



CHRISTOPHER
LAPIDUS

LINEAGE

HERITAGE LOST
BOOK II

The two unarmed men then did something Callobus did not expect. They leaped forward, reaching for his arms. He was still a little off balance from the kick and was unable to block their attack. They grabbed his arms and bore down, holding him still. He struggled against their dead weight.

He felt a sharp pain in his stomach and shouted out in surprise. He looked down and saw the blade of the third man embedded into his side. It had just missed the center of his stomach, but it hurt nonetheless. His blood flowed from the deep wound and he could feel the tip of the sword just barely sticking out from his back. The guard then reared back with his other hand and punched Callobus in the face. Stars flashed before his vision as his head snapped back and blood flew from his nose.

Suddenly, anger rushed through him, hot and boiling. When his sight returned to normal, he looked at the man that had punched him and saw that he was coated in red. Everything was coated in a crimson hue.

Callobus suddenly realized what was happening and tried to fight against it, to bring Mileena to his mind, or his father, or Erot, anything to dismiss the building rage. But the anger was too great and the pain coursing through him made focusing difficult. His side was on fire, his nose was bleeding and the blood coating his lips made his attempt futile. As soon as the crimson fluid touched his tongue, the internal battle was lost and his curse took hold.

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HERITAGE LOST

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For my family.

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PROLOGUE

The wind was calm and not a single snowflake fell from the sky. The air was crisp and clear and the sun shined brightly, bathing everything in a golden glow. The snow-covered ground reflected the sunlight, casting a white glare on anything not covered in the delicate powder. In contrast, the black rock that peaked through the snow banks absorbed the blinding light and made the surrounding stone seem even darker. The mixture of black and white made the area look like a giant patchwork quilt though there was no pattern or order to the chaotic surface. Just a month ago, the entire area appeared as a single block of alabaster, everything covered in snow. Only the tallest and sharpest clusters of rocks managed to pierce the icy veil. But now, with the onset of summer and lack of snowfall, the stone was once again emerging from its frozen slumber. Though the snow receded during the warm season, it still covered a majority of the surrounding area and despite the fact that the stone held the heat of the sun within, no warmth reached the surface of the White Rock Mountains.

On a clear day, from just halfway up the mighty mountains, one could see for miles in any direction. Only the most courageous, or foolish as it was sometimes said, would brave the treacherous surfaces of the White Rocks. They were full of dangerous creatures, deep snow banks that could swallow a man whole and precarious ridges where even the most skilled climber would be hard pressed to cling to the surface. In winter, the wind, snow and ice could freeze an average person solid in a matter of minutes. During fall and spring, the weather was not as hazardous but those months happened to be the mating seasons for many of the beasts that called the mountains home. The few months of summer was the only time that the White Rocks were even slightly passable, which was why, with summer in full swing, the three large figures

were trekking up the mountain.

Three large men, covered head to toe in thick furs, moved swiftly among the sharp rocks. Calloused hands, almost as large as an average man's head, gripped the hard, jagged rocks as if they were made of smooth steel. If composed of something less than sturdy stone, the rock would have crumbled under their crushing grip. Instead, the rock held and the men lifted themselves up, moving closer and closer to the top of the precipice. Muscles developed from years of constant training, vigorous battle, hard climbing and other strenuous activities, rippled and flexed in the light of Solaris. Skin tanned from a life of living directly in the sun glistened with a thin layer of sweat. Hardened eyes scanned every shadowed crevice, searching out any possibility of danger. Large steel weapons lay ready on the backs of the large men should any threat present itself. Though the men were concentrating on navigating the concealed trails, each of them would have their weapon in hand in the blink of eye. Years of living on the Crystal Plains had solidified their instincts.

"Cold enough yet?" the man named Noom asked his closest climbing companion.

"Always," came the reply from Vok. The third man, Fend, just rolled his eyes and continued climbing.

All three men were dressed in thick furs, cut from the hides of the wolves and deer that roam the plains. Leather also adorned their bodies, protecting them from the elements. Pieces of iron, hammered out to form flat plates and strung together to make a large chest piece, armored Fend, the leader of the trio's expedition and the eldest of the three.

Each man stood almost seven feet tall and carried well over two hundred and fifty pounds of muscle. Fend carried himself with the experience and maturity of a veteran warrior while the other two held the enthusiasm and naiveté of youth. Vok and Noom had long, bushy beards the color of the tanned deer hide they wore. Their guide preferred his beard short, trimmed just a few inches from his face. His hair held a reddish hue, like the sky when Solaris dips below the horizon. Each carried a large sword that required two hands to wield and each blade was almost as tall as they were. Though large and sometimes cumbersome, the men maneuvered up the slopes in a way that their weapons were not a problem. They had learned long ago how to climb so their blades would not hinder their travel.

"It will be warmer the sooner we reach the cave," Fend replied, hoisting himself up on a small plateau. When he stood, a shiver ran through his body as a slight breeze washed over him. Though the three travelers had lived in the area for their entire lives, the cold still managed to penetrate their best-made

clothing and caused bumps to rise on their skin. Steam wafted from their flesh and puffs of mist were visible from each breath.

“Are we there?” Vok asked, pulling himself over the ledge. Fend remained silent and pointed.

What looked like a frozen explosion of rock stood only a few hundred yards ahead. Jagged pieces of stone stood facing the heavens, as if being thrust up from the ground by some unseen force. It appeared impassable but all three men knew a small trail, though far from smooth, ran through the walls of rough stone. A peak of narrow stone, looking like the tip of a sword bursting through the mountain, sat just above the eruption. It ended in a point and even gleamed in the sunlight as if it was made of metal. The entire peak looked like it wasn't even part of the mountain. It was as if the gods had dug it up from the earth and set it on top of a plateau.

“Blade Peak,” Fend said, taking in a lung full of air. It was his third voyage to the top of the mountain and each time it astounded him. The peak wasn't natural and every time he set foot on the mystical rock that surrounded the peak, he knew he was walking on magical ground.

“Do you think she is there?” Vok asked.

“She is always there,” Noom responded. “The Great Hunt begins in less than two week's time and we are the last tribe to meet with her. She knows we are coming.”

They looked toward the base of the sharp peak and saw a large opening. It appeared like the mouth on some titanic creature, open and ready to swallow them whole. A brief image of the giant arctic worms that roamed the plains, commonly called isteraz, flashed in each man's mind, but they did not come here today for battle. No, the reason why they risked death, the reason why they traveled across the frozen tundra and braved the dangerous mountain—was to visit the mystical being that looked over all the barbarian tribes of the Crystal Plains. The three warriors sought the Mystic.

Every year, before the Great Hunt, the barbarian tribes of the Crystal Plains would send a trio of its warriors to Blade Peak to seek the Mystic's guidance and advice. Each tribe would prepare and carry out their hunt based on what they learned. Most barbarians returned to their tribes with news that the hunt would be plentiful, the rewards great. Some learned that they would have to hunt longer and work harder to gain their share of the bounty, but whatever the prediction, every tribe took the Mystic's advice seriously. The Great Hunt was very important for it would provide each tribe with the food and clothing necessary to survive the coming months. The meat and skins from the stags the barbarians hunted would keep their tribe alive until the next hunting season,

when they would repeat the process. It had been their way for hundreds of generations and would be so for hundreds more.

Vok and Noom, barbarians of the True Fists tribe, were young, not yet in their eighteenth winter and had been selected by their chief to travel up the mountain. On every voyage to Blade Peak, young barbarians who were just entering manhood were chosen for the hard journey. It was seen as a way to harden their souls and strengthen their spirit. If successful, they returned to their tribe that much closer to becoming a true warrior. If they failed, they usually never came back at all. Over the past twenty years, the True Fists had only lost three tribesmen to the mountain. They were considered fortunate for other tribes had lost more, sometimes dozens, over the past two decades. The warriors were mourned and remembered, but life continued. There would always warriors to take up the trek to the Mystic.

And to show them the way, a warrior who had already made the journey would guide them. Fend had actually volunteered to show the young men the way for not only did he desire to experience the invigorating climb once again, but Vok was his son and he wanted to see what kind of strength and courage his offspring held. He had another son, Bulg, and a daughter, Vala, but they were younger than their sibling and had not yet taken the journey. Fend knew his future held at least two more excursions to the top of the White Rocks.

“Come,” the large man said. “Let us not keep her waiting.”

The three continued up the mountain, carefully placing their hands to avoid slicing their exposed flesh. Though their bodies were covered, both Vok and Noom left their arms and hands exposed for they loved the feel of the sun on their skin. Fend was a little more cautious and was completely covered. He easily navigated the steep slope, quickly outpacing his younger acolytes. Wearing the thick, leather gloves allowed him to grip the rock more securely and he pulled himself along without discomfort. The arduous cursing coming from behind him brought a smile to his lips.

Regardless of the rough terrain, they reached the bottom of Blade Peak quickly. They looked up and saw the small trail that wound through tall, sharp rock and rough, jagged stone. Snow still sat in the shadows and deep pockets of the mountain. The air suddenly held a chill that pierced their clothing and reached to their very cores. None of them could tell whether it came from being so high above Terrial or from the ominous path that sat in front of them. Either way, they started up without hesitation. They had been away from home long enough and wanted to start the return journey back as soon as possible. Though being selected to see the Mystic was an honor, each of them was looking forward to being back in front of a roaring fire, sharing mead and meat

with their tribesmen. Both Vok and Noom had been excited to get to see the wondrous woman they had heard so much about, but they missed the plains and openness of the tundra.

The trail was anything but smooth and very steep. Rough, uneven ground threatened to send them tumbling down the slopes at any moment. Centuries of barbarians climbing up the path had worn the ground and as each decade passed, the slopes became steeper and more dangerous. Soon, anyone going to the Mystic would be traveling straight up, on a rope. Fend had an easier time though he almost lost his balance a handful of times. Noom slipped and fell once, but Vok was there to catch him and pulled him from what would have been a disastrous, if not fatal, tumble down the hill. After many near falls, they finally reached the plateau, but they soon found out that they were not the only tribe on the mountain this day.

“Well,” a deep voice boomed from just above their heads. Fend looked to his hand, which was laying on the flat surface of the cave entrance, and saw a black booted foot just inches from his fingers. His eyes rose and his gaze fell upon the black bearded face of a large barbarian. Two more warriors, each sporting large black beards stood just behind the first.

“Wild Blades!” Fend spat.

The Wild Blades tribe was the most brutal and dishonorable tribe that lived on the Crystal Plains. Unfortunately, they were also one of the most powerful. They fought dirty in battle, using everything from mud to excrement to blind their opponents then kill them in the most painful way possible. They relished bloodletting, as opposed to the other tribes that saw battle and death as something only necessary for survival. They bullied the smaller tribes when they saw fit and overhunted during the Great Hunt, taking as much as they could to weaken their enemies. The True Fists constantly battled the Wild Blades for they were the only other tribe that matched the Blades in size and strength. The two were fierce rivals and were constantly at each other’s throats.

Fend narrowed his eyes dangerously at the large man, whose name he knew to be Gore. He was large even for a barbarian and sported a large curly black beard, dark beady eyes and dozens of scars on his face and arms, a testament to his durability and will to survive. Short black hair covered his head and black leather studded with tiny spikes armored his body. Bands of copper, painted with the symbol of a whirling axe, the emblem of the Wild Blades, covered his arms and legs. Straps also wrapped his forearms, calves, legs and waist. Tiny spiked balls made of rock and steel hung off small clips attached to the straps. In battle, the large man would throw the lethal balls towards his opponent’s face in an attempt to blind him. A large fur cloak sat

around his shoulders and a long, jagged sword sat on his back, just under the furs. Red, odd-shaped tattoos decorated each of his shoulders and a column of the designs ran down the right side of his face, over his eye, a similar marking shared by every tribesman of the Wild Blades. Fend knew if Gore shaved his head, the markings would be covering the right side of his head, all the way down to the base of his neck. The barbarian was a powerful force within his tribe, ranking second within the Blades. He was savage in battle and showed mercy to no one, not even his own children. It was rumored he had killed one of his own sons during an intense argument.

Fend went to pull himself up, but Gore stood defiantly in his way, refusing to move. He even knelt down and leaned in, a ghoulish smile on his scarred face. The smell of blood suddenly permeated the air.

“True Fists,” he said with disgust. “What a coincidence.”

“You do not belong here,” Fend said with anger. His muscles strained to hold himself steady. “Your time with the Mystic ended four days ago.”

Long ago, the Mystic had designated the time that each tribe was to come and visit her. The purpose for the two-week timeframe was to decrease the confrontations that were happening among the rival tribes. Warriors were dying just outside her door and she wanted it to stop. She also decreed that no battle was to take place within a mile of her home. The Wild Blades time had ended four days ago and they should have been well away from the mountain.

“So we ran a little late,” Gore chuckled. The two men behind him also shared in his mirth.

Fend knew it was more than just being dilatory. In the past, the Blades had tried to eavesdrop on other tribes when they came to Blade Peak. If they gained the knowledge meant only for their rivals, they could hinder the others and become more powerful. The tribe that gained the most during the Hunt was usually in the best position to gain warriors and strength for the rest of the year.

There were nine tribes on the Crystal Plains, but at one time, there had been over fifty. Over the centuries, many tribes had simply faded away. Some slowly died off while others were absorbed into the more powerful tribes. Occasionally, warriors would break away and begin their own clan, but this practice usually ended in death for to survive on the frozen tundra you need warriors, powerful warriors that can survive on their own. Only one tribe, the Wanderers, had managed to survive and thrive after one man had broken away and set off on his own. Though successful, the Wanderers were one of the smallest tribes.

As the centuries passed and more tribes disappeared, the numbers of

barbarians in the Plains had steadily dwindled. Many of the elders fear that in another few centuries, the barbarians of the Crystal Plains will be extinct, but until then, those that survived live their lives the only way they know how.

“You are finished,” Fend said through gritted teeth. “Now stand aside or be moved.”

“You’re in no position to threaten me,” Gore said with anger. He stood, his powerful muscles flexing as he went to crush Fend’s fingers under the heel of his boot.

Suddenly, a gust of wind came from seemingly out of nowhere and slammed into Gore. Not even a man of such size could stand against the winds of the White Rocks. It threw him to the side where he fell to the ground, coming within inches of falling out of the cavern. He managed to stop himself from pitching over the ledge. The other two Blades stood still in shock for the air was abruptly calm once more, as if nothing had happened. Then fear took hold of their hearts as they felt a strange presence filling the area. They suddenly realized she was watching the exchange.

If there was one thing in all the land that made a barbarian uncomfortable, it was magic. Unless it was encased within a weapon or item, magic was shunned by the tribes. The barbarians considered any being wielding the ancient art as corrupt and wicked. They stayed clear of anyone even looking like they could bring forth such unstable power, except for the Mystic. She had been part of the tribes for hundreds of years and the barbarians accepted—though some would say tolerated—her. She and she alone was the only being that wielded the mystical energies. Now, feeling that energy around them, the Blades stood frozen in fear.

Fend lifted himself up on the plateau just as Gore rose, furious, to his feet. Fend came forward, giving his companions room to get to the top. Vok and Noom followed right behind, coming up behind their guide. They eyed the three men in front of them and hands slowly rose to the sword hilts sitting just over their right shoulders.

“No,” Fend said, looking back and seeing their intentions. “No violence may befall here. That is the decree.” He looked back at Gore. The large man only scowled at the Fists.

“Come,” the scarred man said in anger. He pushed past the Fists, forcefully shoving them out of the way. Vok almost slipped back down the slopes but caught himself. He went to throw a fist at one of the Blades but Fend held him back.

“Let them go,” the man said, watching as the Blades made their way down the rough trail. He then turned back to his son.

“Control your anger. You will no doubt be battling them before the year is out. This encounter will not soon be forgotten.” The young man heeded his father’s words, steadied himself and took a deep breath. The three barbarians then dusted themselves off and walked into the cave.

The sudden transition from the chill air to a warm draft as they entered, as if they had passed through an invisible wall, amazed them for they had felt no barrier. The tepid air flowed over them, making them shed much of their thick clothing. They placed their furs and heavier cloaks on the ground, off to the side. It felt good to be out of the cold but they knew before long they would be back in the frigid air, making the tiring trip back to their home.

The walls were rough and uneven though certain areas looked to have been cut by a chisel or other sharp tool. Deep, unfinished alcoves and other grooves decorated every surface. The floor, though far from smooth, was a welcomed change from the bumpy trails of the mountain. A low, orange light coming from just around the bend drew them on, like a moth drawn to a flame. The crackling sound that suddenly reached their ears confirmed that the light was indeed coming from a large fire.

They rounded the corner and came to a large circular chamber. A wide pit full of wood and black rock filled the center of the room and a raging fire burned within. Stones, small bones and other debris littered the ground and sat scattered throughout the room. A pile of wood and black rock sat in a sharp corner. Shelves lined with glass jars, odd colored stones, clay pots and bowls sat against one wall while a second shelf, packed with unidentifiable objects, sat on another. Large alcoves lay just underneath the shelves. They looked to be places for items of importance but they stood empty. Three large openings decorated other parts of the room, leading deeper in the cavernous home, but only darkness shown from each.

The chamber was humid, muggy and smelled like an animal that had rolled in its own filth. How anyone could stand to live in such a confined space, no matter how large, confused the three barbarians. They would go mad without the openness of the tundra, the freedom one feels only by running across the icy terrain, feeling the wind and snow against their skin. But this was the Mystic’s home and they would be respectful, wherever she may be.

“Welcome, barbarians of the Fists.”

The voice was raspy and dry, but carried strength, power and a force that sent chills down the barbarians’ spines. They felt the magic behind the greeting as it washed over them. The three men then peered to the side of the fire as a small figure shuffled into view.

The Mystic barely reach four and a half feet. If she stood up straight, she

would probably reach five, but her age prevented such posture. Though each man knew she was centuries old, she resembled a woman in her ninetieth winter of life, hunched over with the ravages of time. She wore a heavy fur blanket that looked like it would crush her fragile bones and leaned on an odd cane. It was a piece of blue wood with four white gems inset up its front. The top was smooth and rounded, making for a more comfortable grip, while the bottom was set with a blunt piece of white rock. The walking stick no doubt held some sort of magic.

Long white hair fell from her head, ending just inches from reaching the floor. So many wrinkles decorated her face that barely a smooth area was discernable. Boney hands, weak arms and a slow walk showed them that she was months, if not days away from passing from this world. But then again, she had always appeared as such. Though ancient, her skin held a rich amber hue and her eyes held a lustrous green that told anyone gazing into the woman's eyes that she indeed held power and still a fair amount of strength. Vok and Noom, seeing her for the first time, stared in wonder and amazement. Their eyes told them she was a decrepit, useless old woman, but their hearts shouted that she could best even the largest creature of the plains.

"Sit," she said and slowly made her way over to the shelf that held the clay pots. As she moved, her cloak opened slightly and Vok saw that she wore nothing underneath. She carried a little weight on her body and it sagged in certain places. Despite himself, he gave a disgusted look. Nudity was part of everyday life of the tribe but seeing it on one so old and aged just seemed... vulgar.

"Respect!" Fend whispered harshly, seeing the look on his son's face. Vok quickly wiped the expression from his face and looked down in shame. He knew better.

"Do not blame your young one," the Mystic said. The three men turned to face her. She was halfway across the room, standing close to the roaring fire. She couldn't possibly hear them, could she? The men thought to themselves. "Though he has seen the flesh of a woman," she continued, "he has yet to experience the intimate touch of one. Isn't that right, young Fist?"

Vok's mouth dropped open. Then it closed as his cheeks reddened to the color of blood. Noom held back a deep laugh, as did Fend. The three men then sat in silence and waited for their host.

"So you wish to know how the True Fists will fare during the Great Hunt," she stated.

"Yes," Fend replied although he knew it had not been a question.

"Let us see what the fates decree."

She took a handful of blue powder out of one of the clay bowls and came towards the fire. She threw out her arm when she came near and the particles flew from her fingertips. Sparks of blue, green and yellow danced in the air when the grains reached the flames. The Mystic then started to chant and raised her arms high. She moved back and forth, like a snake dancing before its prey, mesmerizing it before it strikes. It looked as though she would fall over but stayed on her feet as her voice reached its peak. The flames danced wildly as if affected by colliding gusts of wind. Magic and power filled the area. The barbarians shielded their eyes from the sudden burst of light as the flames roared, hitting the ceiling. Vok and Noom scrambled away from the flames but Fend remained, knowing that he would be safe. He had seen this ritual many times and knew what would come. Still, he felt the intense heat on his skin and swore to the gods that his flesh was melting, but no harm befell him or the others. When it seemed that the entire cave would crumble around them, everything suddenly stopped.

The fire died down, reduced to half its original strength. The heat disappeared, replaced by a cool air that chilled the sweat on their skin. The Mystic had ceased her chanting and was looking calmly upon the trio of concerned warriors.

“The Great Hunt will produce a plentiful bounty for the warriors of the True Fists,” she said. “But use caution for the great stags are restless this season and death waits for any that are careless. Also take care through the narrow passages for the ice lions hunger.” She spoke a few minutes more, speaking of the weather and harsh tundra. Though they listened to each word, the pertinent information had been in the first few sentences. Every man already knew how the air and ground would be for it was the same every year: cold and icy.

“Hunt well and be safe,” the Mystic said, concluding her session with the warriors of the True Fists tribe.

And that was it, almost four days of travel for a few words that predicted the fate of the tribe’s success during the Great Hunt. Fend took in the Mystic’s words and knew that someone may die if they were not respectful of their prey. He also made sure to watch out for the rirraled, the ice lions the Mystic spoke of. They were large white beasts with claws like swords and a roar that could freeze a man solid in fear. The Mystic’s prediction was positive, but it also carried caution. The barbarians would tread carefully this season and take nothing for granted. But first, they needed to return and repeat what they had leaned to their tribe and chieftain.

The warriors stood and the Mystic walked in front of them. She chanted and raised her hands over each man. Vok and Noom shifted nervously for they

could feel magic being laid upon them, but Fend had told them before coming that it was just a blessing bestowed upon each man and the tribe. The two young men still looked nervous. Fend let them sweat a little. He just smiled and offered words of gratitude to the Mystic, thanking the woman for her blessing.

He was only halfway through when the Mystic suddenly arched her back and shouted. She tilted back so quickly, Fend swore her spine had snapped. Whether she was in pain or ecstasy, the men could not tell. Vok and Noom leaped back in surprise, hands going to weapons. Fend was about to do the same when the Mystic's hand shot out and took hold of his arm. Her nails dug into his flesh, drawing blood. Her grip was so strong it felt like the bones in his arm would soon be crushed if she didn't let go. He hissed in pain, unsure of what to do. Then her eyes flashed in green light and her hair rose, dancing wildly around her head and shoulders. Her feet actually left the ground, hovering a few inches above the stone floor. She screamed once more, a sound that split the air like a knife. The barbarians winced as their ears throbbed in pain. It felt like their heads would burst. Then she spoke. Her voice was no longer old and dry, but young and vibrant, but also hollow. It sounded like it was coming from another world, as if an ancient power was speaking through her.

"The ancient bloodlines return, seeking answers from the past. Ancient sins come to light, revealing that they are the last. Only one shall emerge, from the battle to come. Our future lies with them, deciding what we shall become!"

The Mystic then went silent. The glow faded from her eyes. Her hair fell down around her shoulders and her feet came back to the floor. Fend stood motionless as her grip loosened from his arm. Vok and Noom also stood in shocked silence, waiting to see what their old and much wiser guide would do. The only sound came from the fire and Fend's blood as it rolled down his arm and dripped on the floor.

"Mystic?" Fend said.

Her breathing was heavy and her head was down so he could not see into her eyes. Sweat covered her body. He opened his mouth to say her name again, but she suddenly shook and collapsed before he spoke. Fend rushed forward and caught her before she hit the ground. He scooped her up in his large arms. Her skin was as hot the fire.

"Don't just stand there!" Fend said as he turned toward his son and Noom. "Get some water and—"

The Mystic leaned up and whispered into Fend's ear. Then she fell back, eyes closed and breathing shallow. The warrior turned to the others.

"Wait here."

Fend walked away, toward one of the tunnels leading deeper into the

cavern. Vok and Noom just did as they were bade and waited patiently. Their guide disappeared in the darkness. They heard nothing but the crackle of the flames. Almost twenty minutes later, Fend reappeared. The Mystic was nowhere in sight.

“Time to go.” He made for the exit.

“Where is she?” Vok asked, actually concerned for the woman.

“Resting,” Fend replied. “She assured me she will recover and said we need to return home.”

“What about what she said?” Noom asked. “That was a prophecy.”

All three men knew that what they just heard was a foretelling of things to come. The Mystic had just prophesized about a great event that would befall the barbarian tribes. It would effect every man, woman and child of the Crystal Plains, but when was it going to happen? Were they supposed to warn everyone? Never had she had a vision such as the one she just shared. Prophecies usually involved warring among the tribes or the danger of creatures living in the nearby areas, like the frost giants of the Great Ice or the arctic worms near God’s Axe Gorge. They had also never been told in such a violent and expressive manner.

“It was,” Fend said, agreeing with Noom, “but she was unable to explain anything else before sleep took her and we cannot wait for her to recover. We must return to the tribe and tell Korgoth, and Korgoth alone, what was said to us this day.”

“Do you think he will be able to decipher the meaning?” Vok asked.

“If anyone can,” Fend said with hope, “it will be our chieftain.”

The trio left the cave and made their way down the mountain. Questions and anxiety sat deep within their hearts as they carefully navigated the slopes. Fend thought about his children and what the coming battle the Mystic spoke of would mean for them. Vok was more curious than he was worried, wondering just how soon the war would come. Noom, whose mind was always busy with every aspect of life, just filed away what he had heard in the back of his mind. It was another bit of information he would get to eventually. Now his only focus was on not falling down the mountain, which was why he never heard the whoosh of the axes until they slammed into his shoulders.

Fend managed to shout out a warning just before they hit, but the young warrior never had a chance. Barbarians usually had a type of sixth sense that warned them of danger. Many were born with it, but in others, it took years, sometimes decades, to develop. Unfortunately for Noom, he was one of the latter.

One blade sunk into his shoulder, cleanly slicing through his collarbone.

The other hit closer to Noom's head, clipping his ear and sinking into his flesh where his neck met his shoulder. Both blades sunk in deep and hit with the force of an avalanche. Blood flew into the air and sprayed the mountainside. He managed a single shout of pain then his grip was torn from the rock and he tumbled down the mountain.

"Noom!" Vok shouted as he watched his friend's lifeless body slam into the jagged rocks. He never saw where the body stopped for his father's voice snapped his head around.

"Down!" Fend said and pulled his son behind a portion of rock just above their heads. Another throwing axe hit the edge and bounced off, falling to the slopes below. Pieces of stone followed the weapon below.

Fend peaked around the overhang and saw three men, racing down the slopes towards them. He immediately recognized Gore, leading the charge. The other two were the men that had been with him near the Mystic's lair. Now that they were well away from Blade Peak, no decree held them back from murdering their hated rivals.

"Wild Blades!" Vok said, peering around Fend's shoulder. He tore his sword from his back and prepared to meet the charge, but his father's arm came out and held him steady. He eyed the Blades again and made sure they were out of throwing weapons. Satisfied they were, he turned to his son.

"No," he said. "Go. Get down the mountain and get to the tribe."

"What?" Vok said incredulously. "I'm not afraid of battle and will not leave you alone."

"I know you do not fear the Blades and I would want no one else by my side," Fend said, "but Korgoth needs to hear the prophecy. If we should fail, it will be lost. He needs to know. I will hold them off, giving you enough time to get away."

"But father, I—"

"Please, son," Fend pleaded. "This is more important than any fight you will have. I dare say this will be the most important task of your life, and mine."

Vok looked into his father's eyes knowing that if he left him alone to face three hardened barbarians, it would be last time he saw him. He did not want to leave him to be slaughtered, but the urgency in his father's voice left no doubt in his mind that the prophecy was more important than his father's life. Noom was already dead and if all three of them perished then all knowledge of what they had learned would be lost.

"May the gods greet you with raised steel," Vok said with a voice full of sorrow.

“And true fists,” Fend said, finishing the common saying among the True Fists just before going into battle. Then Fend hugged his son and sent him down the slopes. He watched him go for only a few seconds then drew his own sword and readied himself for his final battle.

He peaked around the overhang again. The Blades were only seconds away from reaching him, but then he noticed that only Gore and one other were in sight. The other one had disappeared. Then the back of his neck tingled.

Fend spun without thinking, bringing his sword around in a vicious swing. The blade that had been speeding toward his back collided with his own and slammed into the rock wall, sending sparks and shards of rock flying to the air. The backstabbing barbarian, a large man wearing brown hide armor and sporting a short scraggly beard, flexed his muscles and pulled his arms back. The blade slid against metal and rock, sending a screeching noise through the air. Fend gritted his teeth against the sound and went to jab his sword forward, but heard the approach of the other two Wild Blades behind him.

He spun back, swinging his blade around. Gore had reached him first but jumped back just out of range. The blade slammed into the wall, chipping the stone. He drew his sword back and turned his head, watching as the backstabbing barbarian came in, matching Gore’s cautious approach.

“You are done, Fist,” Gore teased and readied his sword for a killing strike.

Fend turned his head side to side, eyeing each opponent. Luckily, the ledge he stood on only allowed for one opponent on each side. The third Blade was out of the battle for the time being, but Fend caught him heading to the ledge below. He was going to climb up the wall and though he would be extremely vulnerable if he came over, Fend knew his two companions would keep him busy long enough for the man to score a blow.

Knowing he was out of options, Fend turned to the barbarian that had tried to stab him in the back and charged. He shouted a battle cry, roaring as loud as he could, as he quickly closed the gap. The Wild Blade looked a bit rattled by the sudden shout and swung clumsily. The blade still managed to take Fend in the shoulder but he pushed through the pain and barreled into the man.

The two fell from the ledge and hit the slopes. Fend made sure to position the Wild Blade below him. When they hit, he was shielded from the blunt of the impact. The man below him grunted in pain as the air in his lungs was blasted from his body. Sharp rocks also cut through his armor and dug into his flesh. He looked at Fend with murderous eyes and did his best to heave him to the side but he was still trying to regain his breath and was no match for Fend’s strength.

Surprisingly, they didn’t roll down the hill and lay wrestling on the rough

ground. Fend heard the approach of Gore and the other barbarian and tried to pull the man to the side but he kept leaning the opposite way. Knowing he only had seconds to spare, Fend brought his head down, slamming it into the barbarian's nose. There was a loud crack, a scream of pain and a shower of blood. The barbarian's struggle paused for just an instance, but it was long enough.

Fend took hold of the man's cloak and pulled with all his might. The two pitched to the side and started rolling down the hill. Sharp rocks cut into both men, shredding their clothing and armor and drawing sharp cries of pain. The world spun around the men and their weapons went flying. The ground suddenly disappeared from beneath them but then came back with a vengeance, slamming into their bodies with enough force to break bones. Fend felt the bone in his leg snap and let out a shout of pain. He heard the Wild Blade shout out as well, but in greater agony.

What seemed like hours was actually only half a minute when they came to rest on a level area of rock. Fend's entire body throbbed and his leg felt like a blade had sliced through it. He felt dozens of small cuts on his body and his face felt as though ten men had pummeled him, but he quickly gained his senses and sat up, knowing that his pursers would be quick to give chase. He looked over and saw the Wild Blade lying on the ground, seething in agony. His right foot sat at a sickening angle and his right arm looked broken in three different places. Regardless of the injuries, the man was struggling to rise. Fend then looked up and saw Gore and the other Blade coming down the mountain. They were only a few breaths from reaching him.

He took in his surroundings and saw a sword just a few feet from him. He rolled to his feet and grabbed the blade, not knowing or caring if it belonged to him or his enemy. With a broken leg, he knew he would not be able to get away, so before the two healthy Blades reached him, he took the blade and rammed it through the chest of the wounded barbarian. The man screamed, shook once and lay still. Fend ripped the blade free and readied to meet the other two.

Gore came in full force with the speed of his descent behind him. His sword came down in a thunderous chop, aiming right for Fend's head. Instead of blocking the swing because he knew the parry could cripple him, Fend threw himself to the side. Gore's jagged blade slammed into the ground, actually cracking the stone. Luckily for Fend, the wild man's momentum pushed him forward, many paces away from his intended target, almost throwing him down the mountain. Gore had to turn and trek back up the slope. Fend hissed in pain as he put weight on his leg, but he had no time for recovery for the other

barbarian was on him.

The large sword came at his injured leg. The Wild Blade was trying to cripple him further, but Fend parried and threw the weapon back. He then brought his sword down, hoping his opponent would continue forward, and he did, but the shift in weight and his injured leg put Fend off balance and his attack came up short. His opponent took advantage and came around with his sword, slicing Fend across the back of the shoulder. He hissed in pain and dropped low. The Wild Blade reversed his grip and brought his sword up, but Fend moved in close, cutting off the attack, and buried his shoulder into the man's gut. The Blade doubled over Fend's back, losing his breath. Fend jabbed his sword in, opening a long wound on the man's thigh then he shouldered him away, gaining some room. The man staggered back, but Fend could not capitalize on the maneuver for Gore was upon him.

Fend spun, but because of his leg, his movement was slow and Gore saw it coming. He easily ducked the blade and as it passed overhead, he jabbed his sword in, hitting Fend in the side, slicing open his flesh. He reversed his swing and tried to open the wound more, but Fend somehow managed to knock the sword away and shuffle to the side. He made a desperate jab at Gore's head but the large man ducked and came back in.

The True Fist tribesman saw his death then for as Gore leaped forward, so did his companion. Fend could not hope to parry both attacks and with his wounded leg, he knew he could not move away. He didn't bother to try to deflect the attacks for he had served his purpose and delayed the Blades long enough for his son to get clear. As the blades entered him—one his stomach, the other his chest—he thrust his blade at Gore's neck. Unfortunately, the large man must have sensed his intentions because he avoided the blade, but it did stick him in the shoulder, drawing blood.

The vicious man didn't make a sound. He only yanked his sword down, tearing open Fend's stomach. The other man jerked his arm sideways, opening Fend's chest and tearing through the symbol of his tribe—a raised fist set in front of a starburst. The True Fist held back a shout of pain, not wanting to give his enemies the satisfaction. He only dropped to his knees. The sword he held clattered to the ground next to him.

Son, he thought to himself, carry the message well.

"You Fists are such pests," he heard Gore say, though the voice sounded far away. The darkness was already filling the edges of his vision.

"Even dead you are annoying."

The man reared back and swung his sword. Fend vaguely felt the blade tearing through his neck. Then he felt nothing at all.



Vok quickly made his way down the mountain, not looking back. He knew his father was gone, but would not let his sacrifice, or Noom's, be in vain. He had to deliver the prophecy to his chieftain. Then they would prepare for war and cleanse the Crystal Plains, once and for all, of the murderous Wild Blades. It had been a long time since one tribe had warred against another, but this act of malevolence could not go unpunished. To attack one tribe after their meeting with the Mystic was unheard of. It simply was not done. The Blades had to have been planning this for some time.

Thoughts of revenge and justice filled his mind as he came closer to the plains. He reached a wide area of large rock and was just about to travel between two huge boulders when something made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. It had only been a few months since he had developed his danger sense, but his father had drilled into his mind that a barbarian never doubted his instincts. Therefore, when his instincts told him to duck, he listened.

An axe whistled by just over his head and slammed into the boulder to his left. Vok came to his full height and pulled his weapon from his back. He twisted and raised his sword in a defensive position. The axe followed him and banged into his raised blade. He threw it to the side and took a step back.

A barbarian clad in black hide armor studded with metal plates stood before him. A large axe, painted with red and black symbols, sat in his hands. He sported a large bushy black beard and a nasty scar decorated the right side of his face, traveling over his bald head. He wore a crooked smile and squinted in the sunlight.

Vok should have turned and ran, but seeing another Wild Blade, knowing that they had set up a lookout should someone escape, filled his mind with anger. He yelled out in rage and charged.

The older, more experienced Wild Blade met the young True Fist with his axe, but to both men's surprise, the strength behind Vok's swing stopped the man cold. The young barbarian was not one to let an opportunity fade and swung again. This time, the Wild Blade staggered back, grunting as painful vibrations traveled up his arms. He went to return the shocking attack, but to his surprise, Vok was quicker and caused him to go on the defensive. Each swing caused the Wild Blade to raise his axe to prevent from being struck by the amazingly quick sword.

Vok couldn't explain what was happening. He was moving faster, swinging harder and actually moving his larger opponent backwards. Energy flooded his

body and he felt none of the exhaustion or weariness that would come from fighting with such ferocity. He felt his arms grow and his body expand as it filled with power. The edge of his vision started to cloud with red and all thoughts left his mind, including the mission his father had bestowed upon him. The only thing he wanted now, the only thing that mattered, was the death of the man in front of him.

His blade was a whirlwind of metal. It jabbed in and out of the older barbarian's defenses. To the Wild Blade's credit, the man managed to hold Vok at bay and avoid being struck for the first few moments of battle, but Vok's vicious attacks eventually made it through. Wounds opened on the man's shoulders, chest and arms. Blood flowed down his body as Vok continued his savage assault. The Blade managed a few offensive maneuvers and his axe connected with Vok's arm, opening a nasty gash, but Vok felt nothing—no pain, no discomfort, no exhaustion. He did not even feel the blood running down his arm. The only thing he felt was anger, and rage.

Unfortunately, that uncontrollable anger was so complete, so overpowering, that he failed to feel the tingling on the back of his neck. A second Wild Blade appeared from behind him, coming out from a nearby boulder. He lowered his sword and ran straight for Vok's back. The young warrior never felt the blade enter just below his lung until it burst through his stomach.

The adrenaline and vigor drained from his body as he looked down and saw the blade sticking out from his stomach. Horror filled him as he saw blood, his blood, coating the metal. The Wild Blade in front of him only growled in agitation and swung his axe in a powerful chop. The blade split Vok's chest down the middle, actually coming to rest on the sword blade of his companion. Vok tried to cry out but only blood erupted from his mouth. As the blades were torn from his body and life left him, he wondered what happened. Then the pain melted away and darkness took him.



Gore walked up and surveyed the body of the young Fist tribesman. Then he looked to his men. One sported a gash in his leg that the older Fist had given him and the other was decorated with a handful of wounds that the young one had doled out. One had died, but if not for Bulgrim, they would have lost a second. It was an inexcusable loss of life considering it had been five against three and one had been taken one by surprise.

"I should kill all of you," he growled. The men around him actually took a step back, knowing that the man might very well carry through with the threat,

but Gore calmed himself. What they had overheard the Mystic prophesize was well worth more than one dead tribesman, so Gore looked away from the area and started down the mountain.

“What about Hondrick?” Bulgrim asked. Barbarians of all the tribes usually took their dead back to their tribe, to be honored and given a respectful burial, but Gore obviously didn’t feel like his tribesmen deserved honor.

“The mountain’s inhabitants will take care of him,” he said. “We have more important matters to attend to.”

Gore wanted to get back to the tribe as soon as possible and tell Brock, his chieftain, about the prophecy. Whatever the meaning, whatever was about to befall the tribes, Gore wanted to make sure that the Wild Blades were prepared and could benefit. The other tribes, including the True Fists, could fall off the face of Terrial for all he cared. All that mattered was that the Blades thrived and became the most powerful clan.

The four men made their way down the mountain and across the Crystal Plains. It usually took almost six days of travel to reach their home from the base of Blade Peak, but Gore planned to push the men to make the journey in four.

Ice and snow still covered much of the terrain but large patches of earth were visible and more were emerging from beneath the frozen blanket every day though the Plains would never fully be empty of its icy covers. Grass was already growing, flowers and bushes were blooming and the bundles of trees that dotted the landscape were alive and thriving. The rivers that flowed through the Plains were full and raging throughout the land. Every year it appeared they would spill over their banks for the melting snow and ice from the mountains constantly fed the waters, but the waters always remained just below the shorelines. The dozens of small streams that ran from the rivers were also flowing quickly over the land, like winding veins over a man’s arm, and they were full of silverback fish. Animals were out frolicking among the brush, grazing in tufts of greenery or lazily lounging in the sun. The Wild Blades even saw many herds of rehni, the stags they hunted during the Great Hunt, wondering the open country. Soon, the Great Hunt would begin and they would be running after the large animals instead of away from them. How they all wished they could drive their blades into the beasts, feast on their delicious meat and warm themselves under their thick coats, but at the moment, they had a more important mission.

They reached the encampment well into the night. The Wild Blades camp rested on a slightly sloped area within an outcropping of rock. During the day, the sloped area allowed them to see any animal or man coming towards their

camp from a few miles away. It was a well defensible position with the Ice Run River just a few hundred yards to the southeast, the White Rock Mountains to their backs and a large copse of trees to the north. Any wishing to attack would have to come from the front of the camp, though if a large enough force amassed, the Blades would be forced to retreat into the mountains, but no tribe had ever been able to match the Blades in size and power, except the True Fists.

As the four men neared the camp, a couple of sentries appeared, emerging from the darkness like ghosts. They saw the look on Gore's face and melted back into the shadows, thankful that he had not assaulted them.

Their lungs burns, their muscles ached and on two of the men, blood flowed. The man Vok had battled struggled to breathe but managed to follow Gore deeper into the camp. The one that Fend had wounded collapsed in a heap, his leg saturated with blood. The gash had opened wider and the other men worried he may not make it through the night, but Gore just continued without a second glance. Luckily, the sentries reappeared to lend aid.

Hundreds of torches sat on wooden posts and small fires were scattered around the ground, burning low. The area was bathed in glowing firelight and the nearby trees were painted with an orange glow. A few men patrolled the area but none gave Gore a second glance. Hundreds of tents and huts sat scattered over the area. They were constructed with a mixture of pelts, hide, furs, skins, wood and in some instances, stone. Tall wooden poles, strong rope and columns carved from rock made up the support structure of each dwelling. Most were meant for one or two inhabitants, but others were larger, housing up to a dozen or so barbarians. Each one was full of heavy blankets, crude furniture and simple tools. Gore walked by each one, making his way toward the rear of the encampment. Almost every tent he passed resonated with loud snores or low grumbling for it was late and his people were deep in their dreams. He held no worries that his chieftain would be asleep for the man never seemed to sleep. He was always awake, making plans to bring greater glory and power to his tribe.

The chieftain's home would have easily fit thirty barbarians comfortably and sat in the rear of the camp, against the base of the mountains. It was covered with the skins of the largest rehni that they had killed over the years, the hides of others creatures the chieftain had defeated and a black piece of fabric that was painted with red symbols symbolizing strength, courage and power. Bones belonging to other dangerous beasts of the Plains were sewn into certain areas of the structure, showing all that looked upon it that a great warrior lay within. Two rirraled skulls, one on each side of the entrance, sat on the ground with

a low fire burning within each one. Gore remembered the beasts well for they had foolishly attacked Brock when the tribe had journeyed through one of the narrow passages during a hunt two years previous. The powerful man had killed the beasts himself, one with his bare hands. He cleared his mind and looked from the flames held within each lion's mouth to the entrance before him.

There were no sentries for every tribesman knew that Brock did not need them. He could handle any threat that entered his domain. Only two wide curtains made from the skin of an isteraz covered the opening. Each was painted with deep red symbols and a row of ice blue spikes, the heated protrusions the worms used to burrow through the hard icy ground, sat on each one. The worm skin was yet another conquest that the chieftain displayed for all to see. Gore gathered his breath and walked inside.

Dozens of thick blankets made of fur, wool and hide covered the ground, making for a soft, comfortable surface. Torches sat on wooden poles that were set along the edges of the tent. Tables made of stone and wood stood in the large open area in no particular location. Platters of wood and metal that had surely held a feast just hours ago, sat empty on the floor and tabletops. Bones of all shapes and sizes and weapons of various varieties hung from the walls and leaned against the furniture. Gore knew that Brock could wield any weapon with proficiency, even a simple bone club.

Across the room, he saw a large wooden chair decorated with carvings of fearsome beasts and dangerous creatures. Bits of bone lay embedded in the sides and legs, adding to the sinister look. Fur cloaks and blankets lay over the armrests, across the seat and draped over the back. The chair had only held one body during Gore's lifetime and it was his hope that one day it would not only be Brock's seat, but his throne when he ruled over every tribe that called the Crystal Plains home.

And leaning against the chair on the right side, looking as if it would tip the seat over, sat Chasm Cleaver, the giant double-bladed axe that would help Brock mete out his rule. Though one blade was a little smaller than the other, taken as a whole, the weapon was almost as large as Gore.

It shined bright in the torchlight and seemed to glow like the stars. Odd red symbols were etched into the surface of each blade and a handful of notches decorated the edges. A long, sharp spike jutted up from the eye of the axe and a handful of smaller ones sat on the sides. The handle was a shaft of steel, capped with bands of gold. The rest was made of a dark brown wood. A long, narrow gold plate set with blood red studs ran the length of the metal and an hourglass-shaped pommel set with a red gem in the shape of a sphere sat at

the bottom of the weapon. Small symbols were etched all over the weapon's surface, adding to its menacing appearance. Chasm Cleaver was well known throughout the Plains and had taken a fair amount of lives, both human and monster, from the face of Terrial.

"Gore," said a deep, thunderous voice. It sounded like an avalanche and seemed to shake the very walls.

Gore tore his gaze from the mighty weapon and turned to one of the two openings that sat on either side of the large chair. Other rooms sat further back inside the dwelling but no one but the chieftain was allowed access. Standing in the opening to the right of his seat was Brock Axebane, chieftain of the Wild Blades.

He was a mountain of a man, standing seven and a half feet and weighing over three hundred pounds. His legs were tree trunks, his arms columns of stone and his chest seemed as wide as the Plains. The large tent he called home seemed too small to contain the power that radiated from his body. There wasn't an ounce of fat on the man, just pure, corded muscle. His head was bare but for a six-inch long scar that sat on top of the left side of his head. A column of red tattoos running from just below his right eye and ending at the base of his skull decorated the right. Fierce, hard eyes the color of sand looked out from under thick eyebrows. A wide, blunt nose sat just above a long, scraggly black beard that was trimmed to end in a slight point just below his neck. His mouth, barely visible through the coarse fibers, was wide and held a permanent look of contempt and cruelty.

The armor the chieftain wore, at all times it seemed, was a composite of leather, steel and straps. A large piece of domed metal covered his right shoulder and bands of copper decorated his arm. A bracer set with small studs guarded his wrist. His left forearm held a long piece of metal, covered with spikes, and a pointed piece of steel jutted up from around his elbow. Though his chest was bare, for he loved the feel of cold wind against his skin, four straps, two on each, ran over his shoulders and connected to other straps that were attached to his belt. A length of chain connected the bands together, providing extra protection. Leather, studded pieces of hide and belts covered his midsection. Thigh guards, spiked knee guards, leather straps, cloth, steel shin covers and belts protected his legs. None of it had a pattern. It all just looked like it was thrown on, which was a common trait among the Blades, and like every tribesman, each of Brock's shoulders was painted with red symbols depicting strength and power.

The large barbarian looked over his second. The gaze used to cause Gore's heart to freeze and his body to shiver, but he had long become accustomed

to scrutiny and remained as still as stone. The chieftain sat down in his chair, taking in a deep, methodical breath. It seemed like hours before he bade Gore to come forward and speak his mind.

“My chieftain,” Gore began. “I return with the Mystic’s divination. The Great Hunt will be as it was last winter, plentiful and glorious, but she urges caution with the rehni for they are restless.”

“Aren’t we all,” Brock replied. Gore paused, waiting to see if he would continue, but he remained silent.

“She also warns to beware the rirralaed in the narrow passages of the tundra, for they hunger.”

“As do I,” the large man boomed. He looked over Gore and his eyes fell upon the gash in his shoulder. Truthfully, he had noticed it as soon as the man entered. Brock hardly missed anything, which added to his prowess and skill in battle, but the Mystic came first before all else. Now that they had discussed her words, he could see his second had something else to tell him.

“Speak, before I rip the words from you,” he snarled. He was not a patient man and disliked surprises, unless he was the one giving them.

“The True Fists arrived before we left.” He studied Brock’s reaction but the man was as readable as stone. “We stayed and listened. Her guidance was the same as our own, but before the Fists left, she gave a prophecy.”

Gore then recited the prophecy word for word. When he finished, he saw that this time, Brock’s expression was not so difficult to read. He showed confusion, curiosity and excitement. He also wore a look of deep thought, as if he was trying to find something buried deep within his mind.

“No one else must hear this,” Brock said. “What of the Fists?”

“Dead,” Gore responded with a smile. “We took them when they came down the mountain.”

“Who else knows?”

Gore wasn’t sure, but he thought he heard a sense of urgency in Brock’s voice. That was unusual for the chieftain. “Myself and two others, but the Fists took one. The other was wounded during the battle and may not live the night.”

Brock leaned forward very slowly, his eyes boring into Gore.

“Make sure he doesn’t.”

The statement gave Gore pause. It was an odd request, but not completely unheard of. He considered killing the man himself for his failure on the mountain. For a brief moment, he wondered why his chieftain would want the prophecy kept secret, but then the thought left him. Asking questions and thinking too much about Brock’s orders usually got one killed. At least he was not included in the ordered execution.

“Yes, my chieftain,” he finally said.

“Tell no one of this,” Brock then said, looking Gore directly in the eye. “I want those bloodlines. They are the key to our ascendance over the others. Watch God’s Axe Gorge for outsiders. Bring any to me.”

“Outsiders?” Gore asked in confusion.

“GO!” Brock shouted in anger, his tremendous voice echoing throughout the encampment. He rose to his feet so fast that Gore almost fell back in surprise.

“Y–Yes, my chieftain,” he stammered and scrambled to escape the angry man. He left the tent swiftly.

Watch for outsiders? Gore asked himself, as he contemplated the best course of action. There had not been outsiders in the Crystal Plains for many years now and even then, those that entered the land of ice usually died from the cold or ended up in the belly of one of the isteraz that lived near the Gorge. How long should he wait? When would the prophecy come to pass? Questions rolled around in his mind. He surmised that he would be watching the Gorge forever for someone that would never come. Then again, the Mystic had never made such a prophecy and perhaps there was merit to Brock’s actions.

One thing was certain—something monumental was about to happen and he would make sure he was a part of it. It was time for the Wild Blades to take their rightful place as rulers of the Plains, but first, he had to make sure a certain tribesman perished from his wounds. Then he would gather his warriors, make for the Gorge and take any that dared to enter his homeland.

CHAPTER 1

She awoke to the sounds of a rainstorm. Thunder boomed overhead and lightning flashed, turning the darkness behind her eyes bright white, but it quickly faded to black. Through the pounding rain, she made out the sounds of horses galloping over spongy ground. The hammering hooves sounded very close, almost right next to her head, but the storm made it almost impossible to discern exactly how close they were. Strong winds whipped through part of her hair and howled over her ears, almost deafening her. Water dripped down her face and into her nose, making it hard to breathe. A clump of her hair was matted against her face, dulling the stinging water and raging wind. It seemed she had awoken to a world gone wild.

Mileena knew she was on the back of a horse, but before opening her eyes and revealing to her captors that she was awake, she wanted to know exactly what was going on. Unfortunately, the storm raging around her made that difficult. The last thing she remembered was running toward Callobus. Then something hit her in the back and she blacked out. She knew she had been poisoned, but could not understand how. The magic she had cast on herself and Callobus should have shielded them from any sort of toxin. The assassins had been well prepared indeed.

Her body ached and her muscles were sore. The center of her back, right between her shoulder blades, was especially painful, throbbing like someone had pounded on her spine with a club. Whatever the thieves had used was extremely potent for she still felt weak. The constant jostling wasn't helping the way she felt either. To add to the fatigue, her hands were bound behind her back, her feet were tied together and thick leather straps ran across her shoulders, waist and just below her buttocks, holding her down against

something hard, probably a saddle. She kept her eyes closed and felt with the other parts of her body, gathering a mental image of her position.

Everything but her armor and clothes had been taken off her body. Her pouches, daggers and wands were all gone. Her staff was also missing but she would not risk opening her eyes to see if they had taken that as well. Not yet, at least.

She felt the wind against her back. The air flowed over her bruised spine but, surprisingly, that was the only wound marring her flesh. One of the thieves had slashed her down the back during the fight in the forest. The wound was gone as was the one on her arm. Did they heal me? she asked herself. They probably realized if not treated, she could have bled to death. But why keep me alive? Questions rolled around in her head, but she pushed them to the side. There would be time for questions later. Now, she wanted to figure out her surroundings. So once again, she let her other senses take over.

The saddle beneath her was hard and unyielding. Something pointy jabbed into her ribs and stomach with every bump and bounce of the horse. Another hard saddle sat against her left arm and she felt a man sitting there, guiding the horse. Except for an occasional deep breath, he kept silent.

Now that she had her bearings, she had to figure out how to get free, but doing that on a galloping horse was dangerous. If she dropped to the ground, the fall could prove fatal. Not that she had to worry about falling. She slowly tested the strength of her bounds and realized that she was caught until they let her up. She would have to wait until they stumbled to make her move. Until then, she did her best to calm her nerves and plot a way to escape.

As she lay there, shifting uncontrollably, her thoughts turned to Callobus. She hoped he was still alive for she had no idea how the battle had ended. At the speed in which her captors were traveling and the fact they were doing so in a raging storm, she guessed he was alive and that he was on their tail. She knew he would stop at nothing to retrieve her, but her hope suddenly turned to dread as she realized that now, with her gone and Dragonsbane missing, he was truly alone. There was nothing to combat his rage.

What would happen to him? Would the rage take control? What if he killed someone? Mileena knew that if Callobus raged and killed an innocent person, he would never forgive himself. She had always been there to make sure he kept a level head, but now she was gone, and he was alone to combat his curse. He was now in the exact situation that he had feared the most—without someone or something to help combat his curse.

You can do it, she thought to herself. She knew he was strong and had a will of iron, but it was his anger that was unpredictable. If something made him

furious, like the abduction of his lover for instance, he could lose control and go on a killing spree. Please, she thought to herself, be strong. Then another thought entered her mind.

What of Erot? She had not seen him during the battle. Hopefully, he had survived as well and maybe he was with Callobus, helping him to track the thieves and calming his fears. If anyone on all of Terrial could help with the rage, it would be him. With the knowledge in his head, he would have no trouble tracking the assassins over the muddy land.

A sudden jolt threw the concerns from her head and her head flopped onto the horse's rump. She almost held her head back from hitting the animal's skin but knew she had to act as if she was still unconscious if she wanted to learn anything when they stopped. It was a good thing she had for she felt the thief shift in his saddle. It sounded like he was turning around to check on her. When she heard him turn around, she let loose a breath she didn't know she was holding.

After another ten minutes of hard riding and lousy weather, the rain slowed to a light drizzle. Thunder boomed but it was many miles in the distance. It seemed that they had ridden out of the storm. The assassins continued riding for another hour but slowed to a trot shortly after. Eventually, even thieves had to rest, but it appeared that it were the horses that caused them to stop.

Mileena felt the horse move again and heard the men stretching their limbs and the horses' heavy breathing. The one she rode came to a stop and the man she traveled with spoke.

"The horses need to rest," he said. His voice was like velvet, soft with deep tones, but it carried a certain authority.

"Naturally," came the response. "Set up a camp. I think we're far enough away by now, but we leave at first light. The sooner she's out of our hands, the better."

The man did not speak like a ruthless assassin. His voice held a humorous tone, as if he was smiling when he spoke. It also held a certain cultural accent, indicating he was well educated, but behind the witty tones and clear punctuation, a professional killer lurked. This man was dangerous and she had to be cautious. For some reason it reminded her of Killian. At least she knew who was in charge.

"And her?"

"She goes in my tent," the leader said. "I have questions for her, although I don't expect any answers. Oh, and you can open your eyes now."

Mileena knew he had directed the last sentence toward her for it sounded like he had leaned over to get closer to her ear.

“We know you’re awake, for some time now. The small dose of poison doesn’t last *that* long, though I see it does leave a nasty bruise.”

Mileena debated on pretending as if she were still unconscious but knew that it would be pointless and probably lead to something unpleasant. Though she didn’t want to give them even the slightest satisfaction or control, she realized she could learn more about the men with her eyes open, so she did just that and tilted her head up. Unfortunately, all she saw was the bottom of a pair of black boots. The straps across her shoulders prevented her from raising her head.

“Unstrap our guest,” the leader said.

The man in the saddle dismounted. First, he untied her legs so she could walk. For a split second, Mileena thought about kicking out in hopes of hitting his face, but thought better of it. That would definitely have unpleasant repercussions. Then he went about undoing the straps that held her down. He was neither rough nor gentle. He moved like a man that had a simple job in front of him. When the straps came loose, he guided Mileena down to the ground. Her feet hit soft earth and slippery mud. She stretched her back to work out the soreness that comes from hours of being bent over a rough saddle. She felt the bruises up and down her spine and on her stomach and ribs.

“Now then, isn’t that better?”

Mileena moved the wet hair from her face and looked at the leader. It was the first time she had actually seen his face for when the thieves had attacked in the library they had been wearing hoods and masks of black cloth. Even in the Spindlewood, she had not seen him for he had been fighting someone else.

If not for the current situation, she would have found the man handsome. He had deep brown eyes, a simple nose and full lips. Sharp cheekbones complimented his broad chin and his dark hair held a healthy shine. Only a small scar, just above his right eye, splitting his eyebrow in two, marred his face. He was not very tall, standing just an inch or so over Mileena. Dark leather armor, accented with red, covered his entire body and two thick straps crossed his chest, forming an X. She saw a handful of daggers, a longsword, a small crossbow and a whip. She did not need to be attuned to magic to know that almost everything he wore was saturated in mystical energies, including the black cloak that hung from his shoulders.

After studying the assassin leader and the items he carried, Mileena turned and looked at the man that had been riding with her. He was a good four or five inches shorter than Mileena but carried much more muscle than his companion. She immediately noticed his flat nose. It looked like it had been broken many times. Then his piercing blue eyes caught her as she studied the

rest of him.

Black leathers covered him as they did the leader but they hung a little loose, as if the clothing was a size too large, but she immediately felt an aura of protective magic surrounding the man and knew that regardless of the loose armor, he would be incredibly difficult to wound. Metal bracers sat on his forearms and a handful of daggers sat on his belt, arms and legs. Then her gaze fell onto a nasty looking shortsword with a serrated edge, but what really caught her eye was the vest the man wore and the hundreds of eyes etched into it. She had heard of magical items such as the one he wore. A vest of seeing it was sometimes called. The eyes allowed the wearer to see all around them, making them immune to any form of sneak attack. She made certain to make a mental note of *that* little aspect.

She peered around at the other men and saw they all wore dark leather armor. They all carried multiple daggers and a crossbow but she saw that each man had a signature weapon. One, looking to be a half-elf, carried a scimitar while another wielded a cutlass. The strangest weapon she noticed was a pair of hand scythes that a tall thief had strapped to his belt. An odd weapon to carry for an assassin, she thought. Even from where she stood, she could feel the magic that covered each thief. They were well armored, well equipped and well trained.

The men were busy setting up small tents and gathering their belongings from the horses, but they still watched her as she stood in front of their leader. Mileena caught the cruel eye of the man that had sliced her down the back. She also noticed another one, the one she had kicked between the legs, peering at her with anger. Both men's looks told her that they would deliver to her much pain should they have the chance.

"Seen enough?" the leader asked. Mileena turned back to face him. He had spoken as if he knew exactly what she was doing, which was memorizing each man and his belongings. Mileena just stood in silence. One thing that bothered her was that she had not seen her staff. Had they left it behind?

"This should be interesting," said the man from behind her. Mileena was unsure to what he was referring. The leader just gave his companion a smirk and a raised eyebrow.

"Go to sleep," the leader said with irritation. The other man put on a smile and led his horse off to the side, where he preceded to make camp. Mileena stood still and watched him go.

"Follow me, if you please."

Mileena turned and saw the leader was speaking to her. He walked a few steps away and waited for her to follow. She thought about refusing but didn't

see what she could gain by doing so, so followed behind him. He stopped a few yards away from the others and turned to face her. Then he just stood, as if expecting something. If he thinks I'm going to make his damned tent, Mileena thought to herself, he has another thing coming!

Just when she thought he would say something, he reached into a pouch at his side and withdrew a small object. It was a figurine carved in the shape of a tent. He looked at Mileena, smiled, and threw the model to the ground without taking his eyes off her. He spoke a word of power and Mileena felt magic surge into the area. An orange mist started seeping from the figurine and in seconds, it expanded to the size of a large carriage. Then a gust of wind blew the mist away and a large tent stood in front of her. She looked back at the other men, working to make their own tents, but they kept their eyes on their work. They had probably seen this before. She turned back to study the housing.

It was made of tanned leather and was built like a large box, with thick wooden poles at each side. It appeared large enough to fit two or three people comfortably but any more than that and it would be cramped. The roof was raised to a point, also supported with wooden shafts. At the very center sat a small black flag, fluttering in the wind. Two flaps hung closed so she could not see inside but she knew it would be filled with elegant rugs, thick blankets and comfortable furniture. She was familiar with the magical figurines that could expand and create interesting domiciles, but had never seen one before.

"After you," he said and pulled back one of the thick flaps. Mileena narrowed her eyes and remained where she stood. She did not like the look of this for she knew well enough what thieves did to their female prisoners. After the liberation of Swordstar, she had heard from the women of the rapes the thieves had committed. If he planned what she thought he planned, she would fight until her very last breath.

"I assure you," he said in a serious voice, sensing her thoughts, "I mean you no harm. Well, at least no *more* harm. While in my care, no man shall violate you. That is not permitted under my command."

Mileena still looked skeptical, but strangely, believed his words. She turned and saw the others were no longer paying her or their commander any attention. When she turned back, the man was still holding the flap open. Reluctantly, she walked forward, never taking her eyes from him until she entered the tent.

Inside was just as she thought it would be. Thick rugs, furs, blankets and a few pieces of furniture—two chairs, a small table and chest—were spread throughout the room. Candles burned in candelabras that sat on silver poles, bathing the room in golden light. The walls were plain, absent of any decoration.

She looked up and saw the pointed ceiling, twelve feet overhead, braced by the large wooden beams. It was cozy but she did not look at it as somewhere to relax. This was her prison and her jailer's home.

"Make yourself at—"

Mileena kicked back when she heard him enter, almost catching him in the stomach, but he moved with lightning quick reflexes. It was almost it he had expected her attack. She wasn't planning on running for she knew she wouldn't get far with her magic drained and the others right outside. She just hoped to give him a reminder that she would not be easily subdued. Unfortunately, he had been ready for her.

He dodged to the side as her foot came back. Before her leg fell, he caught her foot at twisted. She hissed in pain as she was thrown off balance. Then she fell, landing on her backside. Luckily, the floor was well padded. She looked up and saw him standing, just out of range of her feet, with a smug look. How she wished to blast it from his face.

"Finished?" he asked with expected annoyance.

"Hardly," Mileena replied.

"It speaks!" he responded with sarcasm. He walked into the tent, making sure to give his guest a wide berth. Mileena just eyed him and turned her body to follow his movements.

He moved to the back of the tent. The flap behind Mileena was closed but there was nothing preventing her from standing and running out, except for the thieves waiting outside, and the assassin leader knew it. The fact that he showed no concern infuriated Mileena because he seemed to be flaunting his control over her.

"Are you hungry?" he asked and opened the large chest that sat in the room. He reached in and pulled out a large sack. Then he started pulling cheeses, breads, fruits, bottles of wine and water, and dried meat from within. He set a portion on a large plate he had also pulled from the bag and slid it over toward her. Mileena eyed it hungrily but made no move to pull the plate to her. She just sat and glared at the assassin.

"You really should eat something," he said, taking a bite out of a piece of meat and a drink of deep red wine. "We have quite a journey ahead of us."

"And where are we going?" Mileena knew she could not stay silent forever and wanted to gather as much information as possible so after she escaped she could tell Callobus what was going on. Since the assassin seemed in a talkative mood, she obliged him.

"So, in the mood for conversation now are we? Tell you what, you eat, and I may give you few tidbits."

Mileena glared at him again. He had her once more, asserting his power over his prisoner. How she hated manipulative men!

She slowly reached for the plate and dragged it over. Her stomach growled loudly, filling the room. She didn't realize how hungry she was and silently cursed her body for betraying her, for giving the assassin something else to use. But he just stayed silent—with a smile—and chewed on his food. About halfway through the meal, he decided to speak.

"I'm sure you have many questions, as do I, so I'll make you a deal."

"I thought we already made one," she said, motioning to the food that was in her hand. He just smiled.

"I said maybe. Besides, eating feeds the mind and makes one more alert. Now that you have something in your stomach, which is probably very happy at the moment, we can discuss the current situation."

"I don't see much to discuss, except where you're taking me."

Mileena had a hunch that they were heading to Lornstone, the town on the outskirts of the Crystal Plains, but wanted the suspicion confirmed. She also knew that the assassins were taking her to Bazmal. The man wanted her alive for some reason. That was another question that rolled around in her mind. Why did he want her alive? What was he planning? Did he know that she had some kind of control over Callobus? She figured the answer to the last question was yes for the assassins had probably been following them for some time and had somehow seen what happened in the goblin cave. But her main concern was what the evil man was planning. Whatever it was, it did not bode well for her or Callobus.

"South," the leader responded.

"South?" Mileena asked with confusion.

"South," the man repeated.

"So we're just going to travel south until we...what? Walk off the face of Terrial."

"No, no, no," he said with a raised finger. "My turn."

The man sat in silence for a few moments, just quietly watching her. The gaze unnerved Mileena but she was not going to squirm and matched his stare with one of her own.

"Mileena," he suddenly said. She wasn't surprised that he knew her name for he was a paid assassin and Bazmal probably told him all about his intended targets. "Where are you from?" The question was unexpected. Perhaps Bazmal hadn't told the man everything.

"You mean you don't know?" she said with a mocking smile. "I would have thought Bazmal told you everything about us." She watched for his reaction to

the name of his employer, but his expression never changed. Perhaps she had spoken about the man too soon.

“Bazmal?” he asked in confusion. “Is that someone’s name?”

“So do you always lie to your...guests?”

“Sorry, my dear, but I have never heard of anyone by that name.”

“I’m sure you haven’t,” she said, her voice dripping sarcasm. “So how much did he pay you to follow us? Was it enough to cover your men we killed?”

If the comment angered him, he did not show it. He just sat in silence, waiting for the triumphant look to leave Mileena’s face. When it didn’t, he just took a deep breath.

“Do you wish to know if Callobus is still alive?”

That question shot a sliver of fear through her heart. She felt her eyes widen but did her best to correct the expression. The man must have seen it for he leaned back in victory, the smug look returning.

“I can play that game as well,” he said. “But insulting each other and trying to see who gets the best reaction will get us no where. So please, enough with the petty antics. You have questions and I have questions. I’m willing to give a little to get a little. Do you think we can elevate this conversation?”

He spoke to her like a father scolding his daughter and for just an instant, she felt like a little girl that had done something wrong, but she quickly shook the feeling away. Was the tent altering her mind or did he have some other artifact that jumbled her wits? She quickly looked around but saw nothing that looked out of the ordinary. Of course, the magic, if there was any, could be coming from something as small as a gold coin. He certainly carried enough magic about him to have something similar.

For just a moment, she closed her eyes and opened her body to feel for the magical energies that surrounded all living things. Even completely exhausted of her magic and spells, she should be able to sense where any strong magic was emanating from, but to her shock, she felt nothing. It was as if she had been bathing in soothing water and suddenly been thrown into an ice bath. She was completely cut off from magic. She probably had been cut off since she entered the tent. The affects had been so subtle, she hadn’t even noticed.

“You sense its absence, don’t you?” the man asked. Her eyes snapped open and met his. He just smiled and brought forth a small glass sphere from a sack tied to his hip.

It was about the size of a fist. Gray misted swirled inside and moved as affected by strong winds. At the moment, it held a strong orange glow and pulsed with energy. Though cut off from magic, Mileena could still feel its malicious touch.

“You have no power here,” he said. Then all humor fell from his face and he took on a look of malice. “Make no mistake, I am in control.” Then, just as fast as the fierce look came to his face, it was gone, replaced with a gentle amusement.

“Nice, isn’t it?” he said, referring to the glowing sphere, as he placed it back in the sack at his hip. “Took it—and this tent as a matter-of-fact—from a wizard I was hired to kill. It prevents wizards from casting their spells, but then again, you’re not a wizard, are you? Truth be told, I wasn’t exactly sure it would work on you. Imagine my delight knowing that it does.”

Mileena just eyed him with hate. The only positive thing that came from him showing her the sphere was now that she knew what he was trying to do to her, getting her to drop her defenses, she could fight against the object’s influence. But it appeared he wanted her to know he had the artifact. He wanted her to realize that she was helpless. The fact he knew she was a sorceress only added to his authority.

“That is the reason for my first question,” he said, as he leaned back casually and took a bite from an apple. “Your kind is supposed to be extinct. I am just wondering if there are more where you came from.”

“As far as I know,” she responded, “I am the only one. Too bad for you.”

“And why is that?”

“You won’t be able to use them. You won’t be able to steal their power, like men of your character are apt to do.”

“My dear, you know nothing about me. You only see the forest, and not the trees.”

“But I do know you,” Mileena said with resentment. “For my entire life I have been fighting people like you, murderers and assassins that think they can take whatever they want, that they can kill whenever and whomever they desire. Bullies that intimidate those weaker than they are because it makes them feel powerful. Evil men that would destroy a family for no reason other than the promise of a few coins.”

She was practically spitting the words through clenched teeth. She almost held back, but being bound and a prisoner brought the years of fighting and anguish in the Kilmor Desert back in a rush. All the anger she felt, all the pain, flooded her mind. It wasn’t her agony that she was feeling either. It was all the people she had lost while fighting Druzeel and his minions. Also adding to her fury was not knowing about Callobus.

“It was people like you that followed a tyrannical wizard into a small desert town and tore families apart. It was people like you, butchers that threw men, women and children into chains and whipped them until they couldn’t stand,

rapist that took women—innocent women—over and over again, and threw them away as if they were nothing. So yes, I know your kind very well indeed.”

Mileena sat back and took deep breath. She could feel the heat radiating from her body. Any hotter and it would have melted the man in front of her. He stared at her, as if challenging her to look away, but she held her head high, toward the assassin. She wanted him to see the pain and the anger, though she doubted he cared. His expression was blank and his eyes held no compassion. How she wished she had a spell so she could blast him into the next world.

“Well,” he said after a few minutes of silence. “That was... colorful, and unexpected. I see you have it all figured out. I can also see that there is no point continuing with our conversation. I have learned that when women have their minds locked on something, not even a dragon can pry them away.”

“You’re a monster,” she said in anger and finally looked away from him, unable to look at the man anymore.

“That may be,” he replied, “but I don’t follow anyone’s rule but my own. People pay me to do nefarious things, true, but I have also done my share of noble deeds, when the price was right.”

“As I said,” Mileena replied, “for a few coins. You don’t care what you do or who you hurt, as long as it pays.”

“I am what—”

“I am,” Mileena said, finishing his words. She looked up into his face and actually saw surprise. “I’ve heard it all before, from someone else I used to know, someone who used to be like you. Luckily, he realized what he had done and did his best to right his wrongs. I only regret that he died just as he was turning towards the light. Do you even know why you’re doing what you’re doing? Do you even question it?”

“The reason is not my concern,” he said without feeling. “Someone always has a reason. Someone always has a why. It is not my job to know or care. I am only the tool they purchase to make the why disappear.”

“So why question me? Why talk to me? Haven’t you just broken some of your own rules?”

“Yes, but sometimes curiosity wins out over common sense. I have never had a job quite like yours. It is intriguing. You and Callobus are very interesting people.”

Mileena narrowed her eyes at him. “I’ll make sure to tell him you thought so, after I blast the black heart from your chest.”

The man only smiled. Then he rose and drew out a long, thick spike from the sack at his belt. How much could that thing hold? Mileena thought. Then she realized it was probably a portal sack, a magical item that was not limited

to its physical appearance. One could hide hundreds of objects within and retrieve certain items just by picturing them in their head.

He walked over and stood before her, careful not to put anything vulnerable too close. Then he leaned down and drove the spike into the ground. He reached over and grabbed Mileena's hands. She pulled back but he was stronger. Then he took the three-inch length of rope that spanned between her wrists and threw it around the spike. Then he stood.

"Callobus *is* a lucky man. To have a woman with such raw passion is a rare thing. Or he's insane," he said with a smile. "Your guess is as good as mine." He smiled and walked out of the tent. Mileena watched him go.

Why had he told her Callobus was alive? He could have kept her guessing. It definitely gave him an advantage over her, but he let it go. Did she hit a nerve during her rant? In addition, what was he talking about when he mentioned the good deeds he had done? Those could have been a lie to put her off guard, but she saw truth in his eyes. Perhaps his soul wasn't completely empty.

Then she thought about Bazmal. The man said he never heard of him. That had to be a lie, but again, Mileena had the feeling he was telling the truth. Of course, he was an assassin, and men like him made deception an art. Whatever the reason, she knew if she did not get free she would soon be a guest of whoever it was they answered to.

She turned back and looked at the spike. The rope wasn't tied to it. It just sat on the other side. Curious, she raised her arms. Her bounds instantly snapped against the metal shaft and refused to move. She was stuck, but they couldn't keep her tied down forever. Eventually, they would be moving on and when they did, she planned to leave a trail for Callobus to follow. A few hairs from her head and perhaps some prints would be all he needed, but until they were on the road again, she had another problem.

She reached out for the mystical energies but found they were still absent. She looked for the sphere but could not see it among the rugs and blankets. Either he hid it somewhere or the magic allowed him to put its influence wherever he wished. Regardless, she planned to find a way around its affects. If there was one thing she learned, every magic, every artifact had a weakness and she had become an expert at exploiting those weaknesses.

So she closed her eyes and focused her will. It could take some time to break through the barriers, but when she did, she planned to give the assassins something to remember her by.



Farthos walked out of the tent and the flap closed behind him. For just a moment, he stopped and peered back, looking at the flaps.

She definitely was an interesting woman, he thought to himself, but he had heard her ravings before. Most of those he had abducted screamed and yelled at him, asking why, always why. He had heard the same from those he killed, that is, if he allowed them the time. The other thing they all had in common was that none of them liked the answer. None of them could perceive or accept a man doing mischievous acts just for coin. We all do it for coin, Farthos thought to himself, whether you're a soldier, politician, adventurer or craftsman. Everyone works for treasure.

A funny thought then came to him. Those he helped, those he rescued, those whose belongings he returned, never asked him why. They never begged. They never pleaded. They never asked who sent him or how much he was paid. They only cried tears of joy instead of tears of fear, but what both the hunted and the rescued shared was that they both saw the world as cruel and painful. When their lives were before the tip of a blade, they called their killer heartless and evil. When their loved ones or possessions disappeared, they called the thieves cruel and selfish. How humorous, he thought, that no matter who hired him, they carried hate and anger in their hearts.

The rain had lessened even more and a cold breeze wafted through the camp. Farthos saw that his men had finished making camp and were settling in for the night, though none of them really slept. They would be ready at a moment's notice and were aware of everything around them, a behavior that was bred from years of practice. The lack of sleep also came from the fact that they had lost another man, to the very prisoner sitting in their camp, a prisoner some of the men would like to kill. To Farthos, they appeared to have already turned their thoughts away from Darrin's death, another behavior one in their business was used to, but he knew some bore thoughts of revenge and murder.

"Why did you tell her that?"

Farthos turned to face Garis, who he knew had been standing near the tent's entrance. Not only had he been listening to every word, but he was also standing by just in case their prisoner tried something. She and Callobus had already killed three of their party and he was not going to take a chance. She was not to be underestimated. Even with the magic deadening sphere Farthos had hidden within the tent, she was still dangerous.

Farthos walked away from the tent, toward Garis's own. It was a simple piece of fabric, covered with thin furs. A few blankets sat inside. It would be tight for someone like Farthos but it was perfect for his small friend.

"And you are referring to...?" Farthos asked as Garis walked up, following

him away from the tent. His friend only frowned.

“I’m in no mood for your witty banter. I’ve lost three men. Now is not the time. You told her Callobus was still alive. You gave away pertinent information that we could have used against her. Her hopes were already dashed when you showed her the sphere. Why build them back up moments later?”

“Relax, my friend. There was little harm in revealing what she already knew,” Farthos said, sensing the coming confrontation.

“That’s what she *felt*,” Garis replied with irritation, “not what she knew. Even if there was no harm, it was still something that was unknown to her. It kept her mind working on where he is and what happened to him, instead of thinking on how to escape.”

“She’s not going anywhere. The deadening sphere hasn’t failed yet.”

“It only takes once!” Garis said in an angry tone. “Look,” he then said, seeing his friend’s annoyed look. “I didn’t object when you healed her because I know we can’t have her bleeding to death, though I know Drog and Milgris would have preferred that, but do not underestimate her. She is powerful, even without her spells. Any advantage we have should be taken.”

Farthos saw the genuine concern on Garis’s face. He took a deep breath and cleared his mind, looking at the situation from the men’s point of view. Another companion was gone and his men were no doubt being pursued by an enraged lunatic. To add to the loss and tricky situation, they were heading towards freezing temperatures and another insane person, who just happened to be their employer, and he had much more power at his disposal.

“You’re right,” Farthos finally said, realizing that tensions were high among the men. He felt tense himself for they were heading into an unknown land and towards a man whose intentions could turn in an instant, not to mention the men he had lost.

Garis wore a surprised look. “That was...foolish,” Farthos said, “but what’s done is done. I will tread more carefully.”

“This entire venture has been...unusual, to say the least,” Garis said, calming his irritation and realizing his friend was finally feeling what he was. “Let’s just get her to the wizard, get our reward and get back to something normal.”

“Normal?” Farthos said with a smirk.

“Relatively speaking.”

“Agreed. Pick two for watch,” the leader of their band said. “Just in case.”

The two men parted and Farthos slowly walked back to his tent, where a very angry and powerful sorceress waited. He debated on even sleeping in the same room as she but knew someone had to keep an eye on her.

Why *did* I tell her? he thought to himself, fully thinking about his actions. It really was stupid. I probably shouldn't have showed her the sphere either. Perhaps it was his growing disdain for his current employer. He really wanted nothing more to do with Druzeel and could care less if Callobus ended up killing him. I guess any advantage I give her that she can use against the wizard is acceptable. However, perhaps I should watch my words.

Regardless, the faster he got Mileena to the wizard the better. Luckily, the magical horseshoes he had for the horses would last for a few more days, enough time to outdistance Callobus comfortably, who was no doubt following them. Farthos knew the man would stop at nothing to find his woman, so he planned to make the task as difficult as possible.