath to be turned toward the tower. Now we are all in danger. You will now be seized and given to the king in the hopes that he will show mercy on us and leave us alone."

The crowd gasped in disbelief at these words and then started to turn angry. A troop of the guards started forward but was halted by the weapons aimed at them. Aldren spoke in a voice loud enough for the crowd to hear. "Kendrich, you have become soft and easily swayed. In your quest for power, you have forgotten just why these men came to you in the first place. They are in opposition to what the king and the priests of the new god are doing. Your lust for safety and power has betrayed them all."

The crowd around them started to falter. They looked between the leaders and could see Aldren grow in stature for the words he had said. They waited for Kendrich to deny the accusations, but the denial was not coming.

Instead, Kendrich gambled that a show of force would settle the matter. "When you are destroyed, the men behind you will follow my orders. You are the usurper and must die!" Kendrich then stepped aside as the priest pushed himself to the forefront of the confrontation. Fokoth was confident in his power to destroy this fool. After all, wasn't he a twelfth level priest and well versed in the ways of magic as well? He moved ahead of Kendrich's position and tossed his hood back to reveal his bald head covered in tattoos, symbols of his rank and position.

Aldren also moved away from the rest of his troop. He did not know what would happen but he did not want the fallout to affect them. As he started to draw upon the elements, he began feeling the now familiar tingle move throughout his body. This time, he also felt something new... It was like he was looking at the coming battle much like a dragon would. Aldren was dispassionate about his fate almost emotionless in his thoughts of defeating this puny priest.

These thoughts warred with his human fears. Aldren knew that he could very well lose this battle and with it, his life as well as the lives of those around him. A small voice was extolling him to control the feeling of dispassion. That path leads to devastation with him unleashing such power as to destroy everyone around him.

The priest raised his arms and made a gesture with his right hand. A ball of energy formed and was sent toward its intended victim. Aldren muttered a few words and the energy globe exploded in midair. He

silently thanked Belwin, the Elvin healer, for teaching him how to defend himself. The priest, Fokoth, looked up in surprise. He had figured this half-breed would fall under the first attack. He had been led to believe that his enemy only had the magic that was inherent in the elves which was weak at best. Fokoth started to attack in earnest now pulling up energy globes and hurling them in rapid succession. Each one pushed Aldren back but they were not hurting him.

The priest changed tactics. He drew himself to his full height and seemed to convulse. A wall of energy shot toward Aldren so quickly that he couldn't shield from it. He flew through the air hitting the ground dazed. Fokoth was starting to revel in his apparent victory when the grin was wiped from his face. Aldren had rolled to his knees and was starting to stand. Then, Fokoth was startled when an arrow whistled past his head. The magic shield he was generating was the only thing that saved him. He turned to see the elf woman still holding her bow. How dare someone of the lesser races, and a female besides, think they could harm him? He stared at her summoning an energy ball. He sent it at her with as much malice as he could, trying to kill her with one hit.

Kaldon saw what was happening and shouldered Ameni to the ground. The globe hit him in the side, and spread throughout his body. He screamed in agony as the energy tore his muscles and internal organs. Every nerve in his body was overloaded and he dropped to the ground beside his goddess.

Until now, Aldren had been on the defensive. Now it was his turn. The memory of his mother came to him the night she had destroyed the mage. He stood and pointed directly at the priest. The words came into his head and he spoke them aloud. "HIZAMICH ADROMAL ENDROMICH!" rang clear in the air. The priest looked with fear at his opponent, watching as Aldren's form seemed to grow and expand. The words were foreign to him but he felt the power behind them. He was also in fear of his own life for the first time in his memory. Then, lightning and fire burst from Aldren's hand and shot through the priest. Fokoth's screams of agony were heard as his body was consumed in a flash of heat and light. All that was left was a pile of smoldering ash to show where the priest had stood.

Aldren returned to normal and staggered to where Kaldon was lying on the ground. Ameni was cradling his head, stroking his brow and singing

the songs of passing softly to him. Aldren knelt down and put his hand on the man's chest. "This I cannot heal", he said in a quiet voice. "The damage to his body is too great. I have yet to regain the strength." Aldren looked to the faces surrounding him, his features showing his great remorse. "I put you all in danger by not demanding that I come in alone. I alone caused the death of this good man"

Vabryn put his hand on Aldren's shoulder. "We came of our own free will. Kaldon followed you not only because of his love for Ameni, but also for his belief in you. You cannot heal the wounds of all. And Kaldon was doing what he felt was his duty"

Kaldon stirred and opened his eyes. He had protected his goddess as he said he would. He would die fulfilling his vow. Ameni leaned down and kissed his forehead. "Fare thee well, my champion. You will have a place of honor in the Hero's Halls." The big man smiled at her and then his body slipped into its final sleep. His companions were silent in respect of his bravery.

Kendrich was furious. The priest who had said he would destroy the usurper was now dead. His world was falling apart. The men who were gathered now knew he had turned against them. His anger focused on the one who had caused his downfall. He knew that he would either be banished or killed, but he would send the one who had caused his downfall to the gates of the underworld.

Vabryn seen the movement as Kendrich raised his sword over his head, aiming to cleave Aldren's skull in two. He brought his own sword to block the blow then brought the blade down slashing Kendrich's torso open. Kendrich dropped his weapon and brought his hands down to catch his own entrails as they tumbled out of the wound. A look of disbelief showed on his face as he collapsed on the ground.

The crowd, which had grown to most of the inhabitants, was brought out of their state of shock when Kendrich's body hit the ground. Aldren looked up from his kneeling position to look upon the faces surrounding them. He was not sure if he would be torn limb from limb along with his companions, or whether they would choose to follow him. The tension was building, and would boil over soon, one way or the other.

Everyone turned when they heard a loud, high voice shout. Kal-angurr stood on the top steps of the entrance, hands outstretched in appeal. "HEAR ME PEOPLE OF THE TOWER!!" When all eyes were on him he continued. "Aldren Half-elven has come to us in the time of our need. He is the legend of old reborn. He has been bathed in the blood of the dragons, and his power is evident to all who would see. If you truly wish to free this land from the plague that throttles it, you will fight with him."

The silence was tense as those who could hear digested the old man's words. There was a rumble of voices then a shout. Others took up this lone shout as they started chanting Aldren's name. They continued until he moved beside Kal-angurr. He raised his hands and the crowd quieted. "Hear me all men of the tower. I will ask no oath except for the one your heart tells you is true. For without the truth in your heart and mind, other oaths are worthless. Your heart will tell you that to fight for the freedom of all races is just. If you cannot swear that oath, you are given leave to go where you will."

The crowd was cheering and clashing their weapons together. The rest of the companions came forward to stand by Aldren, affirming their loyalty. Eventually, the crowd dispersed leaving the companions in the courtyard. The body of Kaldon was set upon a pyre to send him on his way. The body of Kendrich was taken to the gates and tossed over the cliff for the Reavers. This was the just punishment for traitors.

That night Aldren and Ameni lay next to each other sated from a long bout of lovemaking. Ameni sang the songs of passing for Kaldon, the slow-witted man who had saved her life. Inwardly, she was troubled that he had done so, but Vabryn had explained that Kaldon felt it a huge honor to protect her and he had made a vow to do so. So in his mind, he felt he had fulfilled that vow with honor. So she had honored him with the songs of her people that were sung for heroes.

She turned to Aldren laying her head on his chest. "You have started your destiny today. It will be a path that will be difficult at times but those that are loyal will aid you. And I will always be with you."

Aldren enveloped her in his arms. "I don't know where we go from here. But we have started down the path that has been set before us. All we can

do is to follow it to the end." Then he gave her a loving kiss and settled down for a well-deserved rest.

Over the next week, some of the men who could not accept to the oath placed on them left the tower. But their numbers were small, totaling less than 100. The rest of the populace went about their duties. Aldren made it a point to be on the practice field every morning to keep his skills sharp as well as to improve those of his men.

And they were his men. They felt a kinship with him as a warrior and as a fair and honest leader. He chose his leaders, Vabryn being his second in command. The captains were chosen for their leadership qualities and trust of the troops. Any of the populace that had a grievance knew they could get a fair hearing. And to everyone's benefit, morale improved everywhere.

Ameni, by being Aldren's bondmate, was considered the Lady of the Tower. Her authority included the household of the Tower and most domestic issues for the settlement. In addition, she was included at Vabryn's request in all the training and planning of the troops.

Ameni was surprised when a mother brought her newborn for her blessings on the infant. She tried to explain to the woman that she was not versed in the magic of her people, but the mother cared not.

"M'Lady, you are mate to the legend. And you are of the Blessed Race. Please Lady, you would be granting great favor on my child if you could bless him."

So Ameni placed her hands on the infant and gave blessings for long and healthy life. The rumor soon spread of her blessing and she was soon being asked to perform the same for any child that was born.

Aldren was out among the support buildings talking to the blacksmith when a runner for the guards came up to him. "Lord Aldren. There is a young man at the gates that asks to see you. He said you know him and his mother and he has important news."

"Did he give a name?"



"Yes my Lord. He said his name was Mirgan. He looks to have about 15 or so winters in age but he spoke like he knew what he was about."

"By all means, bring him in and have him meet me in the tower."

The runner saluted and then left on his errand. Aldren headed back to the tower wondering what would bring the young man who had once guarded his horse this far.

Mirgan came walking down the hall with two of the guards. He had grown since he had last seen him. He had grown muscle and height but walked as one who was exhausted from a long journey. He still carried the short sword that Aldren had given him coupled with one that was more suited to his new height. The boyish features had given away to the lean, thin face of an adult.

He stopped just short of the chair that Aldren sat in. "*Hail, fellow warrior and friend*" he stated in slightly accented Elvish.

"*Hail to thee, warrior.*" Aldren answered with a smile. The guards, seeing they knew each other, moved back down to their places at the doorway. Aldren grasped the young man's forearm in the human greeting, and brought him to a table.

"You look as though you have ridden hard and long, Mirgan. Eat and drink a bit, then we will talk."

The young man tore into the food that was brought to him. As he was eating, Ameni came in. Mirgan bowed low and repeated the elvish greeting. She returned it and then sat near him at the table while he finished his meal.

As Mirgan pushed his plate away, he got to the reason for his arrival. "My lord, I have come to tell you that our village was overrun by the King's forces. He has persuaded the wild men from the Southern plains to fight for him. They attacked at dawn. Mother... was taken and my uncle was killed. He bade me to find you and bring you the news. I wanted to stay and fight, but he told me that it was more important to find you. I knew you were coming here, so I took the route that was most direct, looking for signs of you along the way."

"Don't worry, Mirgan. When the time is right, your mother and uncle will be avenged. You are to rest and get your strength back. I will see what we can do to right this." With that, Aldren left to call his captains to conference. Ameni called to one of the women who worked in the tower and asked that she find lodgings for Mirgan. As soon as they were gone, she followed Aldren. As she walked down the corridor, she could not help thinking that this was just the beginning. To what end, she could not tell.

## Chapter 8

Posted: November 06, 2004 - 10:15:56 pm

As much as it irritated Mirgan, it was close to the Spring Equinox before the main body of troops was set to leave. The day after he had arrived, Aldren sent trusted riders that could scout out into the countryside to find out just what was happening.

These riders came back with information that was taken directly into the tower. Aldren heard all their reports and found that the troops of the king were indeed traveling further north, bringing the priests with them. Any resistance by the common folk was dealt with harshly, usually resulting in the death of the resistors. The elves were fleeing into the mountains, with only a few strongholds holding out. Other races were being pushed out of their homelands. Fortunately, the King's garrisons were not large in number at least in the north. In the south, there were rumors that the High priest had pretty well taken over the kingdom and that King Gisbard ruled in name only, taking orders from the high priest.

The high priest, who was known as Ralahur, had called for the destruction of all who opposed the rule of men. All other races were to be destroyed or enslaved. There were rumors of his use of magic but only for evil purposes. He seemed to know what his opponents in the court were doing, but it was not decided if his success was through the use of magic or the cunning application of spies.

There was good news mixed with the bad. Many of the people who lived in the north where the king's influence had not been strong for a long time, were resistant to the edicts from the south. They still followed the rules of the ancients and were open to the other races. Some of the local lords were openly hostile to the thought of being subjected to the new religion. Of course, these were the ones that were being targeted.

A plan was devised between Aldren and the troop captains. They would give assistance to any local Lord that wished to resist the King's troops. They could defeat the small garrisons that were this far north, and drive back the influence from the south. At least it would be a start. To attack the Kingdom in the south directly was too daunting to be considered right now. There was one other piece of news, but Aldren held that for later.

The men were used to seeing Aldren as well as Ameni out on the practice field. This was where the two were most comfortable, honing their own skills as well as those of the warriors. They both had a dislike for having to hold court and only did so when necessary. On this day, Aldren had a short workout with Vabryn, and then went around observing the recruits that were practicing under the watchful eye of the captains.

He turned a critical eye toward one group in particular. Calling the captain over he asked a few questions and received the answers he was looking for. Then he called young Mirgan to him. "Do you feel you are ready to go out for a real battle?"

Mirgan thought for just a moment. "Sir, I know that I have much more to learn, but I am willing to go if you need me."

"Good answer, young Mirgan. However, this foray will have some personal interest for you. We know where the troop that is holding your mother is staying. If you are willing, we will mount a raid to get her back."

Mirgan's eyes lit up at the prospect. "Yes sir, I am more than ready for that. Should I get my gear now?"

Aldren smiled at the boy's enthusiasm. "You have a bit of time. We will be leaving at dusk. Now, back to your practice and then rest for the afternoon. You will be needing it." Mirgan moved back with his troop but now his sword-work was more intense and concentrated for he knew he would need all the skill he possessed to save his mother.

Aldren then went to give the orders to have all made ready. This would be the first of many forays into the wilds. He had been advised to appoint captains to lead the raids and to stay within the walls of the tower, but he was still too much of a warrior to sit in safety while others risked their lives. This is what Kendrich had become and he was determined to treat his followers as equals and not lord over them.

He was donning his armor when Kal-angarr appeared at the doorway. "Dragon-Kin, this may seem like a simple mission to rescue innocents from the evils that are coming from the south. But it would bode well for you to remember that this will be the first foray since you have taken control of the Tower. The men have already judged you as a just leader in your

dealing with them. By this mission, you will be judged on your ability to lead them to victory. Have care on how you risk your life and theirs."

"Ancient one, I understand what you have said. I have no intention on risking the lives of those that follow me without necessity. We must start somewhere and I had pledged protection of this woman. I cannot abandon that vow."

"One that holds a vow up to this degree is one who is worthy of the title of Lord of the Tower. I will proclaim such before you leave on your journey." With that, he slipped out the doorway.

Ameni was standing at the bottom of the steps holding the reins of his stallion. She was wearing the battle gear that had adorned her body since she had emerged from the home of her youth. It had been polished until the light reflected from the burnished leather. Her bow and knives were in their usual spots. Earlier, Aldren had tried to convince her to stay in the tower since this was just the first of many forays against the king's troops, but she would have none of it.

"Aldren, I will go where you go. I won't be left when you know that I am an asset to any troop. We are to be bonded and there is no reason for me to remain behind."

He knew that he would lose this battle and in reality, he was loath to win. They were so well attuned to each other that to be without her would be like leaving much of his strength and skill behind.

Aldren took note of the crowd that had gathered in the courtyard as he descended the steps. Most of the population had come to watch the troop ride out for the first battle since he took over. He straightened his shoulders and continued down the steps. He was almost to the bottom when Kal-angarr moved forward from the crowd. The old man moved just above Aldren and held out his hands for silence.

"People of the Tower. Aldren Half-Elven, son of Harcon and Elisene, has proven himself in battle. He has proven himself a just and righteous ruler. Shall he be declared Lord of the Tower of the Guard? What say you, people of the Tower?" His surprisingly strong voice was lost in the unanimous yells of acceptance. Once again, he raised his arms to command quiet.

"Aldren, you are hereby named Lord of the Tower of the Guard. Long may you rule with wisdom and justice!" He then motioned to Ameni to step forward. She carried a long object in her outstretched palms. It was wrapped in a piece of dark red velvet. Kal-angarr moved the covering to reveal the sword that Ameni had taken from her childhood home.

The blade radiated in the evening light. The hilt was polished and the runes were faint along the blade winding their way along its length. Kal-angarr spoke in a lower voice now. "Ameni brought this sword to me to try and find the meaning of the runes. I went through the ancient manuscripts that are in the tower. A very ancient volume of Elven lore revealed that this is the sword of Gwrtheyrn, the last, and perhaps the greatest, of the Dragon Clan. It had come to Ameni's ancestors, but its significance was lost. Ameni, as the last surviving member of the clan that cared for the sword, wishes to restore the sword to the Dragon Clan."

Aldren lifted the sword from Ameni's palms. The hilt was warm to the touch and radiated a power throughout his arm. As he lifted the sword into the air, the runes turned from faint markings to blood red scribings, radiating a brilliance that made them visible to the entire crowd. Aldren thrust into the air and proclaimed in Elvish, "*The sword of the Dragon Clan shall once again bring forth justice for all races. By the Guardians who came first, I pledge my life!*"

Suddenly, the evening sky darkened as a huge creature blocked out the evening's lingering light. A deep roar reverberated through the courtyard as Balroth flew across the courtyard, followed by another, slightly smaller dragon. They wheeled and made one more pass before they disappeared into the sky, leaving only Aldren, Ameni, and Kal-angarr still standing.

As the rest of the people stood back up, Kal-angarr shouted out. "The dragons have acknowledged their kin! The legend is alive!"

This revived the crowd from its fear and they began to shout and cheer once again. Aldren replaced his sword with the new one and mounted up. Ameni grabbed the mane of the roan that she always rode and vaulted onto its back. They turned and led the troop through the crowd and out the gates into the gathering darkness.

Since the moon was just one day past full, it was decided to make use of the extra light and travel until just before the false dawn. The trails were well known and they were anxious to be on their way.

The group rode in silence, each one lost in their own thoughts. Ameni was leading since she had the best night vision of them all. Aldren was either beside or behind her as the trail allowed. Next was Vabryn who rode alongside of Mirgan. These two spoke quietly, Vabryn giving pointers and the boy asking questions. Behind them were twenty more men who kept changing positions to allow those in the middle to catch a nap in the saddle.

Their target was about a sevendays' ride away. The king's garrison had taken up residence in a small village not too far from where the assassin had tried for Aldren's life. This far north, discipline had fallen to the side and the men were acting more like robbers and murderers than trained troops. The priest that was with them was a short, wiry man who was bloodthirsty, calling for the death of all men who stood in their way, and the taking of the women for pleasure or slavery. He was not above the use of these women himself, preferring those girls that had barely started their menses. He took particular joy in hearing their screams as he violated them. Even better was if he could do the act in full view of the parents before he had them killed.

The hatred of this depravity was something that Aldren was counting on. He knew that the small village was nearby to the village he and Ameni had visited. The people of that village were not kind to the king's men to begin with and if the rumors had made it to their village, they would be even more enraged. It was to the village that the troop made their way.

Mid afternoon on the sixth day found the troop on the outside of the village. The main body of Aldren's group made camp in the woods about half mile away. Aldren and Ameni rode into the village with Mirgan in tow. They found the burly smith still at his forge, working on a short dagger. The ring of his hammer against the red hot metal gave a counter rhythm to the sound of their horses' hooves. As Aldren came up to the door of the smithy, the man dropped the blade into a trough of cold water. He looked up and smiled when he recognized the pair.

"Hail travelers! It is good to see you still alive." Aldren dropped from his horse and clasped the man's thick forearm.

"Likewise it is good to see you again. We had feared that the king's men or the priests would have done you in."

The smith's face turned dark. "We have heard the rumors. Our ranks here in the village have swelled with folks that escaped the burnings and killings. They have taken the village east of us and set up a base there. The people around here are arming themselves. It has been thought that they will attack here next."

"What do you figure your chances will be?"

"Not good. We outnumber them but most around here are not warriors such as you. But we will take as many as we can before we are cut down." Then he looked closer at Aldren. "And what brings you back here among this fighting?"

"We have come to take back a woman that was captured by those same soldiers. And we will kill as many as needed to do it."

The smith chuckled. "I would go with you, but I am afraid that it would take more than just the four of us."

"Well my friend, there are another twenty one fine warriors camped outside of your village that are eager to fight. We can take out many of them but we would like your help, if you are willing."

"My Lord, go over to the inn and have a meal. I will call for a meeting and we will see what we can do."

The trio did as the smith suggested. As they entered, they heard a bell ring out in the air. They were just sitting down to eat when men and women started to enter the common room. It didn't take long until there was standing room only. The smith bellowed out for quiet and explained what was happening. The entire village agreed that they would rather fight now with the help that was promised than to wait for the king's men to destroy them one by one. One of the men that had arrived at the last spoke up that his wife and daughter had been taken earlier that sevenday, so an attack on the village was looming closer.



A few hours later, Aldren and his companions rode back to the rest of the troop. Plans had been made and would be put into action just before dawn. Then they set the watch and tried to get some sleep.

It was a couple of hours before dawn when Aldren and his part of the troop got to the village where the king's men were encamped. In the pale moonlight, they saw the buildings where the troops lay sound asleep. The only guards were around the building on the near side of the village. This had to be where the prisoners were kept. There were two of them, sitting on stools at each corner. Mirgan volunteered to go around the far corner and take care of the guard there. He slipped from his horse and faded into the darkness. Ameni notched her bow and waited. As soon as Mirgan came around the corner and slit the guard's throat, the second guard turned to go to his aid. Ameni's arrow went through his neck severing his spine. He collapsed without a sound.

When Aldren had reached the door, Mirgan had already slipped inside. There was the faint ringing of steel as the guard inside reacted, but Mirgan had dispatched him quickly. In the candlelight of the room, they could see at least 20 women and young girls sitting or laying near the walls. They had been awakened when the guard was killed, and were watching the newcomers with wide, fearful stares.

"Mother!" Mirgan called out to a figure that was in the corner. She stared in disbelief. He ran over and cut the ropes that bound her hands and feet. "Come, we must hurry!" He then joined Aldren and Vabryn as they freed the rest of the prisoners. The majority of them followed Vabryn out the back door and into the field. Dulca and a few others went with Aldren and Mirgan out the front where they were mounted behind other riders.

They were discovered by one of the garrison troops that had come out of the building. Aldren told the young girl to hang on tight as he charged toward the man. He split him almost in half but not before he sounded the alarm. There were soon many of the king's troops coming out of the buildings, all in various stages of dress. Aldren took out a few more and Ameni added to the toll before the garrison troops could get mounted. In the confusion, Aldren handed the girl off to Ameni and turned back toward the fray. He spotted a lanky, black-robed figure come out one of the doors, screaming for the troops to go after the prisoners. Aldren dug in his heels and galloped toward the priest. Before the man could dodge,

Aldren leaned over and grabbed the man by his hood, then he turned and headed away from the village, dragging the priest along.

The rest of the men from the tower were heading down the trail. Ameni came along side of Aldren and reached down to grab the priest's arm. Aldren took hold of the other arm, effectively suspending the priest between them. They could now hear the king's troops as they mounted up in pursuit. They took off with the king's men close behind.

When they arrived at the smith's village, the pursuers were almost within sight. Aldren pulled the priest into the forge and gave him over to the smith who tied him up and roughly shoved him into a corner. The king's men came pounding into the village then pulled up short when they saw Aldren's men facing them in the road. Their leader started to charge, then heard a noise behind them. Looking back, he saw that the villagers, over 50 strong and armed, had blocked any chance of escape.

Aldren called out in a loud voice. "You are trapped! Lay down your arms and be taken prisoner, or we will cut you down!"

The troops made the foolish decision to fight their way out. As the leader raised his sword, an arrow appeared in his chest just before he fell from his horse. This triggered a hail of arrows and then Aldren's men rushed in for the attack. The battle was short and the king's troops were cut down to the last man. The villagers were mad in the lust of revenge and decimated the enemy, killing the wounded and hacking at the dead. It took a while to get them to stop the mutilation.

The dead were dragged into a field where their bodies were left to the Reavers. Aldren remembered the priest and he was brought from the forge and tied to a tree. There was some talk about killing him outright, but cooler heads prevailed and he was spared for the time being.

Vabryn came up the road a couple hours after the battle, leading the rescued women. Many were suffering from the abuse and the long walk, but all were glad to be free. Some that had been taken in the area were reunited with their families. The others were welcomed into the village. All were fed and their hurts tended.

Vabryn came up to where the troop of the tower was gathered, checking their wounds. Mirgan's mother, Dulca, was busy tending the cuts and

scratches with Mirgan assisting. Mirgan saw the second in command and introduced him to Dulca.

"It is an honor to meet the woman who bore a warrior such as Mirgan."

Dulca, for her part, blushed and returned the greeting. She then turned back to tending the wounded. Vabryn looked at her as she worked. 'Damn fine woman.' He thought. 'Well worth rescuing.'

Aldren gathered the leaders of the village. According to the ancient laws, each village held trials for the offenders in their area. Serious offences were taken to the court in the south where the king would pronounce judgment. This was not an option now, so it was decided to hold a trial that night.

A rough table was set up outside the inn for the court. Aldren and Ameni were seated behind it as was the innkeeper, the smith, and two of the farmers that were considered leaders. The priest was led in to stand in the place of the accused to the right of the court. The trial was called to order and witnesses were brought in. They all told of the torture and abuse that the priest had allowed or had participated in personally. With each tale, the crowd that was watching got angrier. Finally, Aldren called a halt to the witnesses. He asked the priest if he had anything to say in his defense.

One of his guards ungagged him, and he immediately started raving. "This is a sham! You all have no authority over such an important person as myself. All of you rebellious fools should be put to death. You need to bow down to me! That last girl should consider herself lucky that such a person of my greatness would even deign to take her! I should have killed her when I was done with..."

His tirade was cut short by an axe that buried itself in his chest. It had been thrown by the father of the girl who had been the priest's last victim. The priest had raped her while her mother was forced to watch.

The man was held by two of Aldren's men. Aldren stood and shouted for silence. "Release that man. I cannot fault him for what he did after what had been done to his family. Even though the court had not given a verdict, what was done is just for the crime."

After that, the crowd started to dissipate. The troop moved into the common room of the inn and ordered something to eat before bedding

down near the roadway. The women who were rescued were taken in by many of the families and given a place to stay. Aldren and Ameni took the same room that they had occupied what seemed ages ago.

As they removed their armor and other clothing, they talked of the memories of what had happened in the room the last time that they were there. The memories sparked in Aldren were not of the assassin, but rather of the lovemaking that had come before.

Taking Ameni's hand he led her to the bed. He sat on the side with her standing directly in front of him. The light behind her naked form gave her skin and hair a glow all its own. He realized that in the time that they had been together she had matured, not only physically but also in her whole being. She had learned to handle the prejudice that was now in the world, she had overcome the death of her family and friends, and had learned to love someone. That he was that someone made him eternally grateful.

She took her hand and gently caressed the side of his face. "What are you thinking about my love?"

"Only remembering how much has happened to us both since we were first here. And how much more beautiful you are. Mostly how glad I am that we are together."

She smiled down at him, then pushed him onto his back. She then brought her face to his and devoured his mouth and tongue with her own. He responded by returning the kiss while running his hands over her back and buttocks. One small part of his brain was aware of how much her muscles had become stronger and more defined as they rippled under his caresses.

Ameni wasted little time once the fires of passion were lit within her. She slid further up his body until her pussy was aligned with his hard cock. She was drenched, and as she moved back down his body, his cock slid into her easily. She groaned as she felt his shaft filling her, pressing against the walls of her tunnel.

In this position she felt the added pleasure of her clit being pushed against his pubic hair. The combination of these sensations and the fact that they had not been able to love each other since they left the tower were causing her to approach her climax rather quickly. Rising up on her arms, she

started to ride him harder and faster, lost in her own buildup to her release.

Aldren was following along. Her aggressiveness fascinated him, especially since she had never had known a man before him. She had found that after the first time, her need for sex had grown tremendously. She now would initiate their love making as often as he. Then all other thoughts were forgotten as he felt himself starting to approach his own release. His hands moved from where he had been caressing her breasts down to her hips where he held on to her as he started to thrust in rhythm to her.

Her climax hit first and every muscle in her body tensed, then started to flex in response to the sensations that were spreading from her pussy outward. Aldren felt the waves of her internal muscles grip his cock. The sensation sent him over the edge as well. He gave out a loud groan as he shot his seed deep into her body.

As Ameni came down from her climax, she unlocked her arms and let her body cover his, her pussy still clutching his cock in the afterglow. It was a while before she could roll off of her lover. Even then she only moved enough to lay on her side with her head on his shoulder.

The next morning, the troop was preparing to leave. The women and young girls who had lost their families were allowed to either stay in the village to make out a living or they could go back to the tower where they would be welcomed and their skills could be put to use. Those that chose to go were either matched with horses from those that the king's troops no longer had any use for or they rode in a wagon that Aldren had bartered for. The remainder of the horses were left for the village in payment for the help they had given. The innkeeper was sorry to see them leave, for Aldren was generous in payment for the feeding of his troop.

Before they left, Aldren called the village leaders together. "You now know that by working together you can resist the king. I now ask that you speak to the other villages in the area and spread the word. Only by working together will we all succeed. One other favor I ask is that any men who are truly wanting to fight against the tyranny of the king that you give them hospitality and send them to the Tower of the Guard."

The leader wholeheartedly agreed. They knew they had probably been saved from the destruction of their homes and possibly their lives only by banding together. They would spread the word.

The company mounted up and rode back toward the tower. Their number had swelled to double that it was when it set out. They had twenty-five women that had decided to go to the tower, most of them Ameni's age. There were some that could only claim sixteen winters, but most could account for twenty or so. They stayed mostly in a group, still wary of armed men. This was understandable after the ordeal they had just been through. Nevertheless, by the end of the first day, they became friendlier and some were even talking to the men.

Around the fire that night, the mood was good. They had fought to victory and accomplished what they had set out to do. Ameni took note of the amount of time Vabryn was spending around Dulca. He seemed to be very interested in her and not flirting with the rest of the women like he was usually doing while in the tower. Dulca was showing signs of interest as well. Even with the abuse that she had endured, she was still a very beautiful woman. Aldren had reluctantly admitted as much when she had asked him about that.

Eventually, they settled for the night. The lodgings were rough, but better than what the captives had endured at the hands of the priest and his henchmen. At least they did not have to worry about being attacked. There were some that had nightmares during the night, but most were resting comfortably.

They broke camp just after first light the next morning. While they were getting packed, a girl that was probably about 16 winters walked up to the leaders. Ameni recognized her as the one who had been watching her from across the fire the night before. The girl was looking at her feet as she spoke in a quiet voice. "My lady, may I ride with you this morning? I.. I would like to speak with you if I may." The child then looked up and Ameni could see the fear in her eyes. It must have taken all her courage to approach them and to ask this favor.

Ameni smiled at the girl. "Of course you can. We can ride together right behind Lord Aldren. That way he can watch the trail."

"Really? Wonderful!" Then she caught her exuberance. "Oh! Sorry. Thank you My Lady."

Ameni chuckled at the girl's excitement. "You are very welcome. What is your name?"

"Kiran, My Lady"

"Well, Kiran, you better mount up. We are ready to leave." The girl practically fell over herself in her haste to get to her horse. Ameni explained the request to Aldren and he agreed to allow her to ride at the head. He was worried about running into problems, but decided to send a couple of advance riders to cover that possibility. When the wagon was ready, the company moved out onto the road.

Aldren called Peryn, who had fought beside him in the ambush, to the front of the line and told him pick another recruit and ride ahead to watch for problems. Peryn saluted and then rode back to pick a partner. Kiran watched the proceedings with an awed expression. As soon as Peryn and Mirgan galloped past, Kiran let out a small sigh. Ameni made note of it but kept silent.

They had kept a good pace for a couple of hours and Kiran had not spoken the entire time. Finally, Ameni leaned over to her. "You said that you wished to speak to me. Now would be as good a time as any. What is on your mind?"

"Well... Uhh... I wanted to ask..." Kiran ducked her head in embarrassment.

"Don't worry girl. I won't bite. And neither will he." she added when Kiran glanced in Aldren's direction.

"Well, My Lady, I am wondering what will happen to me when we get to where we are going. You see I am of mixed blood. The king's men killed my mother outright because she was an elf. They caught me away from home and didn't realize what I am. I was terrified that they would notice. If the priest had picked me, he would have seen and had me killed. Since you are an elf and you are accepted, I was hoping you would tell me what to expect."

Ameni reached across and took Kiran's hand in hers. "You will have no problem at the tower, Kiran. All races are welcomed and honored there. It is who you are and what you do that matters, not what race you are. I am sure that you will find something that you can do to contribute. As for being mixed blood, there are others. Young Mirgan for one." Ameni saw the sudden blush on Kiran's face. "You can talk with him tonight if you wish. For now though..."

Ameni stopped her sentence and instead called out to Aldren to drop back for a moment. He turned in his saddle and grinned at his lover, then slowed his pace until he was riding on the other side of Kiran. "Aldren, this is Kiran." Aldren bowed his head to her. "She asked to talk to me because she was worried about being of mixed blood in the tower."

Kiran looked horrified that Ameni had told this powerful man about what she had said. She waited for an angry reply like she would have seen from the leader of her village, but was surprised when he flashed her a toothy grin then reached up and pulled his hair back to reveal his elongated ear. This man, who she almost worshiped, was just like her! The wonder on her face was enough to get a chuckle from Aldren.

"Kiran, you have no worries. No one will cause you problems for your heritage. If they do, you are to tell me immediately, and I will deal with them. We are a special breed, and we must look out for each other."

Kiran finally answered, but her voice cracked as she uttered an affirmative answer. Aldren shot a glance over her head to Ameni and grinned. Then he informed them that they would be stopping soon to rest the horses and galloped ahead to inform the advance riders to find a place for the group to rest.

As the two women watched him go, Kiran gave a whispered exclamation for actually having Lord Aldren speak to her. He was so kind to her. Just like the Lady Ameni. The remainder of the morning, the girl rode in awe struck silence, thinking about how her life had changed.

She had been born to a human father and an Elven mother in the village where her father had been raised. The whole family worked hard. She helped her mother with the house and gardens while father traded goods in the little store that was in the front of the house. She had been a serious



girl; interested in learning every bit of information she could about any subject. While the other children were playing, she was memorizing the herbs that were good for healing from her mother. Instead of flirting with the boys in the village, she spent her time listening to the travelers that came into the store. She picked up many different languages and soon was helping her father in his barter. He always told her that she had a gift for languages and encouraged her to learn all she could.

Last year, her whole world started to fall apart. Her father was killed when a couple of robbers broke into their home. Her mother tried to keep the shop going, but the men in the area refused to deal with her or would try and cheat her. Kiran kept the cheating to a minimum, but could do nothing about the attitudes.

Her father's brother had shown up and took over the business. He also tried to take over her mother and her. They no longer enjoyed the profits from any trade, and in order to stay in the house, her mother had submitted to his advances.

Then the King's troops swept down on the town. Her uncle saw them coming and he ran out the back door toward the fields, leaving her and her mother to face them alone. She had been on the other side of the village when the attack came. She had fought until someone had clubbed her. When she awoke, she was laying on the ground surrounded by other prisoners. The priest was looking them all over when one of the troop brought her mother out. The priest saw that she was an elf, and pronounced her doom. She watched helplessly as they tied her up and then sliced her open, allowing her to bleed to death.

After that, the days moved in a fog of grief and anger for her. She was contemplating taking her own life when they were rescued. She did get the satisfaction of watching the priest die, but it did little to quench the fire of revenge. But now, she was riding next to one of the most beautiful women she had ever seen and the Lord of the Tower had spoken to her! Now, that young man that she had seen earlier might be one worth getting to know. These thoughts continued to run through her mind the rest of the day.

Over the next few days, Mirgan took notice of how much attention Vabryn was paying to his mother. He would eat near them and would engage her in conversation whenever he could think of an excuse. Mirgan was

conflicted in his thoughts over this. He admired Vabryn as a warrior and captain. He knew him to be easy with compliments and gentle with criticism among those in his troop. Lord Aldren also thought highly of the man and that went far in his estimation.

But this was his mother! He had been trying to take care of her since his father had met his fate. He loved her and wanted to keep her from harm. He was pondering all of this as he watched the pair from across the camp.

He felt someone step up close to him. He turned to see that it was Nalwor, one of the older men in his troop, and one that had helped him a lot.

"I see that Captain Vabryn has finally found someone who he fancies." Nalwor spoke quietly.

"I suppose he has. He had best take care though." Mirgan replied with some heat.

"Ahh. That is your mother is it not? And you fear that the Captain will break her heart."

"Yeah, I guess. I have taken care of her and her me since my father was killed. I don't understand what they see in each other."

"Just because she is your mother does not mean that she doesn't get lonely for male companionship does it? Now, for your peace of mind, I would suggest that you go and speak to Vabryn."

"Aye, Nalwor, I may just do that." Then he walked off to his own bed. He settled down on the blankets that protected him from the small stones. He tossed and turned trying to find the sleep that he knew was needed, but it evaded him.

He was trying to get it settled in his mind that his mother would actually have feelings like that. He knew what lust (love) was. He had just never felt it deep enough to do anything about it. Even though being a consort and exchanging sex for pay was not looked down upon as a profession for a woman who wished it, he had not used their services.

It just bothered him that his mother would think of those feelings. He then thought of how he felt about the Lady Ameni. She had been the cause of

the first stirrings in his breeches from a female. After that time, his uncle had explained the way things were between men and women and he understood more about his feelings. Could his mother have the same effect on a man?

When he thought of how she looked as a woman, not just the one who had raised him, he could start to understand. She had the curves that would inspire the lust of the men. Maybe she was feeling the same things that his uncle had talked about.

With his mind at least partially at ease about Dulca and Vabryn, he let his mind wander a bit. It ended up on his favorite subject the past several days, the young, half-elven girl that they had rescued. He vowed to get to know her better before they reached the tower, which was still a sevenday away.

Dawn found the troop and their refugees preparing for the next leg of their journey. Mirgan had approached Kiran and offered to let her to ride with him. Giving him a shy smile, she had accepted. It was not Mirgan's day to ride ahead so he would spend the day trying to get to know her.

The group soon moved out. They were following the main roads so the wagons could keep up. The main body of the group was relaxed, but Aldren was still cautious. He had his men ride to the edges and keep a sharp lookout for any problems. The outriders had come across a couple of bands of rogues, but when they saw the rest of the troop, they were more than happy to retreat.

It was about an hour before sunset when the forward riders came across a traveler that requested to speak to the leader of the group. He was led to Aldren who immediately recognized him and stood to greet the dwarf. It was Solrryn from the Keep under the mountain. He was one of the few dwarves that had shown kindness or even interest in them during their stay in the mountain stronghold.

As he ate, Solrryn explained that the old king, Morgatan had passed and that Murdaek was now the king of the Keep under the mountain. Solrryn was coming back from one of the northern keeps delivering the news, and was glad to meet up with Aldren. There had been trouble brewing around the Keep, rumors of murder and plundering. More disturbing was the talk

that sometime during the summer, the human king was planning to lay siege to the Keep. Talk that was bolstered by the buildup of the king's troops and their encroachment further north than they had in many an age.

Aldren listened to the dwarf with growing concern. He knew that an attack on the Keep would be of little consequence. The stronghold was too well fortified. But the rumors of growing numbers of troops concerned him. This was the cause of many visitors to the Tower. As of late, they had seen many representatives from a growing area that had come to the Tower to plead for an alliance. The influence of the Tower was growing larger. He had long feared this responsibility. The fates were taking him to areas that he felt he was not equipped for. But there was no choice but to accept that which was laid before him and do what he thought was best.

Solrryn accepted the offer to stay the night. Aldren asked him to arrange communication with Murdaek soon. Even though the dwarves were a closed society with little contact in the outside world, the evil that was threatening the land was too great for each of the races to try and fight alone. Plans were made that a representative of Aldren's would come to the keep with arrangements for a council of all remaining free races.

Late into the night, Aldren discussed what was going on with Ameni and Vabryn. The talk of the dwarf was disturbing in the estimates of the king's strength. It was finally decided they needed to call a council of all the free races that wished to attend with the goal of forming an alliance to preserve their freedom and their very lives. And it must happen very soon.

## Chapter 9

Posted: January 20, 2005 - 12:58:08 am

The next morning, Solrryn departed before the camp was stirring. He and Aldren exchanged some final thoughts and he was once again on his way south and west toward the Keep. The rest of the troop was preparing for the days march when Aldren sent for Mirgan.

Aldren offered the young man the chance to ride with him and Ameni. He wanted to get to the tower as soon as possible and was going to push as fast as he could. Mirgan was delighted, and then screwed up his courage to ask if Kiran could ride with them as well.

Aldren gave the young man a slight smile. "Any reason that we should speak of a bonding soon?"

Mirgan blushed a deep red. "I... I don't think so sir. I just thought that... well... she might enjoy the company."

Aldren put his hand on Mirgan's shoulder. "Of course she may ride with us. You know, you could do a lot worse than that girl. She is pretty, and smart. But she is very shy, so you may have your work cut out for you." Ameni came walking up then leading the horses. "But consider how living with someone with Elven blood can be."

That last remark got him a dirty look from Ameni, and another blush from Mirgan. He laughed and then sent Mirgan off to find Kiran and get ready to ride. Ameni looked over at Aldren. "What was that all about?"

"Seems our young Mirgan has found someone who has turned his head. I asked him to ride with us so we could talk a bit, and he asked if Kiran could come along as well."

"This is going to be a swift journey. If she does well, then she will be worthy of him."

The young couple rode up as Aldren was making final plans with Vabryn. He smiled at them and then mounted up and headed up the road, Ameni at his side and the young couple close behind.

After several leagues, they turned off the main road and took a smaller trail that would be a more direct route to the tower. They rode along with Aldren and Ameni in the lead, quietly discussing recent developments and what could be done about them. Mirgan and Kiran followed a couple lengths behind to give them some privacy. The effect gave the younger couple some privacy as well.

Mirgan finally got the courage to talk to Kiran about many things: their past lives, what they were looking for in the future, etc. They even commented on the pair ahead of them. By the end of the day's ride, they started to realize the attraction they each felt for the other was mutual.

That evening, the couples paired off. Aldren and Ameni elected to take the first and second watches allowing Mirgan to sleep. He and Kiran bedded down close enough to talk to each other while Ameni took her place on the other side of the camp. A few hours later, Aldren gently awakened her and took her place to sleep. When it came time for Mirgan's watch, Ameni went to let him know. She was surprised by what she saw.

They were both snuggled together, with Mirgan's hand firmly over Kiran's breast. Her hand was covering his and there was a smile on her sleeping face. As quietly as she could, she called to Mirgan. He opened his eyes, looking a bit confused. He realized just where his hand was and blushed. He started to apologize, but Ameni just chuckled and told him that it looked as though Kiran was enjoying where his hand was. When he stood, she could see the bulge in his leggings, but chose not say anything. He took his place and she lay back down next to Aldren, placing his hand as Mirgan's had been.

The party arrived at the tower just before sunset the next afternoon. The guards had seen them approaching and given the signal for the huge gates to be opened. By the time they had made it to the steps of the tower proper, there were people to take the horses and gear. Aldren led the way into the main chamber, stopping to tell the page that he wished to see the captains at their convenience. Then, he asked for supper to be brought in so he and his companions could eat while they talked.

The captains started to arrive while Aldren was still eating. He bade them to sit and started while continuing to finish his plate. "Men, while this campaign was successful, we found out some things have caused me to

rethink our position. We have been content to just stay in the tower and watch over the areas close to us. I have seen what havoc that the king's garrisons, with the help of the priests of the new God, are doing to the free peoples. Furthermore, the size of the king's armies is growing. I fear that we may not be able to do much more than survive, while they destroy the free races at their leisure. I propose to call for a uniting of all the races. What I need from you are any thoughts on this matter."

Aledelm, one of the older and most respected of the captains spoke up first. "Lord, I can see the reasoning behind the idea. But can we get to all of these different races and their many clans and bands before the king's forces could wreak havoc upon us... and them as well?"

"A point worth considering. However, we must try. There are enough troops here to hold the garrisons of the king at bay. We will ride out in patrols that will protect the areas they are assigned. While you are out, you will have to recruit and teach those you are protecting to defend themselves. But first, we must send out riders to spread the word. Select only those that will understand the need to be thoughtful of who they are meeting. We are looking to make alliances, not more enemies."

Uskar, who had ridden in earlier from the town of Makael's Crossing further south asked to speak. Aldren nodded for him to continue. "The King's armies are still well trained and loyal to the crown way south. However, the further North you come, the more disorganized they seem to be. A young princeling by the name of Isray is trying to gain some power near the wastelands. He is not a real threat but he is drawing the court's attention. This could be an advantage for us since they have to deal with him as well."

Aldren crossed his arms in front of him as he leaned closer to Uskar. "What kind of man is this Isray?"

"A man who it is said escaped bondage and has gathered a good number of followers that are in disfavor with the court. From those that have talked to him, he is headstrong but fair. He has carved out the areas that border the wastelands and when the king's troops come to try and take him, he and his followers melt into the wasteland. They know the area, and like as not, the troops never return. They are becoming more cautious

about going after him. If he was allowed to govern the area, he would make a formidable ally."

After a few more comments, Aldren called the meeting to a close. The captains left to choose who would be the emissaries for Aldren's council. Kal-angarr appeared while Aldren was finishing his wine, and they spoke of the rescue and plans for the near future.

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Mirgan had departed for his own quarters as soon as they had arrived. This left Ameni and Kiran alone while Aldren held his council. They had taken a small table near the kitchen hearth as a place to have a quiet meal. Kiran was very quiet while they ate and Ameni respected her silence. After they finished, Kiran finally spoke.

"My Lady, I thank you for allowing me to ride ahead with you and Lord Aldren. I am not as comfortable with the girls my age as I am with more adult company."

"I can understand what you are saying though. When I was a child, my father taught me the arts of the sword and the bow. He had been one of the elders in our clan and the only one that understood the threat that was coming. He taught my brother and me how to protect others and ourselves. I was serious enough to his words that I had little time for the giggling. While the other young girls were trying to catch the eye of the elven lads, I was practicing with my bow, bringing in meat for the family."

"Is that how you met Lord Aldren? I'm sorry, I should not ask such things." Kiran turned her attention to the top of the table.

Ameni just grinned. "That is alright. Actually, our village was attacked and everyone was killed. I maimed three of them before they ganged up on me. They hauled me away, tied me up to a tree, and left me to die. I had a cut along my side and would have died except Aldren had decided to camp nearby that night. He found me and nursed me back to health. We have been together ever since."

Ameni then told her about some of the adventures they had experienced. She was very interested in Mirgan's part of the tale. Ameni took advantage of this to further any bond that was forming between those two. "Mirgan



may be a bit young, but his valor and honor to his word has carried a lot of respect among those that know him. You know he is interested in you, don't you?"

Kiran blushed. "I had hoped that he was. But he has not come forward as of yet."

Ameni patted her arm. "He will, but it may take a while. He is not too wise with the opposite sex as of yet. Just give him some time and watch for the signals. Now we need to find you a bed. Tomorrow we can plan for your future, both here and with Mirgan."

They headed up the back stairs where Ameni put Kiran in a comfortable room down the hall from where her and Aldren's quarters were. Kiran crawled between the blankets, enjoying the softness of the grass-filled mattress. She was soon asleep, dreaming of the vastness of the tower, and wondering how she could be of help to the ones she owed her life to.

Kiran found herself once again in the kitchen the next morning. She had awakened, and after taking care of her morning needs, realized that she was hungry. She had stopped at the entrance, not quite sure if she should enter or not. A rather portly woman, her graying hair hanging in tendrils, spotted her standing there.

This woman waved her into the room. "Come in, child! I haven't seen you around here before. Did you ride in with the Lord and Lady? Come and sit down. You hungry? I bet you are. Kareena, bring this child a bowl of boiled cereal and honey. And some of the hot tea."

Kiran found herself in a whirlwind of activity. This woman could talk faster than a trader trying to cut a bargain. But, the friendliness in her smiling oval face and the concern in her tone made Kiran relax a bit. She eagerly accepted the bowl of grains and the cup of tea.

After she had eaten most of her breakfast, the woman came back and sat opposite her at the table. "We have been busy this morning. Lord Aldren is simple in his needs, and never complains, but we all wish to have anything he would need or want at the ready, that we push ourselves. Now that I have a few minutes, I thought you might like to talk a bit. I am Isabella by the way. And who are you?"

Kiran swallowed the mouthful of cereal and introduced herself. She answered the Isabella's questions and laughed at the tales of happenings around the tower. When Isabella recounted when Aldren had been proclaimed Lord of the Tower, she was enraptured. So much so, she did not notice the guard who appeared next to the table.

He cleared his throat and both women looked up. "Are you the one called Kiran?" She nodded at his gruff question. "The Lord of the Tower wishes to speak to you. Come with me."

Kiran stood and followed the man. She had to wonder at his attitude. Was Lord Aldren upset with her for some reason? Had she said something that was not proper? These thoughts were circling in her mind as she followed the large guard through the passages toward the main hallway that she had first entered last night.

The guard led her to a room off the main hall. She looked inside to see Lord Aldren sitting behind a large table that had many books and papers scattered about. A small fire in the grate cast off the morning's chill. Along the walls were shelves that held what looked like volumes of lore. Shoved in among the volumes were pieces of parchment. She stood at the doorway until Aldren looked up.

"Ahh, Kiran. Come in. Take a seat and I will be with you in just a moment." He then spoke to the guard. "Dunlane, ask the riders to meet me in the main hall before they leave. I want to give them some last-minute instructions and to wish them well and good speed."

Aldren then turned to Kiran and smiled. "Did you get a good nights rest?" When she nodded, he continued. "Have you given any thought to what you might want to do while you are here?"

"Anything you need of me, my Lord."

"That isn't the question, Kiran. What could you wish to do if you could do anything in your dreams?"

Aldren spoke so kindly to her that she decided to take a chance. "If I could, I would wish to learn to fight like your lady. I just admire her so much! She can take care of herself and yet she is very much a lady."

Aldren just looked at her for a few moments. She became afraid that once again she had said something untoward. He finally shook his head as if he was coming back from a thought, then focused on her again and smiled. "I believe that we might be able to take care of that. But in exchange, I would ask something of you."

Kiran was overjoyed, but held it in. Keeping her face neutral, she answered. "If it is within my abilities, my Lord."

"I seem to remember hearing that you understand many languages. Is this true?"

Yes, sir. I used to help my father in his trading business. He was one of the few that traded with all who had need. I found out that I could pick up their language easily. When I was old enough, I would travel with him to different settlements where I would translate for him. It made him popular with his customers and I would often get little gifts for my labor."

"Would you be willing to do the same for me? It would be very helpful to me and to all free peoples. I don't want problems due to something as trivial as a lack of understanding."

Kiran was stunned. Her uncle had dismissed her as little more than a nuisance. He kept telling her that she was not worth the food he had to feed her. He had slapped her for talking to one of the customers in their own language, saying that they had to speak only the common tongue if they were to continue to trade. Now, this man, who she saw as her lord and protector, was asking her to use her talent. Even more, he treated her as an equal and wanted her input!

"It would be an honor to do what you ask." She then switched to Elvish. "*I am proud to be of service to the Lord of the Tower.*"

Ameni stepped into the room as she was speaking. "*It is refreshing to hear the language of the Kindred spoken. Hail Kiran, one who speaks the words of the kindred.*" Ameni bowed with her hands crossed at her chest.

Kiran repeated the bow, watching the elf carefully. Aldren spoke up turning to his mate. "Kiran wishes to learn to defend herself. She is very impressed with your knife and bow."

Ameni smiled and told the young woman that she would enjoy teaching her. "If you are done my mate, I should take her to the armory to see if there is something that would suit this warrior."

Aldren gave his leave to them and headed for the hall to speak to the riders. Ameni took the awe-struck Kiran with her to the armory and then to the practice grounds to start her on her education.

The riders had been gone two days before the troop accompanying the rescued women arrived at the Tower. Housing was found for them all and they were soon to work helping wherever their skills were best suited. Dulca went to the healer's building and was soon trading cures with those that ran the hall.

A few of the others had spotted Kiran being taught swordplay and asked to learn as well. One of the captains, who had earned respect from Ameni, volunteered to teach the basics to those interested. The armory made a lightweight longknife that seemed to be ideal for the women to use. They were all diligent in their practice and were soon competing with the men.

Those, with the talent and the inclination, set themselves up as ladies of pleasure, providing a service that was welcomed by the men. They took care of a need and those that availed themselves of the ladies' services were careful to treat them with respect.

With their ranks swelling, Aldren started to look toward the canyon that they named Dragon's Hold in honor of the meeting with Balroth. Plans were made to fortify the narrow part of the canyon with the idea of populating it as a second base of operations.

Recruits were coming in almost every day. Some had badly needed skills and were put to work immediately, while the others were put into training somewhere that would help in the running and expansion of what was now being considered the Northern Kingdom.

Aldren knew it was reaching the point when he had to start accepting the responsibility that had been thrust upon him. Gone were the days that he could freely come and go as he pleased. Now, there were hundreds if not thousands who depended on him for protection, and in reality for their very lives. Aldren sighed as he stood from his chair. He left the main hall where he had been brooding and started up the long flight of stairs to the

top of the tower. The chamber of the ancients was where his history had been first revealed and where he realized his life was no longer his alone.

He settled his body near the glowing coals once again. He had not had the nerve to return to this place since the first time, but he was hoping the answers would reveal themselves here. The breezes started moving through the many openings that surrounded him. And with the breezes came the words of the ancients once again.

Ameni was waiting for Aldren in their chambers. She had been looking for him earlier in the evening when Kal-angarr told her he had seen her mate heading for the chamber. She had known that Aldren had been wrestling with something. He had tried to shield her from it, but she knew from his demeanor. He had seemed to be much more distant since the raid that rescued the women that now were integrating into life in the Tower.

Aldren removed his tunic and leggings then sat on the bed. Ameni moved over and sat behind him. She reached up and started to knead the tense muscles in his neck and shoulders. Aldren let his head fall forward and gave a low groan as her strong fingers worked on the knotted muscles.

"I know you are feeling the weight of responsibility my love." She whispered in his ear, "and I am willing to help you with the burden if you will allow me to."

He reached up and grasped her hand in his, squeezing gently. "My Love, it is that I feel responsible for all of these people. Not only in the tower, but those in the surrounding villages as well. The king's troops are starting to venture north and I cannot be everywhere to protect them all... I feel it is my responsibility to keep them from harm since I am the one who the king and the priests are after. And I am failing that responsibility."

Ameni was thoughtful for a moment. "I know that you feel that it is your fault the troops are coming out more, and to some degree you are correct. But eventually the people would have been overcome anyway. By doing all you can to teach them to defend themselves, you are giving them a better chance to survive. It is their choice to resist and they must be prepared to take the consequences of their actions. They are willing to follow you because you are fair in your judgments and respectful in your dealings."

She went back to massaging his shoulders. "It is their choice, freely made and you cannot control that."

Ameni then put her arms under his and hugged him from behind, her hands across his chest and her breasts pushing against his back. He could feel her nipples pressing into him and the way her hands were wandering left him with no doubt that she was becoming excited. He reached behind him and pulled her around so that she was half lying on his thighs. He stared at her beauty for a moment and then bent down until his lips met hers.

Ameni could feel his manhood becoming hard under her back. She returned his kisses with force, opening her mouth to receive his tongue and using hers to start the ancient duel. His hands moved to her breasts, covering them at first, and then bringing his fingers up until he held just her hard nipples. She was starting to moan her pleasure into his mouth.

She changed positions, struggling to keep their kiss until she sat astride him. Her wetness was coating his member as she thrust her pelvis against him. When she finally felt he was hard and ready, she rose up and maneuvered him into position. Then slowly, she settled herself down with his cock deep within her. She felt him throbbing deep inside and responded by clenching the muscles of her opening.

Aldren then broke the kiss only to move his head lower and suckle on her breasts. This caused her to moan louder as her thrusts downward became more violent. As she started the climb to her climax, Aldren grabbed her ass with both hands for leverage and began thrusting up into her as he pulled her down.

As she tripped over the precipice, her movements became chaotic and she let out a low wail. Aldren quickly followed grunting as his cock pumped his seed deep into her. He collapsed back onto the bed with Ameni following him down, his cock still buried deep within her.

"The ancients did well bringing us together." Aldren whispered as he stroked her hair. She raised her head and smiled down at him. He could see in her eyes complete love and devotion. He also knew that the same feelings were being reflected back to her.

Ameni reached over and pulled a cloth off the top of a trunk to place between her legs. She was sure that if she had tried to stand, her legs would not have supported her. She did find the strength to turn and move under the sleeping furs. She was asleep almost before her head had settled against the rolled blanket.

Aldren got up long enough to douse the candle flames. He then crawled in beside his mate as he studied her features in the light from the fire. In the midst of all the change and turmoil that was happening, this woman was the one thing that remained steady. Without her input, he would have made some very bad decisions. Well, she was right in the idea that he could not be responsible for the protection of everyone within the northern lands, but he vowed to protect his mate above all else. With these thoughts running through his mind, he joined her in dreamless slumber.

The riders that Aldren had sent out started returning. Most of the villages of men were more than willing to join in the defense of their lands against the tyranny from the south. Those that were not sure would be left alone if they did not raise a hand against their neighbors. The priests that were around soon disappeared, either dead or fleeing back to the south.

Aldren decided that it would be best to visit the other races himself. The riders reported while they had been received well enough, communication had been difficult. The other races were still leery of just who they represented.

Out on the training grounds with Ameni, Aldren watched the progress of his troops. The new recruits were training up quickly. Since they were here of their own free will and had the desire to defend their own, they put everything they had into it.

One bright spot was the progress of the women. After Kiran had requested and started receiving training in arms, others felt that they too should learn to defend themselves. This caused some discord among the men, many of whom were taught that women should be meek and helpless. A few openly laughed at their first attempts, but as they progressed, respect was grudgingly given. The swords and bows were lighter in weight and they were being taught to use the weight and bulk of their opponent against them. The elvish way of fighting, *hanbra*, came to them easily.

Aldren called Kiran over to them. She was red-faced with exertion and panting slightly as she jogged up to them. "*Hail, my Lord and Lady.*" She greeted them in Elvish, bowing low with her arms crossed.

"*Hail to thee, Elf friend and warrior maid,*" was the reply from Ameni.

Aldren then addressed her. "We have need of your abilities, Kiran. Would you be willing to ride with us to visit the other free races and translate for us?"

Kiran's smile threatened to consume her entire face. The Lord of the Tower truly wanted her to ride with him and use her unique talent to help him! "Of course, my Lord. I would be honored to help in any way I can. Is Mirgan coming too?" She then put her hands over her mouth, embarrassed at that last outburst.

Aldren laughed out loud. "I am sure it can be arranged, if he is willing. I was thinking of taking him anyway. Now, I am sure he must come along, since you requested it."

Kiran was blushing from the top of her head to past where her tunic covered her. She bowed her head and left to get her things together.

While Kiran was making up her traveling pack, she thought of Mirgan. The young man was shy around women, especially her. This had caused her own innate shyness to fade and she began to try and make sure she was around so he could notice her. All the planning had finally paid off when he had finally kissed her as they had walked through the side gardens of the tower. It had not been a long kiss, but it had made her tingle down to her toes. And then, he had taken her hand in his! She had felt like she was walking on the clouds. Now every time she was near him, her heart would beat like it would come out of her chest.

She stirred herself from the memories but was still smiling as she packed her gear. She knew this was an important job and she would have to be alert and ready. They would be riding into wild country that could be full of dangers, not only from the wild animals but also from the men who lived there. Finished with her bedroll and other items she needed, she checked and oiled her leather jerkin and honed her sword. Then, she went out into the dusk to eat and talk to Mirgan before getting some sleep. They would be riding with first light.



The troop had been on the trail for almost two sevendays when they approached the settlement of Elves where Aldren and Ameni had spent several months.

As the troop approached the border, they were met by four elves on horseback. Ameni recognized Marden as the foremost rider. "*Hail Marden, warrior and friend.*"

*"And hail to thee, Ameni of the Kin. It is good to see you looking well, Aldren half-elfen. You and those with you are expected. We are to be your guides to the settlement."*

The troop turned off the main road and started down a trail that was clear only to their guides. Aldren took note of the elves that were perched in trees along the way, well hidden in the tangles of limbs and foliage.

When Aldren inquired about the hidden elves, Marden explained that they had been having trouble with bands of rogues attacking and trying to take over their lands. He then said no more on the matter, noting that all would be told in council.

Kiran rode in her now accustomed place behind Aldren and Ameni and next to Mirgan. She was quietly observing the guides, listening closely to their speech and figuring out the few words that she was unfamiliar with. By doing so, she almost missed what Mirgan was saying.

"I was just commenting on how much I am reminded of the times when I was small and my father would take me and mother to the village of his kin. I was very young, yet I remember feeling like I was more at peace with them than anywhere else."

"Do you remember anything special?" was her gentle reply.

"Not so much anything that stands out, but just the general feeling of peace and belonging. It was something that I never felt in the presence of my mother's family. They had never forgiven her for marrying someone outside of her race. They tolerated me for her sake, but there was no real acceptance."

"Well, I cannot see you passing that kind of prejudice on to our... I mean your children." Kiran turned beet red and hoped that he missed that slip of the tongue that betrayed her true feelings.

Mirgan had heard it clearly, but wisely decided now was not the time to pursue it.

The sun had just moved behind the treetops when they came to the settlement proper. The party was led to the square where the elders greeted them and bade them all welcome. Marden then led them to buildings that had been prepared for their use. Aldren, Ameni, Mirgan and Kiran were all told that they could settle in to refresh themselves and then there would be a feast in their honor.

Mirgan and Kiran were requested to go with Aldren and Ameni. They were led to a cottage that was cozy with a bright fire in the hearth. Since there were only two sleeping rooms, Ameni looked at their guide. He quickly explained in elvish that since Aldren might wish to have his squire near, they had supplied them with a dwelling that would allow such. Since Mirgan and Kiran had been holding hands and talking quietly together, it had been assumed that they were bonded.

Kiran hid her smile from their guide and Mirgan was trying to get her to tell him what was being said. She waved him off for the moment. The guide left when their gear was brought in. As soon as they left, Aldren let out a hearty laugh.

"Mirgan my lad, you must look more regal than you think you do. The advance scouts were under the impression that you are my squire! And they were kind enough to provide us with a place with two sleeping rooms so you could be near in case I needed you for something."

Ameni was smiling at the two young people. "I will go and try and explain that you two are not bonded and that Mirgan is not Aldren's squire."

Aldren spoke up, more serious now. "There is no need to correct our hosts, that is if Mirgan would agree to take on the duties as a squire. I would not want a servant, rather someone I could trust to handle messages for me, and to speak in my stead when needed. I do not want you to think that you are being degraded, but rather it would be more like a promotion."

Mirgan was almost speechless. "My Lord, I would be honored to take on the mantle of your squire. I will do my best to live up to your expectations."

"It will be so then. We will pass the word later tonight. Now, let us get cleaned up for tonight's festivities."

Mirgan looked at Kiran and blushed. Neither one moved toward the second room. Mirgan finally spoke. "Kiran, you go ahead and take the bed. I will go in after you and change. I can sleep out here on the floor tonight."

Kiran thought for a moment. "I would not mind if you wished to lay your blankets in the room. It has a hearth that would keep you warmer than you would be out here. I trust you since we have been camping together for a while now."

Mirgan thought to himself that he didn't trust himself, but followed the girl into the room. Once inside, he placed his blankets on the floor as far from the bed as he could. He pulled a clean tunic and leggings from his pack and then left the room so Kiran could wash and change. Kiran washed and dressed in a few moments. He traded places with her to do the same.

The feast was held in the main hall of the elves village. The room was as large as the main hall of the tower. The exposed wooden beams were carved with scenes from their past telling the stories of their settlements. A huge hearth stood on each end, their fires blazing brightly. The walls were carved with designs which the elves favored, trees and vines flowing gracefully around each other making intricate designs that moved around the many windows.

This night, long tables were set down each side to accommodate the revelers, ending at the dais where the elders and the Lord of the Tower were seated. The food was delicious, and not a person among them was left hungry. Conversation was lively and the mixture of Elvish and the Common tongue didn't seem to stop them from sharing their jokes and laughter. Songs were sung and tales were told. It was long into the night before they all became exhausted and left for their respective dwellings.

Once back to their room, Mirgan became suddenly shy. He pulled his boots off and slipped between his blankets before removing his leggings.

He made sure that he turned his back to Kiran as she got into the bed. After he heard the rustling of the mattress, he realized that the candles were still lit in the room. He warned Kiran that he was going to put them out so she could turn away.

With looking in her direction, he slipped out from between his blankets. With just his tunic covering him, he moved quickly to extinguish the candles. He stirred the fire and added fuel to make sure it burned through the night. The stones on the floor could become chilly before morning. He turned to go back to his covers, and looked toward the bed only to see Kiran staring back at him. She had a smile on her face that he could not quite figure out. She didn't look like she was laughing at him as he scurried toward his bed, but it was more of a smile of something she was remembering fondly.

He started to get into his blankets when she called out softly to him. When he looked back, she had moved toward the far edge of the bed and was holding the covers up in invitation. "Come and join me Mirgan. The floor is too cold and hard to be comfortable. I will feel bad if I get to enjoy this bed and you do not."

"Kiran, that may not be a good idea. You are a beautiful woman. And I have had more drink than I am used to. I can't guarantee that I could control my actions."

"Do you think I had not considered that? I am willing to take my chances."

Mirgan thought about her words. He cared for her, very much so. He even loved her. And she had hinted that it might just be mutual. Taking a deep breath, he moved over to the bed and slid in. He settled down on his back with Kiran on her side next to him.

She snuggled up to him, laying her head on his shoulder. He put his arm behind her neck in order for them to be comfortable. They lay there for a few moments, each one thinking their own thoughts. Mirgan was thinking about how warm and soft Kiran felt snuggled up against him. He enjoyed the texture of her hair where it touched his cheek, and the firm feeling of her breast as it pushed into his side. He even imagined that he could feel her nipple trying to bore a hole into his chest. But most of all, he was

enjoying the feeling of contentment and excitement of having his vision of a perfect woman next to him.

Kiran was having the same kinds of thoughts. She reveled in the strength of his arms and chest. She could smell a certain scent that was most definitely male. She could even feel the beating of his heart. Shifting her leg, she touched his hardness with her thigh. He jumped when she did, and she moved back just a bit. But she was now assured that he was excited to be with her! For her own part, she felt like she was on fire!

"This is so much more comfortable, Mirgan." Kiran sighed. She tilted her head to look up at him. "It would be perfect if you would put your hand on my breast like you did the night we slept together going to the tower."

Mirgan caught his breath. "How did you know about that? I thought you were asleep."

"I had been, but when you moved your hand, I woke up from your absence. I felt so safe with you there. With all the things that I had gone through, I was afraid I would never feel safe again." Since he had not moved his hand yet, she reached around and pulled his hand until it covered her breast. She also moved his hand until he got the idea and started caressing her on his own. She moaned as her excitement started to rise.

Mirgan's thoughts were confused. He was not experienced with women, although the prostitutes in the tower were more than willing to teach him. Some had offered for free! Now, he had the girl that he had grown to love lying next to him and she had put his hand on her breast. Judging from the sounds she was making, she was enjoying it. Rather than worry about what he did or didn't know, he decided to just go with the feelings he was having. He reached over, pulled her on top of him, and then kissed her. The girls in Ramas were more than willing to kiss a guy, and he had taken the opportunity to learn that skill. Now, he applied everything he had learned to Kiran's lips. Since she was on top of him, he reached down to stroke her butt. To his delight, he discovered that her tunic did not come down that far. His hands connected with her warm, soft flesh causing his passion to rise even further.

Kiran broke the kiss and lifted herself up until she was sitting astride him. His fear that he had done something wrong vanished when she reached for the hem of her tunic and pulled it over her head. There, in front of his eyes, were the most perfect pair of breasts he could have ever imagined. They were not large, but looked perfect on her frame. They rode high on her chest standing out proudly. The nipples were sticking well clear and were colored in her excitement.

He started to reach out and touch those beautiful globes, but Kiran had other ideas. She started pulling on his shirt trying to remove the last piece of clothing that either one had been wearing. With him helping, they quickly removed the garment and paused to take stock of this new appearance of their lover.

Mirgan's eyes started from where her strong thighs were wrapped around his waist. He could see the dark patch of hair between her legs that thinned enough to show her nether lips were splayed apart lying on each side of his cock. As his eyes traveled upward, he saw her flat stomach that led to her chest. His gaze finally stopped on her face that was flushed in passion and zeroed in on her eyes. The deep blue that was normally there had almost been replaced with the blackness of her pupils as her eyes dilated in her arousal. Her gaze as she looked at him was something he had never seen before. Her smoky penetrating stare was one of sheer, unadulterated lust.

Kiran was on fire. Once she had removed Mirgan's shirt, her lust had inflamed as she took in his muscular chest, bare except for a smattering of fine hair grouped between his pectoral muscles. Looking down where she was kneeling she could see the tip of his cock between her pussy lips. The head was almost purple and coated in a clear liquid. She also discovered that if she moved at all, the sensation sent spasms running throughout her loins.

Though her knowledge was limited, she knew that she had to feel him inside her. She rose up on her knees and put her hands around the base of his cock, raising it up and aiming it at her wet entrance. She started to settle upon it and found that the angle was not quite right. Groaning in frustration, she shifted forward and tried again. This time, she wet rubbed the head between her lips to moisten it, feeling spasms run through her body as she brushed it against her clit. She finally found her entrance and

pushed back feeling the head slide past the ring of muscles at the mouth of her hole.

Mirgan was entranced with the sight he was witnessing. He had felt the absence of her pussy against his shaft when she had raised up but it was replaced with the sensation of her hot wetness as she moved him between her lips... Nothing could have prepared him for what he felt when she lowered herself down onto his cock. It felt like he was trapped in a sheath of hot wet velvet. He could feel the walls of her vagina push open to accept him. She kept up the slow, downward movement until she had him buried and her clit was nestled in his pubic hair.

Kiran lowered herself down until she was lying on his chest. When her uncle had used her as he had her mother, it had hurt so bad that she had passed out. The second time hurt as well since she was dry down there. Fortunately, her uncle's member was not well developed, certainly not like the one that was in her now! This time, she was able to really enjoy what had happened. And she was not one to usually take the lead in anything. But this time, her lust had been in control and she knew she had to have this man that was now trailing his fingers up and down her back. His touch was sending shocks throughout her body. Once more, she raised up over him and started to raise and lower herself onto him.

Mirgan picked up her rhythm and started pushing up into her in time with her movements. It wasn't long before he could feel his seed start to rise, and he started moving even faster. She seemed ready as well since she matched him stroke for stroke. Suddenly, he felt her muscles clamp tight onto him and her sheath started to vibrate along the length of his cock. He pushed one last time hard into her and felt his seed rush up and out of him. Mirgan heard his own growls combine with hers as they both felt their release wash over and through them.

Kiran collapsed onto Mirgan's chest, panting in exertion. She had never felt anything close to this. She could feel him still inside her and she never wanted to lose that feeling. He reached down and caressed her back and buttocks. She sighed happily from his touch. She had never felt so relaxed and in love with anyone before.

Mirgan's cock finally started to deflate and it slipped out from inside her. She groaned as she moved, but she got up and found a piece of cloth to

stop the flow of their combined juices. She then crawled back into Mirgan's waiting arms to cuddle and kiss until they both fell asleep.

Inside the next room, Ameni caught the sounds of the younger couple's lovemaking. She smiled and whispered to Aldren to listen as well. They both chuckled at the thought of the lovemaking going on there, but were very soon aroused by the sounds of passion that they were soon adding their own cries. With Ameni on her back, her knees pulled almost to her breasts, Aldren took her pushing them both to their climaxes within a very short time. Both couples slept soundly, content that they were with their mates and wouldn't be separated by choice again.

Word came that the dwarves would be coming in to join in the council. This held the talks off for a few days to allow them to arrive. In the meantime, the troops had a chance to sharpen their skills and their weapons. For Aldren and Ameni, it was a chance to renew friendships that they had made during their stay there.

The first one was to the healer's house. Old Belwin was still in charge and pleased to see them once again. She invited them into the house and bade them to sit at the table. One of the apprentices brought a hot herbal tea and some biscuits that were buttery and melted in your mouth.

Once they had settled in, Belwin started the conversation. *"I can see that much has happened to you both, but especially you, Aldren."*

*"You are right, Old One. I found that I could not disregard the path that the ancients have laid before me. Many of the things that have happened were not of my choosing, but I have learned to adapt and accept them as part of my destiny."*

*"One thing I can tell is that you have found the very thing that terrified you can be controlled. I can feel the power coming from you, surrounding your being like those who have gone before. It is still a dangerous thing and one that bears your constant vigilance. Have care when you let loose your power for those who are not prepared could be harmed."*

She then turned her attention to Ameni. *"Elf daughter, I see that you have decided to follow this man and have accepted what is to come because of that. Yet I sense something in you that was not there when the last we met."*



Ameni then told of how she and Aldren had met Balroth, the black dragon. Taking turns, the warriors told the healer of how Aldren had saved the dragon's life and how Aldren had learned of his heritage. Belwin listened without interrupting, but taking in every word that was said. When they finished, she sat very still for a long while. Finally, she stirred and spoke in a low voice.

*"You now know what I had felt within you from your first time here with us. For many years, I kept the scrolls of the Dragon Clan hidden away. They contain the secrets of their lives, what they believed, what they understood of their brethren. I now think it is time for me to pass these scrolls on to the scion of the clan. It is only right I do so."* With that, she got up and left the pair at the table. It was not a short while, but the healer returned carrying a heavy volume and two scrolls that looked ancient. These she handed to Aldren with a bow. *"Receive the history of your clan, Lord Aldren. For it is the history of those who will once again bring this world back to a time of peace for all free peoples."*

Aldren accepted the book and scrolls with much thanks to the healer. She then spoke to Ameni about being bathed in the blood of a dragon. *"Ameni, you may have noticed that your senses have been sharpened. In addition, the magics that the elves still possess are within your grasp to control and wield. This includes those that have long since fallen from memory. To you, I pass this book that contains those magics. Learn them well for they may save you or those close to you some day."*

They visited with the healer for a while longer, and then decided to take their leave of her. Before they left, she asked them for one favor. They agreed and it was decided that when they departed, Isowan would come with them. During the time they had been gone from the village, the girl had grown both in height and in knowledge. She would be able to teach those in the tower that were healers much that might save lives. For her part, Isowan was excited to go along. She was to stay with Belwin until it was time for them to depart.

On their third day in the elvish settlement, the dwarves arrived. Murdaek was in the lead followed by twenty men of his court all dressed in the chain mail that their race favored. There had not been any contact between the dwarves and the elves for many long years but it was not from any hatred, but rather it was due to the fact that both races had until now kept mainly to themselves and had not reason to interact. However, both races

were wary of each other much as anyone would be when confronted with a complete stranger.

The leaders were guided to the great hall where the feast a few days before was held. Inside were two long tables that were butted together on their long sides, forming a rough square. The elves took the side opposite the dwarves, leaving Aldren and his company between them.

Aldren started the council by explaining what he knew of happenings in the south. He told of the king and his losing control to the priests and courtiers. How the local lords were allowing the brutality to increase. Of raids, and the destruction of all those who oppose their rule.

Next to speak were the dwarves. Murdaek told of a contingent of the king's men, led by one who claimed to be high in the council of the king, who came to demand the dwarves pay homage to the King. The dwarf's use of the common tongue was excellent as he told the tale, his deep voice reverberating through the hall.

"I listened to his demands and told him we would make our decision in three days. They departed to their camp for that time. When they returned, I told the leader that we had been a free people for as long as time had been measured. We had worked alongside the Ancient Ones and had been at peace since. We will not subject ourselves to rule of another race.

He then stated that we would either become subjects of the crown or we would be destroyed. We shut the gates and they attacked the keep. I am sure that Aldren can testify that our defenses are considerable. They tried to ram the gates, but our archers rained down arrows that decimated their numbers. They next tried fire, but the rock wouldn't burn. Now they are laying siege to our keep using catapults. It is a slow process but they may eventually breach the walls. Since time beyond memory, we have lived in peace requesting nothing from the outside world. Now, we are here to request aid from the other free races. We are willing to form an alliance to stop this invasion, but is there hope against such a force that the king can draw on?"

Aldren stood and bowed to both the elves and the dwarves. "We, and I include all free peoples are at a crossroads. Long have we lived our separate lives in relative peace. We have followed the old ways - ways that

preserved peace and harmony for countless generations. Now a common enemy that wishes to eliminate or make subjects of us all brings us together.

But it is not all men who believe like this. Many wish to remain free to practice the old ways. But one race alone cannot hope to defeat such a menace. The priests of this new god are able to get people to believe that their way is correct. And when a religion is at the basis of the fight, those under the influence are willing to fight to the end. They lose all thoughts of logic and come to depend on the edicts of the leaders. We must band together into a fighting force that is united in the goal of returning the lands back to all the races." Aldren then fell silent and sat back down.

There were several minutes of silence as the leaders of each race were lost in their own thoughts. Finally, Valelael, the spokesman for the elves spoke.

"I can see where we need the cooperation of the other races. But I don't believe that we will be able to destroy this evil completely, for there will always be those who wish to control the lives of others. Our best hope may be to contain the evil. Drive those that believe alike to an area where they can be kept isolated to feed upon themselves. We can declare the lands surrounding them to be free for all races. I speak for my clan, the North Mountain Clan when I say that we will form such alliances of cooperation as is necessary to accomplish this."

There was more discussion but in the end, it had been decided that they would just defend the areas around them keeping in mind that the future goal was to free the lands north of the river Rimdalt.

This was the long-term goal. For the immediate future, they knew they had a long series of fights ahead. First was the breaking of the siege at the kingdom of the dwarves. Murdaek said that there were at least 500 troops held the siege. These troops were clueless of the other doors out of the keep, which was how the dwarves were able to come to the council.

Before the leaders adjourned for a meal, Belwin appeared at the doorway of the hall. After receiving permission to enter and speak, she slowly shuffled her way in to face the council. Behind her was Isowin, who was holding a standard. The attached banner was tightly bound, hiding the device that was upon it.

She spoke in elvish, but Valelael translated for those who did not understand the language. "Leaders and representatives of the free peoples of the land, I stand before you to return a banner long closeted and kept by those who retain the lore and wisdom of the elves. Long ago, this banner was bravely flown by a clan that was of the highest reknown. Now, it is returned to the last survivor of that clan."

With a flourish, Isowin unfurled the banner. It showed a black dragon in flight against a dark red background. Valelael and the other elders in attendance all gasped in surprise. They knew of this banner, but only from legend.

"*Isowin, where did this come from and why do you display it now?*" This came from one of the elders at the dais.

Isowin answered in a strong voice. "*It has been foretold that one would return that could claim the right to carry this banner once again. Now that time has come. My mentor's foresight has been proven true. Aldren, half-elven has been proven to be the one. For he has called the dragons to his aid and they have acknowledged the right. Balroth the Black, mightest of the dragons of legend, has declared Aldren, Dragon Kin. Aldren healed Balroth, which can only be done by one who controls the dragon magic.*"

The dwarves were left out of the exchange. Kiran, who had come to the council at Aldren's request, translated the discussions for them. The dwarves discounted the legends of the elves for the most part. However, seeing the look of concern and even fear in the expressions of the elders made them rethink their preconceived notions.

One of the elven elders spoke up. "*How can we believe this is true? No one, man or elf has been allowed to practice the wild magic for generation uncounted.*"

When Mirgan heard the translation of the elf's words, he stood and asked to be allowed to speak. He had been in awe of the great leaders that were here, but it rankled him that they did not believe what Aldren had done. "Lords, this wise woman speaks the truth. For I have seen the power that my Lord Aldren possesses. I have seen him in battle, surrounded by flame and unstoppable. He is careful of his use of this magic for he has told me that with such power comes a terrible responsibility. You can believe this lowly knight of the tower or not as you wish. But I do not lie. You have to only look into my soul to know that what I say is true." With that, Mirgan

moved back and fell silent. He never had been one for speaking so forcefully, but he had felt that it needed to be said.

The elves went back into a private conference for a while. Then Valelael spoke for them all. *"We who know Aldren tend to believe what is said, but many will still be wary of one who carries such power. Thus we give consent for those who follow Aldren to fight under the banner of the Dragon Clan. However, we ask that the banner not be revealed until such time that we are in battle and have need of such power."*

Isowin furled the banner to its staff, masking the heraldry that was displayed on its field of red. She passed it to Mirgan, who took possession of it with a mixture of awe and not just a little pride. He stood behind his lord, tall and stern with the responsibility for being a part of the ancient legends unfolding.

The discussions stopped long enough to let the leaders eat before deciding how to free the dwarves. Stepping outside, Mirgan approached Aldren during the break. "My Lord, it is really not my place to understand what you need to decide, but I have a suggestion for you, if you wish to hear it."

"If it would help save the lives of our troops, I would be very interested, Mirgan." Aldren then stepped over to Mirgan and grasped his forearm in a warrior-to-warrior salute declaring, "And I wish to thank you for coming to my aid during the discussions. You shall be my standard bearer when we go into battle, fighting alongside me and the men of the tower."

Flushed with pride at his new position, Mirgan was momentarily at a loss for words, but with encouragement from Aldren to speak his mind, Mirgan quietly and quickly laid out his plan. As he listened, Aldren started to grin. By the time Mirgan had finished, Aldren was barely able to keep from laughing out loud.

Mirgan thought he had made a fool of himself until Aldren grasped his shoulder. "Young Mirgan, with ideas such as this, I believe I need to include you in all my councils! There may be a few problems we will have to work out, but the idea is brilliant! Come, we will return to the hall and have you present your plan."

Together, they walked through the ornate doors, leaving the sunshine behind to plan the future of the free races.

## Chapter 10

Posted: March 22, 2005 - 11:16:13 pm

Aldren had Mirgan sit next to him at the table. As soon as the others had taken their places, he got their attention.

"Friends, we were trying to decide what to do about the siege against the dwarf kingdom. One of my younger captains brought to my attention a plan of action that I find might suit our purpose. Mirgan, will you give us your thoughts." He then motioned for Mirgan to stand and speak.

Mirgan started to speak. While he had been present for the entire conference, he had spent his time being in awe of the leaders. When these men had gathered, each representing his race, the import of these talks had sunken in. They were about to impart on an action that would probably divide the kingdom and cost the lives of many men. His voice was shaky at first but gained strength as his confidence grew. "My lords, when I was growing up in the village of Archer's Point, I was vastly outnumbered by the other children. Together as a larger force, they could easily beat me. I learned that if I could work against them piecemeal - keep them separated as it were - I stood a much better chance at surviving. When the forces were even, I could hold my own.

My idea was this; instead of attacking them with just the numbers we have, we lay seige to their own seige. We would cut off their supplies, and attack their patrols, taking out a few of their men at a time then slipping away. Without supplies, they will soon become demoralized. They will become fearful of everything around them."

Valelael spoke up. "How do you know that they will start to become fearful? Wouldn't they just start tracking our men and cut them down?"

"My Lord Valelael, that is where the priests of the new religion will work in our favor. I have heard their sermons. They fill their followers of tales of demons that are waiting for them if they do not follow the priest's commands. They are fearful of the elves as being the greatest evil of the lands. They will be afraid of coming after us in the dark even if their commanders tell them to do so."

"But that is not the way our race fights. We have always done battle out in the open waiting for daylight. It does not seem right." This came from one of Aldren's other captains, Morlock.

Aldren took up for Mirgan at this point. "We are vastly outnumbered as it now stands. The company that set out from the tower was just for a council, not for battle. I believe that Mirgan's plan might work to keep them busy and reduce their numbers until we can bring our strength from the Tower."

Morlock once again objected. "It still doesn't seem right. It seems unmanly to sneak around and attack when they don't expect it."

"You would rather have our forces cut down to a man? If we had the numbers to at least assure a good battle, we might do as you suggest. But until then, I cannot send my troops to a certain death just because we have done it that way for years."

Morlock sat back down and digested what Aldren had told him. As an old soldier, he could not forsake tradition. However, this idea would save lives and that was the objective. He would have to think about this one for a while.

Murdaek then spoke up. "We can survive for a long time, longer in fact than the king's troops. We have access to and from the keep so we will not be of want for anything. However, it would be an advantage to have fewer troops sitting in front of our doors. And those that remain would be more demoralized. Then, when reinforcements from the other strongholds arrive, we will let them into the first hall and the enemy will not stand a chance. If any survive, they will carry back the tale that attacking anyone in the free lands is bad business." Then he gave out an evil chuckle. "Yes, this could be of great advantage."

Aldren had one final thought before they adjourned council. "We need to send people to the other settlements of our kin to let them know of the situation and see if they are willing to join us. We have done this and already have a positive response from almost all that we have contacted. But we need to be united across the land."

Murdaek decided to send two of his dwarves out directly. He did ask for and received provisions from the elves so they did not have to return to

the keep. They planned to leave at nightfall and be well away before the dawn. Valelael adjourned to do the same.

For his part, Aldren sent Morlock and one other of his party to make for the tower and call out the troops. Three others were sent into the country surrounding them to raise the alarm that the war was finally starting. When all had been dispatched, those remaining started to plan the harassment and demoralization of the king's troops.

Before they were to leave to start the siege, Aldren made one request of the Elvish council.

In the light of the full moon, the entire elf village gathered under the blanket of the night. Under a great tree in the center of the settlement, the elders stood in line with old Belwin in the center. She wore the silken robes of the high holy person in the village.

Facing the elders were two people. The elf was clad in the finery that would have befitted a woman of high honor in her clan. Upon her brow was an adornment of intricately woven silver shaped like leaves and flowers that represented the land.

Beside her stood a half-elven man. He was tall in the red and black tunic of the lost clan. Upon his head was no adornment since the crown of that clan was lost in time.

Belwin spoke to the couple as well as the crowd. Her voice was strong and even those at the outer edges of the crowd could hear her words.

*"Hear me all who have gathered. Before the council of Elders stands two who wish to become bonded in the ancient customs of our race. Ameni, elf of the North Woods Clan and being the last of that clan has consented to be bonded in the flesh and spirit to Aldren of the lost Dragon Clan. Their claims of kinship have been accepted and it is the will of this Council of Elders that this bonding be completed."*

She removed from an intricately carved metal case a strange stone. It was a little smaller than her palm and flat much like a wheel but thin on the edges. As she placed it in the center of Aldren's upturned hand, it began to glow. Ameni's hand was then placed over Aldren's, capturing the stone



between their palms. A cord of red silk was wrapped in the prescribed fashion around their wrists and hands binding them together.

As Belwin started to recite the rest of the ceremony, both participants began to glow in a soft light. It continued to grow in intensity. By the time Belwin had finished the incantation, it had grown to such power and brilliance that those near had to shield their eyes. They were surrounded by an incandescence that engulfed them and then shot like an arrow into the heavens, piercing the night sky as if to find its way to the very moon. As it reached the stars, the base of the pillar of light moved out from the couple and expanded out across the settlement in a rapid movement. The crowd felt the rush of power like a wave of warm air pushing against them as it passed them.

From far away, but rapidly moving closer came a deep booming sound, much like if a dozen thunderstorms had moved on top of each other. Around the shaft of light the bodies of the dragons of Melagon were illuminated. Their wings shimmered in the brilliance as they danced in an aerial display that had not been seen in many an age.

Their voices combined to bring a fitting chorus for the couple, the female voices higher providing a haunting refrain to the male's brassy bass line. The effect was startling as well as frightening to those in attendance. Even the doubters could now see the evidence of the legends coming true and they started to believe that the times of change foretold so long ago were now at hand.

In a final bow to the kinship they were honoring, the dragons made a final pass at tree top level, their ranks splitting around the shaft of energy. As they wheeled skyward, the light started to dissipate until there was only a shimmering halo surrounding the couple.

When it had dissipated as well and the crowd had recovered from the event, they saw Aldren and Ameni were still standing there, hands clasped with the cord hanging loosely around both their wrists. The stone had disappeared from between their palms, leaving an impression that was there from then on. The scars were the shape of the stone with the edges fanning outward in rays like those of sunlight coming through the canopy of the forest.

The crowd was still silent as Belwin removed the cord. She then turned to the Council and asked, "Is there any doubt among you now?"

The rest of the Elders shook their heads. For all the bondings they had presided over, this was the first that had ended in such a display. It had been written about in ancient scrolls, but only among the very powerful in magic. And even then what was described was nowhere near what they had just witnessed.

The couple, after bowing to the Elders and the crowd that witnessed the ceremony, walked hand in hand toward the house where they had been staying. Their lives were now forever entwined even beyond the threshold of passing. Never would they be apart in spirit and their bonding was the bringing together two into one entity, bound body and soul.

Many leagues away, in the Tower of the Guard, Kal-Angarr noted that the stars in the night sky were blotted out by the wings of many dragons as they returned from the south.

He had felt a tremendous drawing of power from the elements just before the shaft of white energy had pierced the heavens startling those who lived in the tower bowl. Now with the dragon's return to their homeland, he could feel the magic dissipating as well.

The guards on duty were puzzled and not a little fearful, but the ancient one just gave a satisfied smile as he went down to assure the sentries that all was well. Tomorrow would be soon enough for explanations for the rest of the residents. For he knew now what was foretold, has come to pass. His Lord and Lady were now truly bonded, as it was meant to be.

A sevenday later, Aldren's small company moved out under the cover of darkness. Midway to their destinations, the group split. The main force, led by Aldren and Rangar, moved toward the siege force. Ameni led the other, smaller group, at her request. This group planned to move with as much stealth and speed to where they knew the king's troops were crossing the river with supplies and men. Even with all their speed, they took three days to find the exact spot.

The king's men were lax in their rear guard. Thanks to their arrogance, along with their belief in their own invulnerability, they had left no guard behind them. As far as they knew, any resistance would be in the northern

part of the lands. They had the peasants around here terrified and were sure that no one would dare to rise up against them.

Of course, this worked in Aldren's favor. Ameni's troop had just made camp when the scouts returned to say that a supply train was heading across the river and would be within range in an hour or so. Plans were quickly laid and the troop moved out.

The leader of the supply train was in a foul mood. He had been ever since he had drawn this duty. He had no one to blame but himself. That dalliance with his Captain's sister had cost him dearly. Now he was stuck shuttling supplies to the troops that were involved in the siege against the dwarves. If those little devil's spawn had given up like they should have, he would be back in the warmer climes in the south. They had to know they could not win, and now the orders were to kill every being in the keep. The problem was they had not found a way into the keep as of yet. Every rush toward the doors had been met with a hail of arrows that had cost the troop many men. The catapults had done nothing more than scratch the outer surface. They could not get close enough to try the doors, even in the middle of the night.

Now, the court in the King's palace was getting impatient. If something did not happen soon, there would be severe reprimands handed out. At least he could take joy in the thought of the captain getting what he earned. He might even get the promotion that he deserved then.

Riding at the head of the column of carts, he was the first to spot what at first was a vision. Stand off the trail was a woman dressed in what looked like battle gear but it was a strange design. A single woman standing in a field of tall grass, this could be fun. He had used to enjoy the women for hire until that damned head priest had banned them and had any who disobeyed the edict, beheaded. Now was his chance to get rid of his frustration.

Ameni stood stock still in the field the wild grasses and plants were close to waist high on her, but it provided cover for the men who were crouched down, lying in wait. The front of the column was less than a half league away when she lifted her hand. "Halt! These lands are now closed to you and the men of the King. Turn around and your lives will be spared."

The leader stopped and stared at the woman. Who did this wench think she was? He had 15 soldiers with him and none would dare to cross him. He signaled for the men to dismount the carts and come to him. He would show this elven slut (for he had recognized her race when he was close enough) just what he thought of her edict about not passing through.

What he didn't recognize was the peril he and his men were in until it was too late. They found both archers and soldiers surrounded them with swords drawn and pointed in their direction.

Ameni then spoke again. "We will allow you to leave and go back to where you came from. Any troops crossing the river will be captured or killed. Tell your superiors that the lands north of the river are now free and under the protection of the alliance of the free races."

The leader knew he was trapped, but he also knew that it would also be death to admit that they were stopped by a bunch of rag-tag men. After all, everyone knew that there was no resistance that could withstand the power of the king's troops. Drawing his sword, he started to move toward Ameni. The Elf motioned to the archers to let him come. Before he could lift his sword, he lay dying on the ground, his sword arm removed at the elbow and his chest sliced open.

The rest of his men just stood in shock. For the most part, they were smart enough to know that they would stand less of a chance than their leader. They dropped their weapons and moved back as ordered. A small group escorted them to the river and allowed them to cross.

Ameni knew even though this first skirmish had went smoothly and with no injuries, that this was the opening gambit of what could become a long and bloody war. The council had discussed this and it had been decided that there was really no other way to continue the way they had in the past. She knew that she would see many of the men (and women) she had come to care for, die. But such was the price of freedom. More than that, it was for the survival of her own race and the other races that lived in this world.

Many leagues away, Aldren and a dozen archers were sitting outside the boundaries of the garrison's encampment. They had already begun their campaign of terror and saw it was having the predicted effect. The first

couple of nights, when the men who were supposed to be on guard duty were missing at the change, it had been thought they had deserted. Then within the next few nights, when the more seasoned troopers were out and they too went missing, the commander started getting nervous. When one of them was found the next day pinned to a tree with his own sword, the guards were set in pairs. This had little effect on the killings, and it was getting harder to convince the men to pull that duty.

The captain sent a group out to find who was doing the killings, but they had found nothing. The men were now attributing the disappearances to demons that the dwarves had summoned to destroy them. The front lines had not been able to advance on the stronghold of the dwarves and now his forces were being whittled down from behind as well.

He had sent out a courier to the main stronghold of the king, but he was not sure if he had made it or not. Damn the God that the new priests claimed, this assignment was to have been fairly simple. Slaves were needed in the mines in the South. It should have been easy to capture and dominate these lesser creatures. Even with the legends of the dwarves being dangerous as enemies, his leaders had assured him that they were unfounded.

Things were going very badly, and now the supply carts were long overdue. That is if who or what that was decimating his troops had not captured their supplies as well. If things did not start turning in their direction, they would lose this campaign and with it, his head. Suddenly, there was the sound of a near panic in the camp. Coming out of his tent, he found a man who had been on guard duty standing inside a circle of soldiers.

"I'm telling just what I saw. There was a warrior standing near some trees. I went to investigate and he started glowing. His sword looked like it was a shaft of flame coming from his hand. The Captain can run me through, but I am not going back out there."

The captain did indeed run him through as soon as he got within sword range. He practically screamed at the men surrounding him, telling them the man had cracked under the strain. Then, he sent them off to their tents or their duties. This was getting out of control. When the supply carts

showed up, he would send one of them back with a request for reinforcements.

It was only a week since the night that Aldren had revealed himself to the guard. It had worked better than they had expected. The entire garrison was close to panic. And his troops from the tower would be arriving the next day. One of Murdaek's dwarves was waiting to lead them into the keep the back way. In three days, the counter attack on the garrison would begin.

In the meantime, Aldren and Ameni met up with Vabryn who had rode ahead of the main group. They gave him the layout of the land and just how they would be attacking from the front. The men in the rear guard were to contain the enemy. Then Aldren left with Ameni and Mirgan.

Before parting though, Mirgan asked to talk with Vabryn after the battle was over. The young man's demeanor had changed to the older captain. Vabryn wondered about it but put it into the back of his mind. For now, there were scouts to listen to and plans to make.

The day of the battle arrived, dawning with the promise of a bright cloudless sky. As the men manning the front lines gaped in wonder, the great doors that led into the keep opened. Murdaek strode out with Aldren, Ameni and a small group of dwarves. In his strong voice, Murdaek called for the Captain of the garrison to come forth.

The captain was summoned and moved within speaking distance to the small group. Sensing that he had finally won the siege, he was arrogant when he spoke.

"So you have finally decided to come crawling out from your hideout and surrender?"

His smile faded when Murdaek spoke. "We, the dwarves, elves and free men, have decided to give you one last chance to live. Depart now and you will be spared. If you or anyone else who wishes to destroy or enslave the people of the lands across the river returns, they will not be offered the same mercy that you have received."

The captain's face turned crimson in his rage. He stepped back from the small group and turned to his archers to cut them down. He opened his

mouth to give the order, but stopped mid sentence when he looked at the faces of his men. Twisting back around, he saw the reason for their fear.

Both of the huge gates had opened completely and out poured the entire population of dwarf warriors. Just behind them were a couple hundred fully armed humans. What should have been surrender had turned into a battle where the numbers were just barely in his favor.

The archers, both dwarf and human loosed a volley that took out many of the front line troops. Aldren advanced gathering the power of the elements with every step. Behind him, the banner of the Dragon Clan was unfurled along with the colors of the Tower. Both sides advanced and when they clashed, the battle was on.

As bloody as it was, the battle was fairly short lived. Within an hour, the king's troops were retreating toward the river where they met up with Vabryn's troops. With their escape blocked, the troops decided to make a fight of it. The battle finally ended when the Captain was killed by Murdaek's axe. Those remaining surrendered and were taken to the ford and sent across the river with instructions that the lands north of the river were now free and they were never to return in arms.

The wounded were taken into the hall of the keep where the healers of both races were waiting. Dulca was there and tended her son who had taken a stroke against his shield arm. She stitched him up as detached as possible, but there were tears of concern in her eyes. When she listened to the man who brought him in about the role her son had played, first in the planning and then in the battle itself, she was also filled with pride.

Mirgan spoke with her about Kiran as well telling her that they would be bonded in the future if luck was with them. When she was done, he stood and bowed to her saying that he had to speak to one of the other captains.

He found Vabryn sitting against the trunk of an old ash tree. His head had a linen bandage and he looked tired. "Captain, may I speak to you now if you feel up to it?"

"Please do young captain. Lord Aldren has told me about how you came up with the idea to demoralize the enemy and keep them busy until we could arrive. I must agree with a mind like that you deserve the promotion."

"Thank you, sir. But I wanted to talk to you about my mother and your interest in her."

Vabryn started to speak, but Mirgan held up his hand. "I know you now to be a man of honor and one who would treat her with the respect that she deserves. I also know what you must feel for her since I have now tasted those feelings for myself. What I am trying to say is that as the eldest male member of our family, and knowing what tradition means to her, I give my blessings for you to bond with her if that is your wish. Since she is fully human, the bonds of the elves are not in force."

Vabryn then looked at the young man. "I have talked with Dulca about this and when she told me that she followed the old traditions, I had meant to speak to you. I am glad you came to the decision and that your blessings have been given. For I have never felt toward a woman as I do her. Now come and share this skin of wine that I carried through the battle with me. And tell me about the woman that captured your heart."

Aldren found the two enjoying the wine and laughing as they discussed all matter of things. "I see that the two best captains I have made it through the battle alive. Then they sit down in the field of victory and share a skin of wine without offering me any."

Mirgan had the skin in his hand and hastily offered it to Aldren who took a long drink and handed it back with a grin. "When you two finish that skin, get yourselves to the main hall of the dwarf's keep for some food and rest. Tomorrow we will plan what is to come."

Aldren continued on his way toward the keep and to a bed to rest. Tomorrow would be here too soon and much would have to be decided.

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Ralahur was pacing the halls of the King's palace. Things were not going at all like he had planned. For years now, he had been able to control the kingdom. The old king had been in favor of tolerance of all the lesser races. Thus, he had been careful of any plans that crossed those rules. Instead, he had gathered like-minded men into his group. A long drought had helped his cause since he had been able to parlay this event into an action of his God as punishment for not obeying the tenets.



Now, he was hearing reports that those fools that inhabit the northern part of the kingdom had revolted. Added to this, the self-proclaimed prince, Isray, had laid claim to the areas around the wastelands to the East. Isray's followers were raiding the outposts of the king and talking the populace into rebellion. But he wasn't a real threat as of yet.

The news from the north was far more troubling. There had always been resistance there, but it had come to his attention that there was one who had laid claim to all lands beyond the Rimdalt River. Normally this would not be a problem, but his spies had reported that he was trying to unite all the races. The disaster of the siege against the dwarves was proof that he was succeeding. But more troubling were the reports from the battlefield. The appearance of a banner that the spies had never seen before. And those that fought under this banner were unstoppable. He discounted the tales of a warrior surrounded by flame decimating those before him as fear of the survivors. Nobody had that sort of power any more. But he had to find a way to crush this alliance and destroy the ones that were forming it.

Ralahur strode toward his chambers. He had to learn more about this new enemy. Most of all he had to find a way to defeat him.

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The figure in the darkness moved slowly. His dark hooded robe blended into the mists of the falling night, concealing him from any eyes that might be looking his way. After the defeat of the king's troops lately, they had become much more aware of their vulnerability. They were fearful of night attacks and would not go out in groups of less than twenty men.

It was not so much the traitors now, but the common villagers that were rising up against them. Troop after troop would go into a village to collect the tribute for the king only to be met with armed resistance. Even the priests didn't have the enough influence to demand obedience from the peasants. The few times that orders had come through to destroy the villages that defied the king were costly since the villagers would fight to the last man and the neighboring villagers would harass the men almost all the way back to their barracks.

The council had decided that it was becoming too costly in personnel to continue the terror tactics. Since the king still maintained control south of

the great river, there was an uneasy truce between the warring factions. The traitors had held to the word and had yet to cross the river.

But now, the cloaked figure had to make it across and on to the northern side. He sighed, knowing that he could find no excuse to stay where he was, and he moved from the safe cover of the trees and to the riverbank.

He made it to the water's edge and started to walk carefully along the bank. He was picking his way along slowly because he didn't want to alert the guards above him by falling into the water. He paused several times to listen for the sounds that would mean that he had been discovered missing.

But the sounds he feared did not appear. He finally made it to the place he had been searching for. The river had dug a hollow into the bank under the roots of the great trees above. Inside the alcove was what he had been seeking. It was a crude raft just slightly longer than he was tall and about half the width of his outstretched arms. Made of saplings lashed together, it was crude but would serve the purpose. Stripping off the cloak, he revealed a short sword strapped to his back. He then stretched out onto the raft and arranged the cloak over his back to help in his concealment.

Using his forearms as paddles, he moved out into the river. He quietly steered his craft at an angle toward the far shore. He let the slow current carry him further away from the camp, he was aiming for a spot where he had stored clothing and weapons a month or more before.

It took longer than he had hoped for to make the journey, but he finally felt the bottom of the river against his arms. He slipped over the edge of the raft and crawled up the bank pulling the raft with him. The slope of the bank in this area was much more gentle and it was an easy task to drag the raft into the woods. Then he took stock of just where he was.

He had drifted further than he had wanted to. This meant that he had to move back up stream a couple of leagues to find his cache. It was now the darkest part of the night and he was chilled from the night air against his soaked clothing. This fact made him move even quicker and he was soon moving in a northeastern course, picking his way around the boulders and fallen trees. He was soon feeling the warmth of his exertion, and he figured he would make the small cave where his supplies were cached just before

the false dawn. He would try and sleep a while before he continued on his mission.

The sun was up just over the treetops when the traveler moved from his refuge. He found the trail he wanted and headed out at a slow trot that would eat up the leagues. He hit the main road about mid morning and found the traveling much easier. He was sure to make the meeting place before sundown.

As the sun was touching the tops of the hills, he came upon what looked like a farmhouse. After checking around for unfriendly eyes, he moved across the open field and knocked on the door. A few low words were spoken, and he slipped into the door.

Inside the one room was a stone hearth where a fire was burning low. With the exception of the bed in the corner, the only other furniture in the building was a table with benches along its sides. These were filled by four men that had turned to look at the stranger that had entered. Two more men were standing against the wall. All bore the symbol of the Tower of the Guard. One of the men that were sitting at the table smiled up at the traveler.

"Good to see you alive, Peryn. When you had not arrived when expected, we were afraid you had been captured. We were going to give you until tomorrow night before we left."

Peryn moved over to the fire to warm himself. The wound that he had received in his first battle still ached, and it was made worse with all the walking and running he had done. "It is good to see you too, Captain Uskar. I was wondering if I would be able to get out this time. I knew I had to get this information to Lord Aldren as soon as possible, so I took a chance that they would not give too much notice of a priest coming and going."

"I am sure Lord Aldren will be most anxious to hear from you as well. He should be back to the tower by now. You need to rest tonight and tomorrow, you can ride. There are stations all along the route for you to get a fresh mount. It will still be a seven day's ride, but you can't get there faster. Now, have something to eat and give us what news you can tell."

Peryn gratefully accepted the bowl of hot, thick stew that one of the other men had offered him. He talked as he ate telling them of the general conditions and the morale of the king's troops. Soon though, his fatigue overcame him and he stretched out on the bed, falling asleep within minutes.

The next morning, Peryn was up at daybreak. He packed some bread and dried meat for a meal while he was out on the road. One of the other soldiers that Peryn did not know volunteered to ride ahead with him while the others went about their patrols of the area. He saddled and mounted up and turned the horse along the road that would lead them to the Tower.

The first day they made good progress. There were stops close enough to allow them to change horses often enough that they could keep a hard pace throughout the day. The lands around this part of the road were well populated and the farmers in their fields would often wave as they cantered by. That night they arrived late at an Inn and stopped for a few hours rest before continuing.

The next evening, they were into areas that were less populated. They had slowed the pace in order to conserve the horses. There were now stretches where they would not see signs of another living creature for hours on end. Since the pace had slowed, Peryn found the new man wanting to talk. Ranem, for that was his name, was talkative enough, but Peryn noticed that he did not reveal anything of his life for all his words. Peryn spoke of his past, but would not reveal just what he had learned in the enemy camps.

The sun had gone down a few hours before but the moon had not risen far enough to illuminate the forest. The pair stopped at the roadside to rest the horses and to try and eat something out of the pack. Peryn thought his mount was favoring his left foreleg so he lifted the gelding's leg so he could look at the hoof. It was dark enough that he was not sure if he could tell anything or not, but he had to make the effort. He found a sharp rock that was digging in and using his knife he dug it out. He was straightening up from the crouch when he felt a sharp pain in his back. He fell forward and struck his head on the hard ground. Then everything went dark.

Ranem moved forward when he saw that Peryn did not move. He pulled the short knife from Peryn's back and wiped the blade clean on his victim's cloak. His first assignment and he had succeeded. He knew he had to get back to report to his commander. He didn't know what Peryn had found out, but he could be pretty sure that the man lying in the dirt before him had not told anyone else either.

The assassin mounted his horse and turned to move back the way they had come.

# Chapter 11

Posted: July 09, 2005 - 04:01:19 pm

When the horse that Peryn had been using returned to the stable without him, a party of seven men was sent out to find out what happened to him. Bronas was the first to spot where he had fallen, but all that remained in the trampled dirt and grass were hoof prints, bloodstains, and some prints that Bronas could not identify. When the rest of his companions arrived at the spot, they were just as puzzled.

Searching around, they found the tracks leading off into the woods. They were like the footprints of a human or elf but without toes, and they were less than the size of a small child. Mixed in around the tracks were marks where a body had been dragged away. Bronas selected two of the men to ride hard to the village and alert the Captain to what was happening, while the rest would continue the search. As soon as the two had mounted and turned toward the settlement where the main force of the free races were located, Bronas turned toward the path carved by the strange footprints and strode forward, the tremble in his breathing betraying the nervousness that he tried to hide.

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Aldren had been in quandary for quite some time. In spite of being outnumbered by the king's forces, his troops had managed to hold the border at the river. Many of the King's men deserted to the North side of the river, men who were weary of the ever more strangling edicts that seem to come from the King's Court in a constant stream. This was good news for the cause since that meant trained troops to assist in the defense of the common folk who were valiant, but without the knowledge of tactics that could save lives and assure victory.

The tales that these same men were bringing in balanced all this, tales of a growing darkness deep within the court of the king. Terrified men will exaggerate what they are recounting, but even discounting the wilder parts, the core of the tales were all along the same lines.

Ralahur had not been seen in the court for several sevendays. Orders were coming through his subordinates, but all that was known about him was

that he was dealing with powers that had not been roused since the times of the ancients. His own priests were frightened and names were whispered that sent chills through anyone who had ever heard tales of the dark times.

Aldren knew that if these tales were true then what was coming was beyond his knowledge and abilities. Ameni came into their room at the inn where they were staying to find her mate staring into the fire, very deep in troubled thought. She walked over to where he sat and placed her hand softly on his shoulder.

"Anything I can help with, my love?"

Aldren took a few seconds to respond. "I don't know if there is anything we can do, if the rumors are true. I spoke with some men who had crossed the river just a few nights ago. The high priest Ralahur is delving into the dark magics that haven't been practiced in more years than we can reckon. I fear that if he succeeds and awakens the powers of destruction, there will be no way to stop them. Even being Dragon Clan, I am only one man. According to the ancient scrolls, the only way the wielders of this power were banished before was with the death of most of the old clan. I am not enough to do it alone."

Ameni was disturbed deep into her very core when she saw the look of fear in her mate's eyes. For as long as she had known him, he had never despaired about an upcoming battle. It wasn't the fear of dying in battle that was consuming him, but rather the knowledge that if Ralahur and his demon prevailed, all that had been gained would be lost and the lands would be plunged into chaos from which it would never recover.

Aldren did not speak these thoughts to her. There was no need. Since her bonding with her mate, Ameni had been able to feel his emotions. It had started when they had made love after the bonding ceremony. She had felt something much more than her own passion almost to the point of experiencing the pleasure of her lover as well as her own. Her climax was almost more than she could take, with his feelings feeding her own.

She couldn't read his thoughts but she could tell what his state of mind was. When she started paying attention to this change, she found that she

could strengthen and refine the gift. Now she used it to try and alleviate his despair.

She started to move her hands gently across his shoulders and up his neck, parting his hair so that it fell on each side of his neck. She then started kneading the tension out of the muscles that she felt there. It amazed her once again how this man who had dealt death to so many could be so gentle as he was with her. Especially when they would make love.

Even when she was in the village of her youth she had heard tales from the newly bonded girls about how painful it was when their mates first penetrated them and how the men did not care about the woman's needs. From the first time in the cave, Aldren had been very careful about her pleasure. She had followed his lead and found that by fulfilling his desires that it actually brought her more pleasure. And it increased her love for him more than she could imagine.

Aldren started to relax and allow his head to roll forward to expose as much of his neck as possible. Ameni's fingers, made strong from the use of her bow and knives, found the spots of tension in his shoulders and worked them away. She worked until she felt the fatigue he had been feeling slip away. He did not object when she led him to the bed and told him to lie down after removing his clothing. He was soon asleep under her gentle massage.

After Aldren had slipped into the deep valleys of slumber, Ameni slipped out of the room and down to the common room. Most of the men had gone to their beds in and around the village. Of the few that remained, she sought out Vabryn. Being Aldren's childhood friend as well as his second in command, she felt he knew her mate better than anyone except her.

He was sitting on one of the hewn benches that were along the walls, his shoulders against the wall and his legs propped up on the table in front of him. The remains of his evening meal sat next to his boot heel and in his hand was a mug that contained the last of his ale.

When Ameni approached, he dropped his feet to the floor and stood up. This courtesy was not just because she was the Lady of the North Kingdom, but also because he admired, and in his own way, loved the elf warrior-woman.



"I thought that you would have been sound asleep after making that old dog upstairs beg for mercy." Vabryn flashed her a toothy grin.

Ameni gave a tired smile in answer. She sat down opposite where he was as he settled himself on the bench. "Vabryn, I know that Aldren is worried about the reports that he has been hearing from those that have escaped from the South. If what is being said is true, he doesn't know how to handle it."

Vabryn rubbed the stubble on his chin. "And he has reason to be worried. I don't know much about magic and such but I remember the childhood stories and Ralahur may be meddling in things that even he cannot control."

"Old Belwin said something about when wild magic is used, it will consume the one who is wielding it unless they are strong enough to resist. This may be what has happened to the priest. But I must find a way to help Aldren fight this."

"Perhaps it is time for you and Aldren to talk to old Kal-angurr. He is wise in the history of the ancients. I would suggest that you ride for the Tower and seek his counsel."

"Aldren feels that he needs to be here and the Tower is four days of hard riding away. I don't know if we can convince him. But we must try." With that she stood and bade Vabryn a good night. She then returned to the room and crawled into bed with Aldren who was still asleep.

They spoke the next morning about riding to see Kal-angurr and as Ameni predicted, Aldren was concerned about leaving the troops. Vabryn pointed out that while the forces on the other side of the river were gathering, they were still not at such strength that they could attack. The reports from deserters coming to the North stated that there was still resistance in the countryside, bolstered in all probability by the success of the free peoples. The king and Ralahur could not possibly get their forces together for at least several sevendays from now.

The matter was settled by the arrival of a man dressed in the black hooded cloak of a priest of the New God. The four men who brought him in to the leaders kept as much distance from him as possible, fearing what he might

do. His hands were bound behind him and he swayed a bit as he stood before the leaders.

Aldren motioned to allow him to be seated and a stool was placed in the middle of the room. The hood of the robe was pulled back revealing a young man whose eyes showed his fear and exhaustion. His bonds were cut and his arms fell limp to his side.

"State your name and why you wished to be brought here." Vabryn had taken control of the priest and started the questioning.

"Lord, my name is Temos and until two weeks ago, I was a priest of the God of the Sun. I had to come and find the leaders of the rebels. The high priest has gone mad with power and the need for revenge and someone had to come to warn you. Things have been going wrong in the kingdom for some time, but I kept trying to reconcile it with what I knew to be right. I couldn't stand the abuses of others that he has ordered done, but would make excuses to ease my own mind. But when he started to take young girls from the villages around the Keep, I started to wonder about him as well as my own sense of right and wrong."

One of the men offered him a drink of water, which he eagerly accepted. He then continued his narrative with increasing speed and urgency.

"One night I followed behind as the High Conclave of priests took the latest captives into the High Priest's lair. I lost my stomach as well as my sense of sanity with what happened next... One of the young girls, probably not more than into her menses, was stripped and placed on an altar the likes of which I had never seen before. While four of the Conclave held her down, Ralahur sliced her open and cut out her heart. He was chanting something as he held the heart above his head letting the blood drain down over his head. I was almost caught as I staggered out into the night.

Nothing in the scrolls of the God of the Sun speaks of the things he was doing. This was some spell that must have come from the dark recesses. I made it back to my hut and prayed about what I had seen. I did not know what to do. When I came out from the hut the next morning, I heard the villagers talking about how the miller's daughter had been taken the night

before. That was when I decided that the only thing I could do was try and find the rebels."

After giving this narrative, the young man almost collapsed onto the floor shaking with emotion on what he had witnessed. It seemed that he had been holding in all of these horrors until he made it to his destination. Once he released all of that emotional telling, he could not support himself any longer.

Aldren moved over to the prone figure and released his bonds. He quietly spoke something into the man's ear while placing his hand on his forehead. Almost instantly, Temos relaxed and fell into a deep sleep.

A couple of the men took the sleeping man to a tent where he could rest, but under guard. Aldren turned to Vabryn and the other captains that had witnessed the tale. "This man does not lie. I could feel the fear and hatred he had and that it was directed at Ralahur. He may prove valuable in the near future. However, some of what he has said is troubling to me and I believe that it is now time to consult with others that are more well-versed in the ancient lore. I will be leaving with a small party to the Tower in the morning."

He went through the door and into the daylight to search out Ameni and get ready to ride. The arrangements were made and packs were set for the trip. Aldren selected Uskar, one of his captains along with one of the new recruits of the captain's choice. Uskar had a wife that was soon to give birth at the Tower, so this would be a chance for him to see her. The young recruit was Doale, who had come from lands to the east where the king's troops had done some of the most horrific damage to the land and its people.

Mirgan asked to ride as well. And since anywhere Mirgan was Kiran would be found, she was included. This rounded out the group. Enough of a force to effectively deal with any trouble on the trail and allow them all to rotate guard duty. There was only one more addition to the troop, and Aldren waited until they were ready to ride before he summoned him.

Temos had just awakened from his slumber when Lord Aldren had entered his tent. For the first time in months he had slept the sleep of the just, doing what he felt was right. He had been afraid that the leaders of

the rebels would kill him outright instead of listening to him, but he knew he had to try and stop the evils that were brewing in the South. He heard the front flap of his tent open and Lord Aldren stepped inside. Behind him was a woman of incredible beauty dressed as a warrior from some old tale. He realized that she was an elf, and felt a blush run up his face. She stared at him for several minutes and he could almost feel her reading his mind. Just before he started to shift nervously, she broke her gaze and smiled at him.

When Aldren saw his mate nod her head, he spoke up. "Temos, I am riding to the Tower of the Guard within the hour. I request your company so we can talk in more detail about what is happening in the south."

"I would be honored my Lord. I don't know how much help I can give, since I am not of the High Conclave, but I will do my best." The pouch that contained his belongings had been taken when he was captured but was now on the top of the chest at the foot of the cot. He picked it up and slung it over his shoulder. With a nod of his head, he indicated his readiness to leave.

The others were already mounted and Vabryn was holding Aldren's stallion so they could exchange last minute thoughts. Aldren spoke quietly to his captain. "I still do not like the idea of leaving now. We have more troops arriving all the time and we will need to help them get into fighting shape. The dwarves are battle ready as are the elves. What we need is to get the human farmers and townspeople into a fighting force. And we must know what is happening from the other side of the river."

"We will handle the troops. For all your wisdom my friend, you still have yet to learn to let others assist where they can leaving you to do what we can't." Vabryn moved in a bit closer. "I am concerned about not hearing from Peryn. Word was passed on that he had made it to the farmhouse and had started toward the tower thinking you were there. A group of men went to look for him but have not reported yet."

Aldren stroked his chin as he absorbed this new information. "That is a worry. I could understand being captured across the river, but he should have been safe on this side. See if you can find out anything. Send word to the tower."

With that, Aldren mounted up and the small band turned toward the tower. Vabryn watched them go, then turned and called for the other captains to meet with him to figure out the best course to take with the new men that were arriving.

The road was wide enough to allow the group to ride three abreast, so Aldren motioned for the priest to ride between him and Ameni. In the hours that followed, Aldren learned everything that Temos knew about troop strength, leadership, and most importantly any weaknesses that could be used to advantage. He also learned a bit more about the young man.

As an orphan, Temos had been raised by some folks in a village just a couple days ride from the King's Court. The God of the Sun was already gaining followers in the village and he was turned over to the priests for training. He knew nothing of the outside world except what they told him and their tales were filled with images of enemies that would tear a man apart and eat his flesh if they found him. Elves were said to be the most dangerous and would torture men for days getting pleasure in their victim's screams of agony. He was told that the elves wanted to hold dominion over men and force them to engage in their evil rituals.

When he grew up enough, they had him take the vows of priesthood for their God and trained him in the ways that he would follow for the rest of his life. However when he had been among other people for a while he began to question some of what he had been taught.

The first time he had seen an elf with his own eyes, some of the men from the village had already tortured him to the point of death. He had looked closely into the elf's face and saw nothing of the tales he had heard about, but rather the look of a fellow creature that was not evil but just different. Pain and despair that he saw as well and it haunted him from then on.

He had been ordered to the King's Court and there he had stayed in a nearby hut. He had returned one evening when another priest came in with the news that they had finally captured an elf-witch and had just killed her when one of the guards of the court came rushing in and killed everyone that had been there. The word went out that the guard was to be captured and brought back to be killed. Temos could not believe that his fellow priests would do such a horrid thing, since he had been taught that

evils were to be avoided not sought out. When he had voiced his concerns, he was told that the high priest had been told in a vision that they had to destroy the evil before it consumed the land.

Temos soon found himself serving the High Conclave, tending to the needs of the elder priests, and running messages. The night he left, he was told to carry the message to the rest of the runners that all was to be ready four moons from then. On the day following the fourth full moon, Ralahur would be leading them into battle that would wipe all evil from the lands and bestow humans to their proper place as Lords over all the lands. He had taken the message and after distributing it among the other messengers, he had saddled up to spread the word. Instead, he rode as fast as he could to the river and the rebels.

Aldren had not interrupted him during the entire time Temos told his tale. He knew part of the tale was true since the "elf-witch" had been his own mother. He now digested what he had heard and realized that they did not have too much time. In just over three moons time, they would be attacked and if his suspicions were correct, it would be an attack that they probably would not survive.

During the lull when Aldren was deep in thought, the sun's warmth was having an effect on the priest. He was feeling the exhaustion of his escape having ridden without rest for several days until he was captured. His head was bowing toward his chest in sleep when Ameni noticed him. With a quiet word to Aldren, she pointed out Temos' condition. Aldren then told him to move back between Uskar and Doale. He could safely sleep in the saddle and they would keep him from falling over.

They did quicken their pace given the urgency of the new information. They rode on into the night and did not stop until the waning moon was high overhead. They had no fire and each man took an hour's watch. By sunrise, everyone was back in the saddle, stiff from the hard ride, but anxious to continue.

The remaining days were just as hard and by late afternoon on the fourth day, they reached the gates of the tower. They were escorted in and rooms were found for the weary travelers. Before he and Ameni retired to their quarters in the tower proper, he sent a request for Kal-angurr to meet with him later that evening.

When Aldren finally awoke from his exhausted slumber, he carefully removed himself from the arms of his bondmate without waking her. He quickly dressed and went to the kitchens to get something to stave off the pangs of hunger that were gnawing at his belly. He entered the kitchen grateful for the fire and the tantalizing smells of the last of the stew that had been supper for the rest of the tower's occupants. Isabella, the portly headwoman was busy making sure that she had what was needed for the next day's meals when she spotted him in the doorway.

She immediately came over and set him down at the small table against the wall. Then she served him up a large bowl of the stew, thick with meat and root vegetables. Along with a half loaf of bread, it made for a delicious meal. As he ate, Isabella kept him company with a steady stream of happenings both major and minor that had been going on since he had been gone.

As he sopped up the last of the gravy in his bowl with the bread crust, he looked over at Isabella and smiled. "I am grateful that you have stayed on as headwoman. Your concoctions are a major reason for returning home as often as I can. I hope for the tower's sake that some dashing young man doesn't come along and take you away from us."

The woman blushed as she nervously stroked back a few strands of her graying hair that had come loose from the bun on her head. "Don't you think that my Lord Aldren. I ain't had no young mans chasin' me since I was much thinner and still had my dark hair."

"Come now. You are still a comely woman and I heard you mention a certain man's name more than a few times while we were talking."

Isabella blushed even more now. "Ahhh... well, me and Gambaldt are gettin' closer I guess. He brings me the best cuts of meat he has, and I always have a sweet cake or two awaitin' him. But we's not anything too serious. And anyways, I wouldn't leave here for nothin'"

"I'm very glad to hear that Isabella. Now since I've had such a good meal to fortify me, I must leave to tend to business." Aldren rose from the table, kissed her hand (which made her blush even more) and left the warm confines of the kitchen.

He started to climb the long steps to the top of the tower where he knew Kal-angurr would be awaiting his arrival. This was proven true when he entered the doorway and saw the ancient man arise from the rug that he had been sitting on. They clasped forearms as old friends do, and Kal-angurr motioned him to take a seat.

"Now Lord of the Tower, tell me what this old man can do to help relieve you of your burden."

Aldren told him about what he had learned from the tales and the young priest. The ancient man sat taking it all in, but his expressions were taking on a more worried look with each new piece of information. He sat very still for some time after Aldren had finished speaking, searching his mind for any clue on how to counter such a threat as this.

He finally stood and moved over to the fire pit that was in the middle of the room. He stirred the embers until they started to take on a hint of flame. Placing a log in the middle of the disturbed coals, he moved back and started murmuring an incantation in a tongue that Aldren had never heard. The warrior was fascinated because this was the first time that he had witnessed Kal-angurr call upon the spirits of the ancients.

Aldren felt the winds start to move in through the many openings in a way that he was now familiar with. He let them swirl in and around him, speaking to him with voices that no longer held fear for him. The voices spoke of the past battles with the evil forces that were becoming a threat once again. They also hinted at what would be needed to defeat those forces. But he didn't comprehend just what they were saying.

He was still trying to find meaning to those hints as the winds calmed. Becoming conscious of his surroundings once again, he saw that Kal-angurr sitting against the wall, his face ashen from what he had heard.

"Old One, do you understand what the voices were trying to tell us? They kept saying that I would need to draw upon the power of my inner kindred, but I do not understand."

Kal-angurr understood somewhat better than the warrior did, which was the reason his face was so pale. He knew that Aldren would have to be able to gather the strength and power of the dragons. But he also knew



that it could very easily be the death of the man that sat across the chamber from him. Or even worse, he could lose his very essence.

For many minutes, the old man didn't answer. Finally, he gave a sigh and started to speak in a low earnest voice. "Lord Aldren, what the spirits meant is that the only way to conquer this enemy is to use all the power of the Dragons - your inner kin. It will require more from you than you have ever thought possible. So much so that you could lose the very essence that makes you who you are. The strength it will require will be enormous. It is for you to decide if it is worth your life, and with it the last of the Dragon Clan."

Aldren thought about what Kal-angurr was saying for a few moments. There was no certainty of success even if he tried it. Plus that would leave the rest of his people without the power he did have. On the other hand, if he did not at least try to destroy the evil force, it would cover all the lands in its darkness and all would be lost.

In the end, the choice was an easy one. "I must try it for the sake of all I hold dear; even if it means my life. But I don't understand how I am supposed to do this."

"For that you must go to the source of the power. You must talk with the dragons."

## Chapter 12

Posted: July 15, 2005 - 09:43:26 am

When Aldren returned to their quarters, he found Ameni awake and waiting for him. Rather than explain it all to her then, he told her the bare basics of what he found out. What he didn't say was that it could mean his life. She accepted his explanation and helped him get undressed for bed.

They held each other for a while, just enjoying the closeness of the other. Eventually, their hands began to roam over each other's bodies and their passions started to rise. Aldren moved between Ameni's spread thighs and entered her in one slow thrust. She in turn brought her ankles around his back, pulling him tighter against her. Their rhythm started to increase as her lubrication flowed more freely. His orgasm caught him by surprise in its sudden appearance, and he thrust against her one last time while he arched his back and shot his seed against the mouth of her womb. Seeing and feeling the force of his climax sent her over the edge as well. They both fed off each other's passion until they were both exhausted. He slowly pulled his cock from her and rolled to his side. She in turn moved up against him so they were face to face. She gave him a loving kiss and then pushed him onto his back so she could take up her favorite position; laying against his side with her leg over his and her head resting on his broad muscular shoulder. Once in position they drifted off into a dreamless slumber.

The two lovers awoke shortly after dawn. After a quick kiss, they took turns using the facilities and getting dressed. They did not forego their armor as they intended to go to the practice field later. The two lovers stepped into the dining hall of the tower to find Mirgan and Kiran sitting together at one of the end tables nearest the kitchen entrance. Since the hall was otherwise vacant, Aldren and Ameni joined the young couple.

After being served a breakfast of cooked grains and honey along with sweet cakes, the foursome dug in. As they were enjoying their morning tea, Mirgan started to speak, then hesitated. When Ameni gestured for him to speak his mind, he turned a shade of red but tried again.

"Kiran and I were talking last night and we agree that we wish to be bonded. With both of us being half-elven, we want to have the traditional

bonding." Here he hesitated for a moment. "Well sir, we were wondering if you could do the ceremony. Since you are the chief of your clan. You see we cannot get back to either clan for the ceremony, and with the exception of my mother, you and the lady are our only family. My Uncle was a good influence, but it was you who first taught me how to be the man I aspired to be."

The older couple looked at each other for a moment. What Mirgan had said affected them both. There was a feeling of pride in his words that they had been able to help in some degree with their growth as well as a feeling of responsibility. They turned back to the anxiously awaiting youths. Aldren started to stand and told them both to follow him to the great hall. As they passed the doorway, he told the guard that was there to assemble all the people he could find on the front steps one hour past dusk.

Once they got to the great hall, he had them seat themselves around the table. He eyed them carefully for a few moments then started asking questions.

"You are sure of this decision? Both of you?" They both nodded in the affirmative. "You are both young, not fully to the age of consent, though not far from it. Mirgan, your mother is at the main camp down south and I would normally require you to wait until we had the permission from her. However this request comes at a time that causes me to tend to bypass the traditions."

Ameni then told them what they needed to do for the ceremony and told them both to be ready at the front steps of the tower at the appointed hour. The couple left to make their preparations and Ameni left to speak to Isabella about cooking a feast for this night. Before she departed though, Aldren asked her to meet him in his office within an hour.

When called, Kal-angurr assured Aldren that he still kept a bonding stone and cord and would have them ready. Then Aldren moved down the corridor to his office. There were still some serious decisions to be made before the joyous occasion that night.

Aldren and Ameni were finally alone in his private rooms when he explained in detail just what he had learned the night before. Then he

asked her for her opinion. Deep down he knew what he had to do, but also knew that it would affect her as well.

"I may not like it, but you have already made the decision to go through with it and of course I will support you. When we first met, I knew that I wanted to be with you from then on. Then of course, I could never imagine what would be coming and how things would change for us both. But that doesn't change the way I feel. I will be at your side until the end."

"Ameni my love, I cannot allow you to go with me into this battle. You cannot help when the time comes for me to face Ralahur. I cannot take the chance you would be hurt or killed from the blasts of magic that may happen."

"I swore an oath to be with you always. You cannot release me from that oath, and I refuse not to honor it! We are bonded in ways that transcend both time and space and I will be standing by your side. We can overcome whatever we face as long as we are together."

Aldren stopped pacing around and came up to face her. Her features were set in a look of defiance and her eyes were blazing. He put his hands on her shoulders and moved in to kiss her passionately. "Then that is the way it will be. Together we will be forever."

Aldren considered the best time and place to meet with the great dragon. He considered traveling to Balroth's territory and searching out his lair. But time was a factor now and they didn't know exactly where the lair was. They could spend months looking and even then, they did not know if the dragon would help them.

Ameni suggested that they travel to Dragon's Hold where they first met Balroth. Three days ride away and they could call the troops out that were stationed there and send them to the impending battle. They would ride in three days.

There was quite a crowd in the courtyard of the Tower that evening. Aldren was dressed in his finest, dark red and black in honor of his clan. Ameni was garbed in a dress that befitted the Lady of the Tower. The soft greens were from her heritage as well.

Mirgan was standing on Aldren's left awaiting his mate. He was clad in the ceremonial uniform of a Captain of the tower. He had yet to attain his adult stature and the uniform had been hurriedly tailored to fit. Despite his youthful appearance, he stood proudly and more than willing to go through the ceremony.

Kiran approached the central group. In the traditional white of bonding, she almost shimmered as she moved gracefully to stand next to her soon to be life's mate. Aldren took note of the circlet of silver that adorned her head. It was the same one that Ameni had worn for their bonding. As the two participants turned to face the Lord and Lady of the Tower, Aldren raised his hands to command quiet from the crowd.

"Here me all who witness this bonding! Mirgan, son of Etwain and Dulca has asked and received consent from Kiran, daughter of Morson and Berenth to be bonded together from this time on. Both are known to the Dragon Clan and we verify their heritage and their desire."

Then he turned to the couple. "Do you both agree with what is stated in regard to your families and your desire to bond together?"

"Yes, My Lord." They answered in unison.

"Do you Mirgan wish to be mated with this woman for the rest of your life and beyond, to be honor bound to always love her, protect her, and cherish the person she is?"

"Yes sir, I do wish this to be."

"And do you Kiran wish to be mated to this man for the rest of your life and beyond, to be honor bound to always love him, care for him, and cherish the person he is?"

"Yes sir, I wish to have this."

Aldren took a stone similar to the one that had left the scars on his and Ameni's palms and placed it in the middle of Mirgan's hand. Kiran covered the stone with her own and their hands were bound with the cord.

The incantation that Aldren spoke in elvish gave the blessings of the ancients to the couple and bound them together always. He touched their

clasped hands and a soft white light bathed the couple that dissipated only when he finished the spell. If the spectators looked closely, they would see that the cord that had been tied to their hands and wrists lay loosely clinging where it had been tight before. Kiran lifted her hand to reveal the stone that still glowed from the magic. Mirgan placed the stone into Aldren's hand and clasped his mate's hand once again.

Aldren finished the ceremony. "Let it be known throughout the clans and all lands beyond that you have made the vows to be bonded and will be considered so in the traditions of the Kin." Aldren and Ameni both gave them a low bow.

*"May your life be filled always with the happiness and love that you feel at this time."* Ameni blessed them in the language of their kin.

*"You both have our eternal gratitude, my Lord and Lady. Your blessings will surely see us together in this life and beyond."* Kiran replied.

The couple then turned and acknowledged the cheers of the crowd. Aldren and Ameni parted, indicating to the couple that they were to precede them to the great hall for a feast, then to their quarters in the tower.

Three days later, a small group left the gates of the tower on their way to the Dragon's Hold. Aldren and Ameni rode in the lead, with the new bondmates just behind. Aldren had been surprised when Mirgan had appeared the day before and requested permission to ride out with them. Aldren told him that he should spend some more time with his mate when Kiran appeared and stated that it didn't matter where they were together, their place was with the Lord and Lady of the Tower. Aldren had consented and thus the foursome was on the road just after dawn.

The trail had been improved and the journey could be made in two days. The group was traveling at a more leisurely pace and would make it in three. This was so they could have time for thought of what was to come. They met a few patrols on the way, but the area was trouble free. The nights were spent in the huts that the troops had built along the trail for that purpose. That gave them shelter from the elements and allowed them to forego posting a watch.

The young couple was still in the throes of passion from their bonding and their sounds of lovemaking had an effect on the older couple. If one had

passed the huts during those nights, they would have heard the mixed sounds of the couplings of the inhabitants.

The sun was at its zenith when the group found themselves at the gates of Dragon's Hold. A fortified wall had been built across the narrowest part of the canyon with a parapet from which archers could defend the heavy gates. Aldren was recognized and the gates were opened to reveal the changes within.

Gone was the small camp where they had resisted the attack. In its stead were several large stone buildings that housed the troops and their weaponry. The spring had been routed into a system of cisterns that could provide water for all those inside. There were also gardens to provide vegetables between the barracks and a corral where herdbeasts were housed. A stable and armory were set near the back wall of the canyon.

The travelers dismounted and turned their mounts over to the care of stable hands. Aldren then led them to the building that housed the officers. The captain, Enthof, rose from his seat when they entered. He was surprised to see the Lord and the Lady out there.

After clasping forearms with Enthof, Aldren started to explain their presence. "I have other business out here so I decided to bring you the news myself. Things are bleak in the south and we are calling all our forces out. You and your men will need to leave as soon as it can be arranged and join Vabryn to reinforce the troops already there. Battle is looming and it may be the final battle for our freedom."

"We can be ready to move by morning, my Lord," replied Enthof with a measure of pride.

"I can see that you have exceeded my expectations here and I have no fear that you and your men will do the same on the battlefield."

Enthof left to give orders for the men to prepare for departure. Shouts could be heard as the word was passed. These men had been training for a long while and were anxious to put their skills to use.

Aldren and his group took the evening meal with the troops and there was much laughter and story telling between the mugs of ale that were passed around. The capture of the supply train was told so often that it caused

Ameni to start blushing. Just before they all headed to their cots, Aldren stood and raised his mug.

"Men, we are coming up on a battle that may well decide the fate of all the lands. I know that you all have trained just for this and with your knowledge and skill we will prevail. I raise my mug in a toast to you. May the blessings of the ancient ones ride with us all!"

There was a loud cheer that mixed with the banging of mugs and the pounding of fists on the tables. Soon though the hall was cleared and the men were in their beds resting in anticipation of the upcoming events.

By midday, the keep was emptied except for Aldren and those who came with him. For being so full of sounds of industry, it was eerily silent. All the buildings were shuttered with the anticipation of their occupants returning. Mirgan had offered to prepare the evening meal and was rummaging through the stores that had not been taken for something to work with. Ameni was looking for the herbs that she needed to prevent conception. He was dirty and tired and decided that a dip in the sun warmed pool at the back wall of the canyon was just what he needed.

Ameni came back into camp with a supply of the needed herbs. She had been pushing her way through the alpine bogs to find the plant and was covered in mud to her waist... On the way back, it had dried to a crust that cracked and flaked off as she moved. She dropped her pack of herbs next to the rest of her gear and headed to the pool to clean up.

As she approached the water she spotted her lover at the far end of the pool, his head resting on a rock just letting the sun warmed water slowly move around his body. She stared at him admiring once again the masculine form before her. Those thoughts turned to the way that he pleased her during their love making, causing her to feel a tingling in her loins.

She quickly and quietly removed her clothing and slipped into the water. She was trying to get close enough to surprise him, but he somehow felt her presence and sat forward. She smiled at him and then wrapped her arms around his neck giving him a passionate kiss.

Aldren responded in kind and started to move his hands all around her back and buttocks. She pressed herself against him and found to her



delight that his arousal was rapidly coming up to her level. She moved her legs around his torso and reached down to position his now hard cock at her entrance. She then flexed her legs driving him deep into her. They both groaned from the feelings and she held them like that enjoying the feeling.

It was only a couple of minutes until the urge to move became too great and she arched her back to float her upper body as she urged him to thrust into her. The water kept their movements slow but the position was very satisfying for them both. Aldren moved one hand from where her waist where he had been holding on to caress her breasts that were floating just above the water. He rubbed the warm flesh then started to tease and pinch her nipples causing her passion to rise even faster.

As she neared climax, she used her powerful legs to push him into her even harder. She froze in position then with a loud groan, she fell over the edge and Aldren had to hold on to her to keep them coupled.

As Ameni started to come down from her climax, Aldren started to climb toward his. He took over the rhythm of their coupling and he was soon pounding deep into her. He slowed for a couple of strokes as he felt himself approaching climax then slammed deep into her, releasing his juices to mix with hers and then with the water surrounding them.

They were both enjoying their afterglow still coupled when Kiran came to call them to the evening meal. She was surprised and then embarrassed to find them still coupled in the position they had climaxed in. She let out a little squeak and turned to leave as quickly as possible.

Ameni called to her and the young woman turned around. She was still blushing and keeping her eyes downcast. To the inquiries as to what she needed, she finally found her voice and spoke to the ground. "My Lord and Lady, I wanted to let you know that the meal was ready. I apologize for barging in, but I didn't know where you were and was just checking."

Ameni started to disengage herself from Aldren's cock and Kiran looked up at the movement. She caught a glimpse of where they were joined and as Ameni moved away a very good look at Aldren's manhood. Within a couple of seconds she decided it was bigger than her mate's but not by much. Then she realized what she was doing and blushed even harder.

As Ameni turned her body upright, she tried to comfort Kiran. "No need to apologize Kiran. The elves are not ashamed of nudity or of coupling with their mates. So you do not need to be either. Also, you don't need to call us Lord and Lady when we are alone. I've grown to love you like a sister that I never had just like Mirgan is much like the brother I lost."

"Yes my La... I mean yes Ameni. But you two need time to finish... uh... what you were doing. We will hold the meal."

"That's fine, but before you go could you toss my dirty leggings into the water? I need to get the mud out of them. And would you mind getting me a dry pair out of my pack? They are in the bundle that is tied with the red straps."

Kiran hurriedly did as she was asked and returned by the time Ameni had finished rinsing her dirty clothes and was standing at the edge of the pool allowing the air to dry her skin. Ameni's easy attitude about her seeing them both nude had eased the young woman's mind and she stood nearby as Ameni dressed. She was disappointed and a bit ashamed at herself when she noticed that Aldren had already dressed.

"I saw the bundle of herbs that you had next to your pack. May I ask what they are for?"

Ameni finished slipping her tunic on before she answered. " I use those to prevent conception. I could not ride with Aldren and be of help to him if I was with child. But just a certain amount of those leaves each day will prevent that. That's something that you might consider if you intend to continue going with your mate."

"I would really appreciate it if you would teach me things like that. I am woefully inexperienced about many things. By the time that I was old enough to understand much of what she had to teach in the ways of being a woman, my Uncle had come and she did not have much time. I avoided the house as much as possible then."

Ameni reached out and touched the side of Kiran's face in a gesture of caring. "After the evening meal, I think we should let the men do as they will and we will spend the evening talking." Then she added in elvish, "*It is time we sisters compare what we know.*"

Kiran eagerly agreed. She had been in awe of this woman for a long while now and had always been nervous around her. But the Lady... no, just Ameni, had been so helpful and friendly, treating her as an equal. After being mistreated for being female and even worse a 'half-breed' by so many, she reflected on how much life had changed... She was among the most important people in the North Kingdom and more important, she had bonded with a young man who loved her. She sat quietly for the rest of the meal basking in the contentment of her changed circumstances.

After the meal, the women moved into Aldren and Ameni's room for their promised talk. Aldren and Mirgan talked about the upcoming battles and strategies, with Mirgan bringing up some valid ideas on how to counter possible enemy attacks. Soon however, they grew restless. Aldren asked if Mirgan felt up to sparring to help work off some of their energy.

Since there was no hurry, they started with basic attack and defense moves just to get warmed up. Soon, they were going full speed each attacking then countering the other's moves. The ring of steel against steel rang out into the darkening night and the fire reflected their blades as they practiced the dance of death.

Their workout lasted for the better part of an hour before Aldren called a halt. He could see Mirgan was tiring, and he had worked up a sweat from their exertions. They sat back near the fire cleaning and sharpening their weapons.

Aldren complimented the young warrior on his skill. Mirgan ducked his head at the praise but his grin showed how important those words were, especially coming from one who he idolized.

"I have come a long way from the child that you entrusted to take care of your horses and goods back in Archer's Point."

"Aye, you have. Your speed and skill has improved, but the qualities that you showed that day are still there. Honor, loyalty, fairness, and a determination to do your duty have remained. And those are the most important to a man in this life. They will do you well no matter if it is in battle, or in your dealings with others. Always trust in what you feel is right and you will make the right decisions."

"Aldren, I know that the coming battles may cost me my life. Before, I only had to be concerned with myself, but now I have to think about Kiran as well. I worry for her safety and what would happen to her. I ask that you care for her as if she was your own if something happens to me. I know she loves you almost as much as she does me. She worships your mate and strives to be like her as much as she is able. Would you do this for me?"

"Of course. With your skills, you have as much chance surviving as anyone, including me. Perhaps even more. But I will be honored to do as you request. We would have done so anyway for Ameni and I both love Kiran as we do you."

That satisfied Mirgan on that count. He had provided for Kiran's future as best he could. Not much else was said until Kiran came out to tell them she was headed for their room. Mirgan banked the fire and then followed her to their quarters.

Aldren stayed where he was for a while longer. He was trying to settle his mind about trying to contact Balroth. The first time was just a fluke. He had been wishing for help in the battle with the king's forces. Could he remember the right words? Did he just have to concentrate on calling for the dragon? Would he have to remember the ancient tongue of his ancestors? That language came to him unbidden when he was drawing the power. Could the dragon tell him what he needed to know? Would he be able to do what was required even when he learned the secrets?

He was mulling these things over when he heard a deep voice inside his head. *"I hear your troubled thoughts Dragon-kin and I will answer your questions."* As Aldren was getting over the shock, he felt the presence of Balroth both mentally and physically as the dragon's black form appeared coming over the wall and landing in the large courtyard.

*"I am honored by your presence in my time of need my brother."* Aldren was thinking these thoughts but he knew instinctively that Balroth would hear him.

*"The dragons have not interfered with the dealings of the other races for years uncounted, but we can feel the danger that is awakening in the lands. For if it comes to pass that what is coming succeeds, it will mark the end of the race of dragons as well."*

*"The dragons are the mightiest of all the creatures. Can they not just destroy what is being called?"*

*"Sadly we cannot. It is the power manifested within a human that is the danger. It is said that only a human or elf will be able to counter it."*

Balroth looked toward the barracks where Ameni and the others were standing in the doorway. *"Come forward elf woman. You are known to me and we have a bond that was sealed in blood. I would look upon you and refresh my memory of you."*

Ameni came out slowly. She was dressed only in her tunic and her feet made no sound as she started toward her mate and the great creature that sat before him. She was just past the doorway when she heard Balroth once again. *"Have the other two behind you come forward so I will know them as well."*

Ameni motioned for Mirgan and Kiran to follow her. They were both hesitant but came out slowly.

*"Come forward. I will not harm either of you. You are close to the dragon-kin, I can feel his caring for both of you."* Both of their faces showed their shock from hearing the dragon's voice inside their heads. But they quickened their pace until they were standing near Aldren.

The dragon turned his head until he could see them, then he came very close and sniffed them both, getting their unique scent. *"I now know both of you by your scent and your essence. I know your minds and will hear you if need requires it. Young elf-woman, you have the traces of the blood of the dragon kin running in your veins. Your offspring with this man will strengthen that bond with the dragons."*

This startled them all, but the dragon seemed to accept it as fact. *"You may go or stay as is you wish. I must instruct the dragon-brother in what he will need."*

Mirgan and Kiran moved back a short distance, but watched closely. They were fascinated with the creature that was there, and totally shocked that he had been able to speak to them. That he would bother to do so was even more remarkable. Ameni stayed next to her mate.

*"This human is trying to harness the evil powers that still reside in these lands. These powers were defeated once. Defeated but not destroyed. They were buried deep in the bowels of the earth and thought by the humans to be locked away forever. A small portion has always been about, lurking in the hearts of some of every race, but most of all in the humans. It shows itself in the lust for power, domination of others and greed.*

*If he is successful in unleashing those powers, they will consume him for that is their way. He will become their way back. In order to defeat him, you must become the dragon that you are in spirit. This will be the only way you will be able to call the powers that you will need.*

*There is a danger for you though. When you allow the dragon to come out in full force, it will seek to consume you as well. You will lose every part of you that is human and you will cease to be. The human body cannot hold that much power, your dragon spirit will wish to retain it for all time. You must force yourself to keep a hold on your human side. Only that will bring you back and allow you to stay the human you are."*

*"Balroth, I understand what you say, for I have felt that pull in the heat of battle. But I do not know how to do what will be required. I do not know if I am strong enough to bring out the power needed."*

*"These things I will teach you. You have the strength within you for you are stronger than all of your ancestors. Now come closer so you may touch my head. I will then show you how to do what you must."*

Aldren moved forward as requested and touched the great dragon just back of his jaw. The warrior's body went rigid as Balroth took him deep into his own mind. Aldren saw recent events that had happened but through the eyes and mind of a creature that was alien to him yet strangely familiar.

Then he found himself feeling what a dragon felt when it called up the power of the elements. He felt the surge of raw energy that was drawn only to be put forth in a massive blast. He discovered the secrets he would need to accomplish this on his own.

One thing he did not expect was the feeling of what it was like to be a dragon. To ride the winds on wings that could propel you to the far ends of the lands. The freedom of knowing that unless you were struck down

somehow you would experience the lives of hundreds if not thousands of generations of mortals. And at last he understood the connection that the dragons had with his clan. His mother had known it, for she had been to the dragons in her youth. It was a knowledge that ultimately led to her death, but she had been grateful for the knowledge all the same.

Aldren came back into his mind gradually but completely. When his human conscience was once again established he realized that he had been in that position for quite some time and the moon was well past its zenith in the night sky. He leaned against the dragon feeling the smooth scales on his side and drawing strength from the closeness.

He was still feeling the euphoria of the memories that he had experienced. The dragon within in had been awakened.

*"That is the danger that I spoke of. You could lose who you are if you are not vigilant. It will be well for you to remember this. Now rest. I will remain here until the dawn then return to my homelands."*

Aldren thanked the dragon for giving him the knowledge that he would soon need. Ameni bowed to Balroth wishing him well. Mirgan and Kiran followed suit. Then they all went to their beds, secure that there would be no reason for a guard that night.

## Chapter 13

Posted: July 23, 2005 - 10:55:57 am

Aldren awoke just after the sun had started down the west wall of the canyon. Ameni was getting dressed quietly in order to let him sleep. He rose up on his elbow and greeted her. She came to the bed and gave him a kiss, telling him to take his time getting up. He considered doing so until he felt hunger pains in his belly triggered by the smell of breakfast being cooked. When he arose, he felt a difference in his body. A feeling that his limbs were lighter yet stronger than they had been. He should still be feeling the lack of rest considering the little amount of sleep he had gotten; yet he was strangely refreshed. He went out to greet the others and to fill the hole in his belly.

The group decided to leave right after the morning meal. After the visit from the dragon, they all felt the need to be getting back to the tower and mobilizing the troops that were there.

The journey back to the tower was uneventful except for the sense of urgency that colored their mood. They pushed on and made it to the gates of the tower late on the second night. The sentries were surprised but rapidly let them in. Aldren left orders for the captains to meet with him in a few hours and that one of them needed to wake him up before that. Then the weary travelers headed for their chambers.

The guard woke Aldren shortly after sunrise. He quietly left Ameni sleeping and after washing up, dressed and headed to awaken Mirgan. Aldren then went to grab a bite to eat before meeting the other captains. On his way to the hall, he asked that Temos attend the meeting as well.

The captains were apprised of the happenings. The coming battle had been expected among them, but they had figured that there would be just a series of small fights like those that had been happening for the past cycle or so. They became very concerned by the information that Temos relayed. He told of massive numbers of wild men that were being brought up from the forests and swamps. These people were not as advanced as most humans but were vicious in a battle and had no thought other than to kill as many as possible before they were killed themselves.



They also heard how Ralahur had, through the King, brought together all of the barons and Lords with promises of giving them the riches of the North. This was bad since the arguments and feuds among these minor rulers had always kept the king's forces smaller than was possible.

The tales of what Ralahur was doing magically was the most troubling. Having seen the power of the magics that Aldren and to a lesser extent Kal-angurr had practiced, they could envision just what would come. Aldren assured them that he would do his best to take care of that threat.

Plans were then set to mobilize the remainder of the fighters that were here in the Tower. These troops were the best trained, and would be in the worst part of the fighting. It was decided to have those not able to handle the ride were to remain and protect the Tower.

The captain who had taken charge of the training of the women asked if they were to be included in the troop movement. A few of the other captains chuckled at this man since they still thought that women training for fighting was just an amusing diversion to keep them happy.

Augustine, the one who had spoken up told Aldren that the women had worked hard and were just as ready as any troop here. He would stack them up against the others at any time.

Horrand laughed at such a thought. "Any of those women would cry and run away the first time they were confronted. It would be a disaster if one was actually hit."

Mirgan stood to shout an objection, but before he could open his mouth, Ameni push open the doors and strode into the hall. She was dressed in the full battle gear of the elves and made an impressive figure striding to where the captains were seated.

"Captain Horrand! I supervised the training of those women. Even though their weapons are lighter, they are every bit as deadly. Even in hand to hand they will surprise you."

"Lady Ameni. I do not call your teachings into question. But in hand to hand without weapons? It is impossible for a woman to best a man. Just look at the size and strength."

"Would you care to test that Horrand?"

"Not against you, my Lady."

"How about another. Just a young slip of a girl compared to you. Mirgan, would you be so kind as to have Kiran join us?"

Mirgan headed toward where he knew Kiran was at this time of the day and soon was back with her in tow.

Aldren rose and bowed to her. "Kiran, the captains are of the thought that the women here cannot take care of themselves. Would you be willing to give them a demonstration?"

"Of course, My Lord. Who wishes to be put on their knees first?"

Horrand walked over to Kiran. He was a full head taller and double the weight of the girl. He put his hand on her shoulder and said, "I promise not to hurt you badly, little girl."

Before he could finish the last word, Kiran had placed her hand over his and moved back, twisting, just as Ameni had taught her. Horrand yelped in pain as he did indeed go to his knees. Kiran calmly stepped back and faced Aldren.

"Anything else my Lord?"

"I don't think so. You proved your point. Wouldn't you say so, Horrand?"

Horrand was still massaging the feeling back into his hand. He nodded his head slowly as he watched Kiran with a new sense of respect.

"Then by your leave, my Lord, Lady." She bowed to both of them and walked quietly out of the room.

"I believe the question of the women coming along has been answered. They will not be in the main battle unless they request to be so, but they will make an excellent rear guard. It will also be voluntary as to if they come along. Is there anything else we need to discuss?"

He received negative replies from all, and dismissed the council with the reminder that they would be leaving within a sevendays time. One man, he held back to have him find a small force that could ride to Dragon Hold and keep it from thieves and wild animals. With that done, he and Ameni went out into the gardens.

The next several days saw a huge increase in activity as the entire population prepared for the call to arms from which many would not be coming back. The night before they were to ride out, every horse was shod, every piece of armor was checked and every weapon was sharpened to a deadly edge. The captains gave final instructions to the troops and checked every man.

It was long after the last of the ale had been drank and the last cheer had been shouted, that Aldren sought out Kal-angurr. He gave the ancient one a bow as he entered the cluttered chambers near the top of the tower.

"Old One, I once again ask that you take control of the Tower in my stead. You understand more than any other what is at stake and the slim chance we have of success. If all does go ill, you may have a chance to escape the darkness. I beg you to take it, for there may be a chance of another some time from now that will succeed where I failed."

Kal-angurr slowly shook his head. "Dragon-kin, there will be no other. Legend says that you are the last that can possibly succeed against a foe this powerful. Remember what Balroth had to show you. I cannot see what is approaching, but I feel our fate will hang on a knife-edge. But know this. All the free people are fighting because you gave them the chance to be free. It is their decision to fight and maybe die to maintain that freedom. You go with the blessings of the ancients and all who were your heritage."

The clasped arms in what might be their final show of friendship. Aldren returned to his and Ameni's chambers to prepare for the dawn.

The movement was massive with a column of soldiers stretching back for many leagues. With the ranks swelled to past twenty thousand, they could not make the distance that they wished for each day. To push harder would leave no energy in man or beast to fight, but Aldren chafed under the delay.

The moon had waned when they finally made it back to the main encampment. Scouts had ridden ahead and Vabryn and the other leaders of the various races greeted them. Aldren dismounted and went immediately into the tent to catch up on what had happened since they had left. The others followed after they had settled the horses.

Spread out before them on several tables were maps of the areas on both sides of the great river. Vabryn started the briefing. "We have built fortifications along all the areas that would be possible for them to cross. However, most of the work has been to rebuild the old fortress. The people of this area had maintained the buildings as best they could and used it as a refuge in times of trouble. The dwarves were instrumental in reinforcing the walls and other fortifications. After you had departed, I took it upon myself to get the final work done. We have moved all the supplies and we can occupy as soon as you are ready."

"You did right in preparing a place for us to be. I will expect to start for there tomorrow if that can be accomplished. Let those we brought with us rest a day or so before they follow. Now what have you found out about the enemy's movements across the river?"

"Our scouts report that they have been building floating bridges near the banks. In addition, siege engines and catapults have been spotted among the trees. At night, the fires of the troops can be seen dotting the land for as far as you can see. We have kept back from the banks to keep the number of our forces from being detected. There have been some minor clashes where the king's troops have tested crossing at the fords, but nothing major as of yet. I am sure that what the priest told us is still the plan."

I think you are correct on that assumption. They will try and push against us in force to destroy as many as possible, then set up a siege at the fortress. That is what they would have done in previous wars. One thing that constant is their strategy. What we have to do is to use this to our advantage as much as possible."

Valelael came in then. He told Aldren of what the elves had been able to accomplish. With the help of the old healer Belwin and her apprentice Isowan, they were able to help the elves to bring back much of the magic that they had ignored. Being native to the kindred, it was almost second nature to them all once they had shed their fear of it. The animals that

were associated with the different clans had remembered the bond and had come to their aid on several occasions. They were once again feeling the pride of their blood.

Since time was coming closer for the kindred to once again become strong, they had been training hard. Their skills were at their peak and they would be ready to do battle. The clans that had been trapped in the South had made their way to Isray and formed alliances with him and were ready to do what they could.

Valelael looked sad at this point. "It is indeed sad that the kindred have finally found pride and power of their heritage so close to the end of their time here."

Aldren placed his hands on the tall elf's shoulders. "My brother, it is good that they found that pride at any time. Whatever that brought about that change is not important. The kindred are taking their rightful place once again among the free peoples. And that pride may be what will turn defeat into victory. I am proud to be counted among the kindred of my mother."

The moment was broken by the sounds calling for the evening meal to be served. The leaders moved to the tents that had been set up for them and set about devouring the roasted meats and breads. It was during this time that a rather ragged-looking young man was led into the tents with the mission to speak to the Lord of the Tower.

Aldren looked up and was overjoyed to see Peryn kneeling at the table. The young man had appeared to be lost, and presumed dead. Yet here he was, looking worse for wear, but at least alive. Aldren left the table shouting for someone to find Isowan and bring her to his tents.

When Isowan came in, she found the young man sitting up in the bed, looking very pale and tired. She checked him over as best she could, noting there were many bite marks and scratches along with the wound in his back that had been reopened during his wild flight from capture. He had gone without rest and had eaten only what he could catch as he moved. She prepared a draught to make him sleep, but he begged off until he could tell Aldren what he had found on his mission. She relented only with the promise that details could be talked about later.

When Peryn started to object, Aldren overrode his complaints with a vow to the elf healer that he would not take much time. Isowan turned and left to prepare a place for him in the healer's area. As soon as they were alone, Peryn started his report.

"Lord, I did as you asked and received the reply we were looking for. The conditions were met and all was in place when I left them. As I made my way back, I also found out a few tidbits from the outlying troops I encountered. Seems they would talk to a priest that happened by. One thing we must watch for will be trolls that they captured from the southern hills. They are not numerous, but the king's men tortured them into compliance. They will be a force to watch for. Each one will equal a whole troop."

As Peryn was telling his tale, Aldren could see him losing strength. He had heard enough of what he needed to and told the young warrior that was enough for now. Then he called Isowan to enter and care for the young man. Two strong men waited for Peryn to fall into a drug induced slumber, then they carried him to the healer's tent so she could tend him with ease.

In the early darkness, Aldren moved to the edge of the camp in order to think about what he had just learned. Peryn had found the Prince that was controlling the desert to the east in the southern kingdom, and had secured an alliance with him. It was understood that he would be left alone in his rule of the areas he controlled now and that if it was needed, the North Kingdom would come to his aid. There was to be free trading and crossing over the borders for his people as well as the free people.

In exchange, he would push attacks on the king's men to keep them distracted from the east. Aldren knew from reports that Isray was aggressive against the constraints that the king and the priests were trying press him with, and he had been accepting refugees from the kindred fleeing massacre. He respected the elves as he did the other races, and those that had dealings with him found him a fair ruler.

The good news of this alliance was welcome, for it meant that he could worry a bit less with an extra six thousand or so troops pushing in from the east. But this was a balance against the news of the trolls. What Peryn had said about them was not far from the truth. They never made contact

with the outside world, preferring to remain in the hills of the southern most part of the kingdom. The few sightings that had been reported made them out to be roughly twice the height of a man and weighing several times as much. They seemed to be slow witted, not paying attention to who or what was around them.

Aldren had heard of only one attack on humans by a troll told to him by his father when he was a lad. Some hunters had roped what was probably one of their young that had wandered away. They had been prodding it with spears enjoying the odd sounds it would make. They heard an adult troll coming to the sounds of the little one but didn't realize the speed with which they could move. The troll went crazy, stomping on the hunters and throwing them about. They could not be captured except by some magic, because the hunter's arrows and spears did nothing but enrage the beast. It would take a hundred arrows to bring one down, and by that time, the destruction they would cause would be considerable.

Ameni found her mate leaning against a tree just out of the glow of the campfires. She quietly moved up to his side snaking her around him. He returned the smile he had seen on her face, and then continued his scrutiny of the starlit sky.

"What do you see in the sky, my mate?" she asked softly.

"I was just wondering if our ancestors are looking down from the Hero's Halls and watching. Are they interested in what we are trying to do, and would they approve?"

"From the time I was a small girl in the village, we were always told that they believed in the justice and honor for all the lands. They had fought and died for those things and it was our duty to continue the fight. You are leading us all in a pursuit of just those things, so I would think they would approve."

Aldren gave a heavy sigh. "I just hope I can live up to their standards. I never wanted this... responsibility. I just wanted to live my life free, first on my own and then with you. Now, I must send many men, dwarves and elves into a battle that they will not come back from. Their deaths will be on my mind forever. Have we done the right thing? Would they still be

alive if I had not put it into their thoughts that they could live free? Have I done them a disservice in offering that which I am not sure I can deliver?"

"It is only human to have doubts, but you are needlessly torturing yourself on this. As you have told me before, you had no choice but to follow the path that was before you. The ancients put you on this path knowing that you would do what was necessary. It really never was a choice - for either of us. But you gave these people a glimpse of what they could have if they wanted it bad enough. And they do. It's by their choice that they are here. They believe in the dream of living free and they believe in you. You have not tested the limits of your power yet, but I am willing to bet my life on you having the power to do what is necessary."

Ameni then gave him time to digest those thoughts and turned him back toward the encampment and their tent.

When the Lord and Lady came to check up on Peryn, they found him sitting up in bed. His color was better and he was alert, but the weakness of blood loss was still evident. Isowan told them that he had an infection that was being drawn out, though he would not be riding anywhere for a while. She gave him an affectionate caress on his cheek then left to tend to her other charges.

Aldren pulled up a chair for Ameni and then sat on the edge of the cot. "You are looking much better this morning, Peryn. Now, how about a telling of your adventures."

Peryn thought for a moment then began the tale from where he had ridden away from the farmhouse. "We had ridden for a few days, making good time. The other man riding with me, he called himself Ranem, had been fishing for what I had to tell you, but I kept silent on that account. We had stopped just after dusk because I thought my horse was lame. I checked his foot and Ranem stabbed me in the back and took off through the woods.

"By the time I had come to, I was being dragged through the forest by a group of small creatures. I had never seen their likes before and tried to place them. I was fading in and out of consciousness so I wasn't thinking well, but I kept thinking they looked like a creature from a folk tale that my grandfather had told me when I was just a lad. He had called them



*wyvormen* and stated that they were eaters of men. As a child, I had dismissed them as made up to scare us kids into not venturing away from the camp. Now I was not so sure.

"I passed out again, and later came to when I felt teeth sink into my lower leg. I kicked the creature and sent it flying back into the brush. The others were more cautious about approaching me then. But every time I fell asleep, I would wake up with one or more tasting me. I really thought I was headed to the Hero Halls. I was very weak from the loss of blood and lack of rest and I figured it would be just a matter of time before they figured out they could rush me and I would not be able to fight them all off.

"I had given up when there was a noise coming from where I thought our trail was. The creatures must have been loath to give up a good meal because they went charging toward the sound. It was then that I knew I would have to make a getaway if I ever was going to. I got on my hands and knees and crawled away. I made it to a stream and pushed a dead log into the water then clung to its limbs. I floated downstream until I was sure they would not find me and then rolled off and made it to shore. From there, I worked my way toward where I thought the road was. A patrol found me the next day and once one of them recognized me, they brought me to you."

Neither of the listeners had interrupted his tale. He was indeed lucky to have made it out alive. There were creatures that hunted in the forests and not all were well known. They then bade him a farewell and went on about the day. When he had time, Aldren made inquiries and found out that small human-like creatures had indeed attacked a man named Bronas while they were following a trail that they thought was Peryn's... With the help of his companion, they had killed them all and then followed the trail to a small clearing. They had figured Peryn for dead by then and had come back.

The move to the fortress took the better part of a sevenday before they were done. Aldren surveyed the battlements and found them well preserved. The repairs the dwarves had made were of even better quality than the original and they had even added two rings in front of the main gates.

The fortress was set into a cliff where the back was set into the wall and the battlements stretched around the front in a three-quarter circle. The walls were four times the height of a man and were thick enough to walk three abreast. There was enough room to house most of the people that were there, with the rest camping within the first ring of battlements beyond the gate. They were now set and the waiting would begin.

During the next couple days, the Captains made their plans. They had close to twelve thousand troops, but less than half had really tasted battle. The remainders were just ordinary people who had been drawn into these circumstances. Even with the addition of the elves and dwarves, there would be less than fourteen thousand to try and defeat more than twice that number. Commanders came in and out carrying orders and setting men along the walls and in the forest that was nearby.

The idea was to defend the outer areas as much as possible, but when those fell, retreat back into the fortress and fight from the battlements. The warriors were aware that they were vastly outnumbered, but determined all the same to take as many as they could before they fell.

Aldren and the other captains went among the troops checking readiness, offering advice, and rousing the troops. There was a grim determination among them almost to a man, something that caused Vabryn to remark that he felt more honor among these honest folk than he ever had in the king's court.

That night as Aldren stood on a parapet looking out on the moonlit landscape, he noted the full moon. Tomorrow, the King's troops would start to cross the river and the battle would be joined. The waiting and planning was over and the time for action had arrived.

The battle did indeed start at dawn the next morning. From the start, things did not go as well as the enemy could have hoped for. The bridges the enemy had built to cross the river were bombarded by catapults that had remained hidden in the forests. The boulders broke the bridges into sections that would float into those downstream doing damage to the ones below them. The few bridges that made it across were perfect targets for the elven archers. They kept firing on the troops trying to cross until the bodies had to be pushed into the river in order for those trying to cross to get through. This showed the first mistake by the enemies commanders.

They had not expected any resistance until they were well into the country. By the time their archers had arranged themselves to return fire, the elves had run low on arrows and had melted back into the forests. Catapult crews set fire to their machines so the enemy could not use them, then they too retreated toward the first wall.

The first wall was where the free races made their stand. The flags of the kindred were mixed with those of the dwarf kingdom, giving a colorful display along the sides of the massed troops. In the center were the flags of the Tower of the Guard and alongside was the sable and red representing the Dragon clan. It was just below these banners where Aldren and Ameni stood awaiting the advancing troops.

And advance they did. Flying the colors of the various barons, the mass of men moved forward in a slow cadence. When the king's men were over half way across the open field, Aldren ordered the archers to fire at will. Bodies started to fall on both sides as the enemy archers began to return fire. When there was less than a furlong between the opposing sides, the commander of the enemy shouted for the charge.

This battle was costly for both sides. The free races stood their ground and let the enemy come to them. Both sides then met in a thunderous din of clashing swords and shields mixed in with the cries of the dead and wounded. The free people held their own against the tide of enemy men, but with each wave, they found themselves being pushed slowly back. There were pockets of the defenders battling desperately to try and join ranks again but the onslaught was against them.

A horn sounded from atop the wall and with it came a new sound. The ground shook as Rangar led a company of mounted troops into the fray. This broke the enemy's line and allowed for the retreat of the embattled defenders behind the wall.

Both sides regrouped and revised strategies. The wall provided the defenders a better chance, but the sheer mass of troops the enemy had did not bode well. It was decided to hold here until the wall was breached with only half the troops that were there. The remainder were to reinforce those already at the second wall and provide cover when needed.

This proved to be a wise choice as the enemy's catapults were pulled into place. The archers along the wall peppered the enemy with arrows, aiming at the men and beasts that were moving the engines of war. Once in position, the trolls were driven up to load the catapults. The defenders saw the enemy prodding the trolls with spears to get them to perform their duties. It was obvious that they were unwilling participants, but participants nonetheless. Aldren ordered the archers to concentrate on the trolls.

The arrows seemed to have little effect on the creatures. They were covered in arrows but other than bellowing in pain they kept loading the catapults. Aldren finally called Ameni and a couple of elven archers over and told them to aim for the troll's chests. As she released the first arrow, Aldren summoned up his power and pointed his sword at the flying arrow. The head burst into a magical flame and struck the troll. It collapsed in agony as the fire from the arrow consumed him. Another troll soon joined the first, and the remaining ones disregarded the commands of their captors and fled from the battle. The catapults fell silent while men scrambled to find rocks they could lift.

But the damage had been done and the first defensive wall had been breached in several places. Aldren ordered them all back to the last wall as the enemy started pouring in where the wall had been destroyed. The defenders made it back with the enemy on their heels. As Aldren slipped through the opening, he shouted for the gates to be closed.

This wall was stronger than the first, but all within knew it would be a matter of time before it too lay in shambles. Until then, they would defend it with everything they had. The enemy would charge the wall and they would be met with a hail of arrows. By the midday, the enemy dead lay piled at the base of the wall several layers deep.

Inside the wall, the situation was getting desperate. They had taken heavy losses and those that remained were tiring. There were many wounded and inside the fortress, the healers were working feverishly to save as many as possible. Aldren and his captains had managed to rally the troops each time the enemy attempted to scale the wall but the odds were too far out of their favor.

It had been decided that they would make a final stand in front of this wall. To retreat into the fortress would mean certain death since they had not the supplies to withstand a prolonged siege. If this were to be the end, they would make it a glorious one.

As the enemy moved back to regroup, they were stunned with the gates opened and the remaining free races came storming out. They fanned out along the base of the wall and stood at the ready. The commanders of the enemy must have felt victory in their grasp because they turned the troops and reset the lines. Then they started forward.

Aldren once again called up the elements. He had felt his power was somehow different from when he had used it several times earlier today. He was more attuned to feeling it work through him, and his control was much greater. Now he was holding back, trying to save his strength in case Ralahur had accomplished his goal. Even so, he knew, as did the others, that this could possibly be their final stand. Before the final clash came, he spoke some incantations in the ancient tongue. He didn't realize that he was doing this, but Ameni, who was at his side, heard him clearly.

Then the battle was engaged. There was a new ferocity to the enemy's attack, like a fear was driving them. And Aldren had an idea just what that was. Deep in his core he could feel what was coming yet he couldn't back away from the battle.

It was a surprise to both sides when the sun was suddenly blocked by a sky filled with huge wings. With Balroth leading, the great dragons dove down into the ranks of the enemy, causing havoc, killing many of them with fire and magic. The ones who survived the first attack ran in complete panic. For them, this was a terrible legend that had suddenly come to life with devastating results.

The dragons continued their onslaught, sweeping the ranks away before them. Heartened by this unexpected assistance, the defenders fought even harder. They saw a chance for victory being pulled from certain defeat and were quick to take advantage of it.

There was a disturbance that was coming from the south. Aldren felt it increase and took the time to look in the direction the feeling came from. As others heard the noise, they looked as well and froze in sheer terror.

There was a company of soldiers surrounding a group of priests. And in the middle of that group was a figure that was radiating evil palatable enough that even those with the least intelligence could feel it. Defenders and foe alike dropped to the ground in sheer terror.

Aldren heard the voice of Balroth once again in his head and it filled him with confidence. *"Dragon-kin, this battle is yours. Only you can claim the day and thus the future of all in these lands. But you carry the power of the ancients as well as the power of the dragons. Listen to your heart and you will succeed. We will be with you."*

Heartened by the dragon's words, Aldren moved to where he was away from the others and stood waiting. Alone, he stood silently as the company of priests halted and moved away to reveal Ralahur dressed in black robes. The priest moved forward until he was about fifty paces from Aldren. Still, the warrior stood silent; his sword in his hand.

The priest spoke directly to Aldren. "Surrender yourself and I will kill you swiftly and not force you to watch as we strip the flesh from all those who foolishly followed you."

"I think not. You should go back to your dungeon while you still may. You will not reign over the free races," was the warrior's reply.

The priest raised up into a form nearly twice his normal height. Darkness spread out from him enveloping everything around him. Suddenly, a bolt of energy sprang from his upturned palm and rocketed toward Aldren. This was what Aldren had expected and he had been drawing energy from the elements around him. He blocked the energy and then sent a bolt of fire back toward the priest.

With the battle joined, the combatants tested each other's meddle with energy each driving the other back with every thrust. Aldren knew he was tiring and started to wonder if he could keep going much longer. He was also fighting an inner battle to maintain control over his spirit. Ralahur was tiring as well but he had exercised no such control. In truth, Aldren could feel that the essence of the man who had once been in that body was now gone and what was left was the pure malice of evil.

There was one who was not content with just watching the battle between the forces of light and dark. Malrion, a young dragon had taken flight and

was moving rapidly toward the dark figure intending to finish him off while his attention was elsewhere. Aldren was so close to his inner essence now that he felt the wrath of the young dragon as he sped toward his intended target.

"*MALRION - DON"T!!!*" Aldren shouted to the beast using his mind as well as his voice. Aldren watched in horror as the Ralahur-creature turned and shot a bolt of malice at the dragon. It caught him directly in the chest and Malrion screamed in agony. His body was consumed in a dark fire and what was left fell to the earth.

The Ralahur-creature took advantage of Aldren's preoccupation with the dragon and hit him with a shaft of power. Its aim was off and instead of killing Aldren; it struck him at an angle and sent him spinning to land several feet from where he had stood.

He was hurt he could feel how that power tried to rip his core from him as it battered his body. He rolled himself over onto his hands and knees. The Ralahur-creature stopped long enough to gloat in his victory before coming in to finish Aldren.

That was the final mistake the enemy made. Aldren was now in pain but that was replaced with anger. The Ralahur-creature, by killing the dragon, had sent him over the edge. He finally went deep into his own soul and released the essence that was struggling to get out. Aldren at that moment was no longer just a man, but he became a dragon in all but form. He was seeing as a dragon sees. His senses sharpened to an incredible degree and his control of the wild magic was beyond anything he could have imagined. He could see the man-creature stripped bare of all its darkness and felt for the creature's inner essence. It tried to resist, but Aldren had already got past its defenses. He sent a bolt of pure magical energy straight into its core blasting it apart.

## Chapter 14 (coda)

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Those who had been watching saw Ralahur seem to explode into pieces of flesh as a noise of indescribable tone went rushing past them and then into the sky, leaving them in wonder.

With the priest destroyed, his followers turned and ran. The men that remained were so disheartened they laid down their weapons and asked for quarter. The very few that remained willing to fight, mostly the wild men, were quickly dispatched. The prisoners were rounded up until the council decided their fate. The wounded were taken to the healers, and the dead were lined up for burial with honor.

After Aldren had destroyed the evil priest, he had fallen to his knees. Ameni came over to him but didn't get any reaction from him. She reached out to Balroth and the great dragon told her that when Aldren had released the inner dragon that was his essence. It had taken over and was now in control. He was no longer a man, but was not a dragon either. The conflict would soon consume him and he would die.

Ameni was frantic now. In saving the rest of the world, her lover had sacrificed his own spirit and would soon pass into the Hero Halls. She couldn't let this happen. She needed him even more than the rest of the kingdom did. She could feel her heart longing for him, for all that they had shared, and all they still had to share.

She had not wept since that day in her family's hut. But now, the tears were flowing freely as she felt the loneliness that came upon her. She was trying to think of anything she could that could bring him back when she suddenly remembered the words that old Belwin had told her. "*To you, I pass this book that contains those magics. Learn them well for they may save you or those close to you some day.*" She had studied and learned every spell that was in the book. She was now proficient in almost every one. But which one would serve the purpose that she now so desperately had.

Rubbing his brow, she felt him slipping further away from her. She had to get him back somehow. That was it! She would enter his mind and call the essence of the man to return and take control. Placing her fingertips on his



temples and bringing her thumbs together at the bridge of his nose, she began to let her mind enter into his.

She immediately felt the chaos as the essence of his human/elf side fought the dragon side for control. His spirit was so scattered and confused, she could not separate the two. In frustration, she called out once again to Balroth for assistance.

The great dragon glided to where the two figures were. His shadow covered them as he brought his head down to hover above them. *"I can help you to find his essence as a man once again, but it will be up to you to call it back and place it in control. Just follow my mind and grasp on to his core when we find it. Your feelings for him and his for you will be the only thing that will accomplish what you wish."*

Ameni agreed and soon felt the dragon's mind lock onto hers. It was then that she felt even briefly, what it was to be a dragon, and understood why Aldren had never been able to explain what he had felt. She pulled her thoughts back to the task at hand and went with the dragon back into the swirling chaos that was Aldren's mind... It took some time for Balroth to locate what he was looking for. Ameni felt it as a dimly glowing spark, but she felt his humanity there and she clung onto it with all her might.

She started calling out to him, to his human essence, telling it to listen and remember. There was a query from that spark as if it was trying to recognize who was calling to it. She continued to call to him, bringing him slowly back to the surface. The dragon side fought for control, but she kept repeating that he had to come back to her. That he needed to feel the love she had for him.

The shadows of the evening crept onto them as Ameni kept working. Balroth kept watch on both of them and kept away all the curious with the exception of Kiran. Mirgan had been wounded and she had stayed with him until she was sure he was alright. Word had come through the healer's area as to what was happening and when it was getting dark, Kiran decided that the couple, still on the field, would need food and drink. Balroth growled as she approached but recognized her and allowed her to proceed. She set the food and ale near Ameni and backed up until she bumped into the dragon. He bade her to sit and wait on the chance that the elf would need her support. As she sat there watching the motionless

figures, she found herself musing how strange and wonderful that she would be leaning against the creature that most people knew of as only a myth.

It was the waning hours of the night when Ameni finally stirred. She sat back feeling her stiff muscles complain about being moved after being stationary for so many hours. But she had done it! She had coaxed that spark that was Aldren's human/elf essence out of the chaos and back into control of him. Once he began to come back to himself, he took over and coaxed the dragon spirit back under control. It had been a near thing, and what had finally done it was getting him to remember their bonding and their love and devotion to each other. He would awaken soon, weak but back to his own self again.

Ameni finally glanced around and saw Kiran watching them with huge eyes. Ameni's smile was the reassurance that he would be whole again. Kiran wrapped her arms around the elf and they cried tears of relief. Then Kiran thought of the food and pressed Ameni to eat. Balroth took one more sniff of the still prone figure and then moved back. Both women thanked him for his assistance. He told them that the dragons would leave before dawn to return to their territory in the mountains. Then he launched himself and disappeared into the night.

When Ameni had eaten, she asked the young woman to send a litter so they could get Aldren into the fortress where he could rest. With the dragon gone, Reavers were starting to gather to feast on the fallen. Help soon arrived and the leader of the Dragon Clan was carried back to the fortress. Not to lie among the dead, but to the quarters where he would recover.

It took a few days for Aldren to regain his strength for it was not only his mental capacity that had been overloaded. While he was recovering, Vabryn took charge of the troops and started to organize things. There was not much more to do other than start the repairs of what had been destroyed, and to bury the fallen.

There had been so many deaths between the two opposing forces that it was impossible to bury them all in separate graves. Instead, the bodies of the dead were cremated with all the honor they deserved. Songs were sung and speeches were made recalling the actions of these men. Their

names were placed in a book that would forever be kept in the fortress. Later as the walls were being rebuilt, those names were carved into the stones being used. Visitors could come and read the names of ancestors and recall their part in the war.

The other big problem was the wounded. Most were able to get around within a few days. However, there were enough serious wounds that small group of healers headed by Isowan could not keep up. Isowan sent out a call for healers and supplies and within a few days, elven and dwarfish healers came to assist. After that, there were very few who did not come away fully healed.

Once Aldren was able, he once again took charge. He reduced the troops to manageable levels, sending the volunteers home with all the thanks and blessings that he could bestow. Patrols were sent to clean up any pockets of resistance. There were very few of these and once word had spread of the defeat of the High Priest, they surrendered and were sent back across the river.

Special honor was bestowed upon the troop of women that some had laughed at. During the battle, a troop of enemy soldiers had tried to come around a breach in the wall to attack the fortress and kill the wounded there. These women had met the soldiers and held their ground preventing a possible rout. Afterward Horrand, who had ridiculed the women, walked up to the group.

"Ladies, I am man enough to admit when I am wrong. Even after the demonstration in the tower, I still thought that when you were confronted with the horror of battle that you would collapse. I am proud to say that I was completely wrong. Your ferocity in battle and the way you still fought even with some of you were wounded startled me. I have seen seasoned warriors who would have given up faced with what you were. I would be proud to fight with any of you beside me." He then gave them a low bow.

Aylene, one of the leaders spoke for the group. "Captain, we all appreciate what you just said. You are an honorable man to admit that you were wrong. And I speak for all of us when I say that it would be a privilege to fight alongside a man such as you." Then the women returned the bow. They all went their separate ways, each with a new respect of the other.

Another sevenday had passed when a scout came riding in to say that a company of soldiers was approaching from the east. It was Isray coming to speak with the Lord of the Northern Kingdom. Aldren sent orders for them to be escorted in as honored allies that they were. When they arrived, a feast was held in their honor. Aldren and his captains found out that Isray and his men had kept many companies of soldiers from reinforcing the main battle, saving many lives. The two men clasped arms for the first time, sealing a bond that had until then been held through messages only.

Isray had proven to be honorable and Aldren was more than happy to leave the eastern lands under his protection. He had a strong personality and had taken a group of exiles and undesirables and formed a formidable force to be reckoned with. Talk among his men showed him to be fair with people and brutal to those who opposed him. He would be perfect to keep control of that area.

Isray stayed for two sevendays more enjoying the friendship he had found with the leaders of the North Kingdom. Emissaries had been sent to King Gisbard inviting him to a conference. Aldren and Isray, along with the captains of the tower, went to the field near the ford of the great river to meet with the king. There, they set tents and waited for him to arrive.

A few days later, the representatives of the king arrived. He could not come himself... After hearing of the defeat of his armies, he had went completely mad and launched himself off of the tower heights to his death. He was an ineffectual king anyway, having allowed Ralahur to control the kingdom in his stead. Now, there was no king to control the court and the barons were fighting against each other in their own struggles of power. Those that came to the conference were the most powerful of the barons and understood that they could not afford a protracted war with the free races in addition to the struggles they already faced.

After dismounting, the four barons were led to a tent where the representatives of the free races sat. The terms of their surrender were simple. The kingdom of Morgorne was divided; Isray would rule the desert in the east to the Evenskill Mountains. Everything north of the great river was declared for the free races to live in harmony, ruled under a council of representatives. The south part of the kingdom would be left alone to rule amongst themselves. As long as the borders were adhered to, they would be left alone.

The barons left in a better mood than when they arrived. They had lost more than half the land of the old kingdom, but they could see where Aldren had been fair. He could have declared he was seizing the entire kingdom, as would have been his right as victor. It had been made clear to them that it was their responsibility to enforce on the other barons these restrictions. That would take some work but this outcome was far better than the alternative.

It was getting well into the autumn of the cycle when Aldren finally felt things were settled enough to begin his trek back to the Tower of the Guard. He was still Lord of the Tower and he needed to get back to his home.

Before he left, he appointed Vabryn and Dulca keepers of the fortress. Together, they would protect the surrounding areas up to the river. Many of the men who had been with Vabryn from the time he had been in the King's garrison elected to stay on as border guards and farmers or what other trade they decided on.

To his surprise, Peryn requested to stay as well. Isowan was staying here as the healer and the two of them had come to an understanding shortly after she had nursed him back to health. Aldren gladly gave his blessings on them and reminded them any time they could come north, they would be welcome.

Mirgan had been badly wounded during the battle, but was now up and about. He and Kiran would accompany the Lord and Lady back to the tower. Before they left, Mirgan spoke with his mother for a long while, then set her hand into Vabryn's, signaling his blessings on their union.

Their journey was slow for they were often stopped as they would pass a village and the people would beg for the travelers to join them in a meal. Across the lands, the harvests had been good that year and the people were grateful.

One place they scheduled to stop at was the village where the trial of the priest had been held after the battle that had freed Kiran and Mirgan's mother. As they rode up, the blacksmith was still at his forge. He turned and recognized them and came out to greet them as old friends. He bade

them to settle at the Inn and he would let the people know that there were visitors.

The innkeeper and his wife were overjoyed to see them, offering them the same rooms they had occupied long before. The tavern part of the inn was filled to capacity that night and tales were told and plenty of ale was consumed. In all, they stayed three days resting their horses as well as their riders.

The main body of troops had been sent home shortly after the final battle and the small troop that were with the Lord and Lady consisted of a total of ten riders. They had still been on the lookout for any trouble from robbers, but they saw no one of that type. After they left the smith's village, they picked up the pace and were soon enough in front of the gates of the tower. They entered the tunnel to shouts that the Lord and Lady had returned and by the time they came out the other end, the population of the tower seemed to have dropped what they were doing to come and cheer for the return of their leader.

The crowd followed them to the steps of the tower proper. Kal-angurr was standing a few steps from the bottom. Aldren and Ameni dismounted and came to the bottom. The old man signaled for silence from the crowd. "Welcome home, Lord and Lady of the Tower. You will find all the same as when you left. Through battles of sword and magic, you have forged a land where all the races can be free and live in harmony. Now, take again the mantle of leadership. Long may you rule in justice and peace."

Kal-angurr bowed and stood aside. The couple walked up the steps and into the great hall of their home to begin their rule over the now freed lands.

As they turned in for the night, Aldren was watching Ameni from the bed. He was used to her routine, but this night she was standing at the foot of the bed looking at her abdomen. As Aldren looked closer, he noticed that her tummy seemed a bit more round. He stared at her as a smile moved across her face.

In answer to his silent query, she whispered to him. "Yes I am with child. You will be a father and the dragon clan will grow."

Laughing he pulled his mate onto the bed with him. He smothered her with kisses to show his appreciation of her carrying their child. Then he showed her just how much he loved her.

After Ameni had fallen asleep in his arms, he thought back to earlier times. He had never wanted the path that had been placed before him, but he knew in his heart that he would not have changed it at all. His life was complete.

**The End**