

KINGDOMS PERIL



BOOK III

THE SLAYER SERIES

CHRISTOPHER LAPIDES

“Fool,” she said.

His world cracked and started to shower down around him like a collapsing building. The pain in his side was nothing compared to the pain in his heart. It was ripped in two and at that moment, Katrina ripped the dagger out, opening the wound even more. The wound was deeper and more damaging than anything he had ever sustained. No demon, wizard or monster had ever hurt him so.

She stood up and pushed him. His legs would not obey his command and Callobus fell. He felt like he was falling into an endless pit of despair and darkness. All thoughts were erased from his mind as he stared at the bloody dagger in his sister’s hand.

Then his unprotected head slammed into the hard marble stairs. His vision swam and he felt blood on his scalp. He saw it on the steps as he rolled down them. He finally came to a stop, face down at the bottom of the stairs. Blood pooled around his face and side. Every breath was a battle and he could taste blood in his mouth. Dragonsbane had fallen from his grasp and clattered somewhere to his right, but he didn’t think he cared anymore. Everything had been taken away from him, again.

BOOKS BY CHRISTOPHER LAPIDES

THE SLAYER SERIES

Dragons Plight

Town Shadows

Kingdoms Peril

HERITAGE LOST

Identity

Coming Mid 2011

Lineage

Coming Early 2012

Destiny

Coming Late 2012

KINGDOMS PERIL

BOOK III

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CHRISTOPHER LAPIDES



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KINGDOMS PERIL

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Thank you Jenna, for putting up with everything I do that drives you crazy.
Without you I would be lost.

For Kaylee and Anna.
Your smiles make everyday an adventure.

PROLOGUE

The carriage slowly rolled down the cobblestone street. Commoners shifted out of the way, making sure to give the royal guard in front enough room to pass. They stood still, whispers on their lips, as the large assemblage passed by them. Those that went to move back to the middle of the street had to be pulled back to avoid the second part of the guard that closely followed, this one consisting of the city and noble guard, the latter being the personal guard of the nobles. The gossip among the citizens of Grimfall quickly spread as they watched the procession make its way toward the castle. Everyone heard the rumor that the Queen had issued a summons to all the heads of the noble houses, and when the Queen summoned you, you made haste. It did not happen often, so when a summons was sent, something of great importance was bound to take place.

Dunslade Greyhand sat in silence as his carriage shook and rattled as it traveled down the street. He slowly pulled back the thin red curtain, just a little, and looked out at the city. Artisans and merchants sat along the streets selling their products. A jewel merchant waved a fancy necklace in front of a woman's face. She stopped for a brief moment, but then moved on. Other commoners walked by without a second glance, anxious to get on with their daily activities. Most just keep their eyes forward, going about their normal routines. Others were drawn into the hustle and flow of bargaining. More than a few eyes drifted toward Dunslade. He looked into some of those eyes and managed a weak smile. Then he remembered the glass was enchanted so they couldn't see his face. He doubted the gesture would have been returned anyway. Sighing deeply, he let the curtain fall back into place.

By the looks on those faces, no one would suspect that anything was

wrong, but behind the smiles and laughter, Dunslade knew fear and anxiety sat in their hearts. He saw it everyday, especially when the royal guard was about. Though the city guard usually handled the daily street patrols, the royal guard had slowly expanded its duties to encompass all normal daily routines. Nervous nods and anxious smiles greeted every guard that walked by—city, noble or royal. When they were out of sight, the people hurried on to their homes. People should not have to live their lives in fear, he thought as they drifted closer to the castle.

His visits to the castle never bothered him. They were a welcomed reprieve from all the paperwork that occupied him every day. He had hundreds of people in his employ and had to make sure they were paid on time and that his warehouses were kept full. It was tedious work but it kept his pockets full of coin and his belly full of food. What did bother him though were the results of those meetings. Last time the Queen had increased the taxes on all imports and exports. It had hit him hard in the pockets, but ultimately, it was the citizens that suffered the most. Any tax levied on his merchandise was passed on to the cost of his product, which made it more expensive for the citizens, which drove his sales down. All the nobles felt the pinch and they were slowly getting agitated, but there was little they could do. The Queen had the royal guard to make sure her law was enforced, and carried out. Even though all of the ten noble families had their own garrison of soldiers, the royal and city guard were ten times any one of their forces. If they banded together, they would have more pull with their demands, but Dunslade knew that would never happen. Most houses were bitter rivals and more than one supported the Queen. Despite the financial squeeze, most were content with the way life was. Even though the taxes were high, their pockets were still full, but that was not the case with the every day citizen. They were the ones suffering. The nobles had joined as one once, but that was a long time ago.

The memories of those past years were not something Dunslade was fond of, so he pushed them away. Though no one could argue that the last few years were better than the last ten before, the kingdom had definitely fallen from what it had been when Dunslade was young. With the increased taxes and the brutality of the royal guard, revolt soon became a widely whispered word, but those whispers had consequences.

Every whisper of rebellion or revolt was quickly crushed. People disappeared and some seemed to be erased from existence all together. The people may have a roof over their heads but they lived in fear that at any moment, it could be taken away. The royal guard was ruthless, and more than once Dunslade had heard of men that were accused of treachery just because

they had said something against the Queen in a drunken haze. Those men were taken and usually never heard from again. Those that did survive the dungeons came back, but they were different. Instead of voicing objections to the Queen's rule, they had changed and became the staunchest supporters of the kingdom. Some wizardry had turned them, Dunslade thought. But what could they do?

The royal guard stringently inspected everything that left or entered the kingdom, though this used to be a responsibility of the normally less-intrusive city guard. No one dared to try to circumvent the Queen's law. Most shipments reached their destinations a little light and most of the profits went to her. The nobles were left with the scraps. Why some of the nobles supported her was beyond Dunslade's knowledge. He knew most had a sense of duty and would serve their queen no matter what, but things were getting out of hand. There were rumors that her supporters were really demons in disguise and that she was a witch, magically enslaving all who opposed her. Even two of the mayors of the surrounding five cities supported her and as each day passed, more and more people voiced their support. Be it because of fear, loyalty or enslavement, Dunslade did not know. As for himself, he served the kingdom and at the moment, she was its monarch.

The carriage slowly rolled to a stop. Dunslade pulled back the curtain and saw that he had reached the castle. They were standing just outside the large wood and steel double gates. They were kept closed at all times, except to admit people the Queen wanted in, and a large contingent of the royal guard always patrolled the walls. The steel portcullis was raised at this time of day. Some of the nobles had already arrived and were inside. Dunslade noticed that the carriages of Gravmar Radinare and Roldan Firmmere had just arrived as well. Their carriages had just rolled to a stop when the large gates slowly opened. Each noble's contingent of guards was allowed into the castle grounds, but not into the castle itself. The city guard was not allowed inside at all. Only those invited by the Queen were granted entrance.

As they entered the courtyard, the royal guard escorted them to the front of the castle. The guard wore full platemail and helmets that shined brightly in the sun. Their armor was bright silver and had the emblem of the kingdom—stars over a vast ocean—embossed onto the breastplate, but instead of the blue and white colors that had been commonly used years ago, they wore the black and gray that had become the norm since Grimfall had come under the Queen's rule. It mirrored the dreary feelings that Dunslade and those around them felt. Many carried longswords but some wielded maces or axes. Those on the walls held bows and watched as the carriages moved along the path to the great

castle doors.

The inside of the castle grounds were immaculate. A white cobblestone path led directly up and around the castle. Not a weed or stray plant grew from between the stones. Silver lanterns hung from silver poles along the path and it was said that at night they gave off a golden glow that filled one's heart with peace. No one but the Queen and her guards knew this because no one was allowed in after sunset. Rich green grass grew all over. Colorful flowers and exotic plants dotted the landscape and sat against the walls. Tall trees grew in groves around the castle and many species of bird chirped in the branches. Dunslade saw many gardeners walking the grounds, trimming plants and making sure everything was taken care of. All of them were women and had the same blond hair and gentle features. He thought it odd but figured they were all related somehow. In the kingdoms of old, the gardener and his family usually lived on the grounds and took care of the gardens.

The castle walls rose at least fifty feet. Many spires rose into the air around the castle, many hundreds of feet high. Two smaller buildings sat off on the left side—most likely the stables. A large tower sat away from the castle on the right, which housed the court's wizards. The stone of all the buildings was a rich white color with a hint of blue. Bright red tiles coated the tops of the spires and gleamed in the afternoon sun, though the black and gray flags that flew on their tops looked out of place and served to cloud the castle in a mood of melancholy. Most of the windows were shut and the red shutters were closed so no one could see inside. Everyone knew the Queen's wizards magically sealed the openings.

The carriages rolled to a stop and Dunslade stepped out when his driver opened the door. He stretched his arms and legs and the pain in his joints reminded him just how old he was. He took in a deep breath of air and nodded to the other nobles. Gravmar wore a look of uncertainty while Roldan kept his face expressionless. All three met in the middle and walked up to the entrance.

As they approached, the large steel doors opened and a man dressed head to toe in bright silver armor slowly walked down the steps. A short white cape flowed behind him as he descended the stairs. Long blond hair, almost white, flowed from his head and it was tied in a ponytail that fell to the center of his back. Chiseled cheekbones and a pointy nose complimented his handsome face. He also had a small, carefully trimmed mustache and a neatly trimmed anchor goatee on his chin. His eyes mirrored the bluish white of the castle walls. He didn't wear a weapon but they all knew in the castle, he didn't need one.

“Welcome,” he said. His voice was deep, yet calming, and carried a

pleasant tone.

Dunslade had met William the White a handful of times but it was always in the castle grounds. He spoke little and when he did, it was short sentences. He was quick and to the point. The man never left the castle, or the Queen's side.

“The others have already arrived. If you will follow me, I will escort you inside.”

They left their carriages and noble guard behind and followed the man into the castle. Even though the Queen and her guards could be brutal at times, Dunslade always found it amazing how polite they were while he was in their presence. The Queen was also enchanting and he found himself looking forward to seeing her once again. Her beauty was unmatched and every noble, except for the three women, wanted to lay their eyes on her. Though she was young, an aura of power, strength and enchantment hung around her at all times.

They walked into a grand foyer. The room was half-circular and large golden chandeliers hung from the ceiling, about thirty feet overhead. Many large candles lit the grand hall and large stained glass windows in the ceiling let in the daylight. The floor was made of white marble and was polished to a high shine. Large red and blue diamond designs were engraved into the surface. A long red carpet ran from the entrance to another set of steel doors, which sat at the end of a long hallway, about two hundred feet from where they stood. Many smaller doors led off into the castle and out onto a terrace near the front, on both sides of the entrance. Large marble pillars rose from the floor and connected to a walkway above that ran the entire circumference of the room and bridged the hallway ahead of them. Black and gray flags hung from each pillar. Two sets of wide stairs came down from the walkway on either side of the hall. Guards walked above and watched as the nobles were escorted toward the throne room.

“Why muddy it up with such drab colors?” Roldan said. It was widely known that the Firmmere family prided themselves as artisans and they loved to use bright colors in their works. He often complained about the garb of the royal guard. Dunslade smiled slightly at the familiar sentiment but remained silent. William just kept his eyes forward and said nothing.

They reached the large doors. They were made of steel but were coated in a thin layer of gold. The emblem the guards wore on their armor was etched into each door and the stars were made from sapphires. Though the emblem on the guards' armor was black and gray, these doors were crafted long before the Queen's reign and were left with the elegant blue and gold. Each door was ten

feet high and five feet wide. Every time Dunslade saw them, he was amazed at the craftsmanship. The other nobles also gazed at them in admiration. Each should have been twice a giant's weight but William reached out and easily opened them. They swung open slowly and he led them inside.

The throne room was easily double the size of the foyer. The floor was set about twenty feet down from the entrance. A long walkway sat on the wall they just entered through with stairs on each side that led down to the main area. A long red and blue carpet flowed down each set of stairs and another circular one lay in the center of the room. The throne itself was made of gold and a black stone. It sat on a large dais. The carvings and decorations on it depicted falling stars over a vast ocean. It was empty for the Queen had yet to arrive. Two double doors sat against the back wall on either side of the throne and a few more sat on each sidewall. All were well guarded. Two fifteen foot tall stone statues of ancient warriors stood on either side of the throne, between the doors and the elegant seat. Paintings of various subject matters decorated the walls and a large silver chandelier hung in the center of the ceiling. Small, round stained glass windows, about three feet in diameter, dotted the ceiling and provided light. The golden rays of the sun reflected off the many crystals of the chandelier and bathed the room in bright white. Dunslade entered and looked over the balcony. All the other nobles were down in the room, conversing, eating and drinking. A long table with food and drink had been set up for them.

Dunslade and the others followed William down into the room. He watched as his escort walked toward the doors on the right and exited. Some of the nobles looked his way and nodded. He was a well-respected man among his ilk and none of them saw him as an enemy. He considered himself lucky for there was much bitterness and hatred between some of the others. A handful of the nobles had yet to reach their forties. A few hadn't even reached their thirties. The youthfulness of those family leaders was a result of a time that, at far as Dunslade was concerned, was a black mark on the kingdom.

During the time when war broke out, before the Queen arrived, some of the heads of the houses were murdered, even assassinated. Some deaths came about from interfamily altercations while others were the result of nobles seeking to eliminate their rivals. The sons, daughters or cousins next in line had to take up the leadership position. Dunslade had been head of his house for over thirty years. He had no heir and did his best to distance himself from other nobles' disputes. He remained alive during the war by keeping quiet and hidden from the public eye. Over the years, he had seen many heads of families come and go. In his fifty-five years, he had seen bitter rivalries but none that went as far as those during the war. The ones today were fierce, but

not as violent. He scanned the room, noting that certain nobles kept well away from each other and the conversations were short. Everyone in the room was anxious to see what the Queen had to say. Some were even constantly wiping their brow to stop the beads of sweat from running into their eyes.

After many moments, the doors William had exited opened and he walked over to stand in front of the throne. He stood silent and motionless until the conversation died. He never had to say a word. The room quickly went quiet.

“The Queen thanks you all for coming.” All of them knew they really hadn’t had a choice but the gesture of kindness was appreciated.

“I present Queen Steelwill.” He backed away and stood to the right of the throne. All eyes moved from him to the woman in the doorway.

She wore a long blue dress with small gems sewn into the fabric. It flowed around her body but clung in places where her smooth curves shown through. Each time she moved the light would catch on the jewels, giving her the illusion of glowing. Her long, curly auburn hair was down and hung behind her slim shoulders. A silver tiara of blue and red gems sat on her head and sparkled in the light. The smell of fresh strawberries filled the room and more than one noble inhaled deeply to take in the scent. Her bright blue eyes found each and every one of them. Her gaze held them all, each for a few moments before she turned away to look at William. Dunslade found himself wanting her to look at him forever so he could lose himself in her hypnotizing gaze. He quickly shook his head. The girl is more than half your age, he thought. Every time he had met with her, this happened. The rumors around the kingdom said she was a witch, but he knew them to be just rumors. She was a woman, a beautiful one at that, and they had powers that did not involve magic.

She smiled at William and turned to face the nobles. When she spoke, her voice was soft, but it held an aura of power and strength.

“Thank you for coming. I realize you all have busy schedules and I hope to not keep you for too long.” She sat down on her throne. Dunslade put down his glass and bowed, as did all the others. She smiled and addressed them once more.

“I wish I could tell you all that this meeting will be filled with good news, but that is not the case.” All of Dunslade’s fears intensified. He looked to the others and saw the worried looks they wore.

“As you know, our kingdom has prospered greatly since my arrival. I had hoped to continue that prosperity for many years to come. Unfortunately, one of our operations in the south, near the coast, has been destroyed. An army of giants attacked our mining camp and many people were killed. The entire cavern was destroyed and the minerals that were flowing into our kingdom

have stopped, I fear for good.”

They all knew about the mining camp in the desert. Dunslade, as well as a few others, had sent some of his men to investigate, to find out what the Queen was really doing. All had come back with reports that nothing was out of the ordinary. It was a regular mining operation. The people of a small village in the desert worked in the mines and shipped what they took to Grimfall. The Queen said they were rewarded for their work and both peoples profited. Reports did surface about a year ago that giants had been seen in the area but they never caused trouble, until now.

“Your Majesty,” Alura Olacane said.

She wore an elegant gown of yellow silk with purple accents. Standing hardly five feet, the head of the Olacane family was the shortest, but often the most outspoken, noble. Though young, her predecessor had taught her well. Her family dealt with armors and metals. She had bought some of the black mineral that the kingdom was importing and used it to make new and stronger weapons. The price of her goods had doubled in the recent years since the mines were started. If something happened to the mines and the mineral, her business and profits could be in jeopardy.

“What has happened?” she asked.

The Queen turned an expressionless face in her direction. “The giants gathered a small army and destroyed the mines and I fear all who worked within. I have sent a small detachment of soldiers to see what can be done, but I have been told that getting into the desert now is troublesome because the giants and other creatures patrol the entrances.” Her face suddenly turned to disgust.

“I have also been told that some of the people that helped sabotage the operations were elves.”

Murmurs passed through the nobles. Dunslade heard more than one whisper of traitor emerge from someone’s lips. It was known that the elves of the Oakcrest Forest to the south had a bad relationship with the Queen. They had refused all bargaining attempts with the kingdom to let her use the forest for lumber. The soldiers had tried anyway and many people were killed in the small skirmish. Since then, the two kingdoms have been at a stand still, each waiting for the other to make a threatening gesture. Could this be just such a gesture? The murmurs grew into shouts but the Queen raised her hands and everyone quieted.

“I plan to investigate this matter and find out the truth behind these allegations. Until then, trust no elf or the words they speak. I have set up a meeting with the elves of Elvradar. They assure me that their people had

nothing to do with this. Some have even assured me that they will open their forest to us as a sign of good faith. They are watching their woods closely for any that come from the desert. They will hold them until my emissaries can speak with them.”

The nobles nodded in agreement but worry still painted their faces. Dunslade knew better than to jump to conclusions. He had more than one elf in his employ and planned to do his own investigation into the matter.

“These unfortunate set backs,” she continued, “are why I have brought you all here. The mineral that we imported was very valuable and was a major reason as to why we had prospered as we have. With its absence, the surrounding lands, as well as the kingdom, will suffer. We have already started to feel the affects. I have little choice but to increase the tariffs.”

Whatever enchantment the Queen held over the nobles disappeared in an instant. Roars of anger filled the room.

“This is preposterous!” someone said. “How are we to survive when you strangle us?”

“No more!” another voice shouted.

“What about the other towns?”

“Tax them!”

“My business will be ruined!”

More and more shouting came from the nobles. The Queen took it all in but she quickly grew tired of their insults. She raised her fist and slammed it down on her armrest. There was a resounding BOOM as the sound was amplified by the magic that surrounded the throne.

Everyone went silent. No one moved. More than one of the guards took a step forward.

“This must be done to ensure the survival of our kingdom. As soon as this matter is resolved, the tariffs will be rescinded, but I will not tolerate these arguments. If there is a threat coming from the south, there is no way to know that it will not reach us. We need more guards and weapons of war. As citizens of Grimfall, it is your duty to protect the kingdom, by any means necessary. Your gold will be used to secure our kingdom.”

The nobles grumbled to one another but no one was going to openly dispute the Queen, no one with any sense.

“We were better off with the orcs.”

The Queen turned her head and peered at a tall, female noble. Shadrie Banemor was dressed in a black, tight-fitted bodice and a black and red dress that went down to her ankles. She wore thick, calf-high leather boots underneath and long leather gloves, both black. Rumors that the young noble

was an ex-pirate were widely whispered and she surely dressed the part. But others knew the head of the Banemor family always wore black when visiting the Queen for she had openly stated that visiting the castle was like attending a funeral—depressing and cold.

Shadrie had only taken control of her house two years ago, after her mother had been assassinated. Though young, the nobles had come to respect her and they were careful when doing business with her. She had her mother's unrelenting business sense and was a very good businesswoman. She was only in her late twenties but she had a backbone of steel, which got her into trouble on many occasions. Her red hair matched her fiery disposition yet her thin frame seemed too frail to support such a strong spirit. She and the Queen had argued before but she always backed down, mainly because she didn't have a choice. Many guessed the woman didn't like the Queen because they were both beautiful and Shadrie immediately identified her as a threat for the noble had used her looks many times to get what she wanted and didn't like competition. But others knew Shadrie adamantly hated paying for things she considered worthless, like a queen that continuously abused her power for instance.

She matched the Queen's intense stare with one of her own.

"Is that so," the Queen said. The noble just stared daggers at her. The other nobles slowly stepped away from Shadrie.

The Queen stood but never took her eyes from the woman. "William." The man walked over and bowed before her.

"Yes, your Highness?"

"Take half her holdings and throw her in the dungeon for a week. Maybe that will sway her feelings."

"Yes, my queen. Guards!"

The anger and hatred Shadrie wore was replaced with shock. All the other nobles stood in stunned silence. Something like this was unheard of. The Queen had seized their assets before, but never so much from one noble, and never has anyone of them seen the inside of a dungeon. Shadrie just shook in both rage and terror.

"You can't."

"Yes," the Queen said without emotion. "I can."

The guards came over to take Shadrie into custody. She knelt one in the groin and punched another in the throat before they subdued her. She kicked and screamed but it was no use. All the nobles watched as she was taken from the room and placed in manacles. Her screams echoed throughout the halls for many moments. The Queen calmly sat down and looked at the remaining

nobles. Her beautiful face was still a mask of calm. Dunslade had never seen anything so disturbing.

“Anyone else?”

No one said a word. “Good. This meeting is ended.” She rose and walked from the room. William bowed as she exited and motioned for the guards to escort them out.

Dunslade and the others were escorted from the castle. He watched as one of the royal guards told Shadrie’s noble guard she had been arrested. Shouts of anger came from her guards, but when the royal guard surrounding them drew swords, their protests silenced. The noble guard of house Banemor slowly left the castle grounds without their leader.

Dunslade climbed into his carriage and headed for home. As he slowly rode away, he looked back one last time at the castle. He pictured Shadrie in the dungeons, all alone and scared out of her mind.

“What is the kingdom coming to?” he asked himself. Sorrow filled his heart as he turned away and leaned back in his carriage.



The sword flashed out but Xander raised his shield to bash it away. The blade met his steel and he threw the thief’s arm out to the side. He lashed out with his sword and stabbed the man in the chest. There was only a grunt of pain as the man dropped, his mask slipping from his face. Xander didn’t look and moved forward to help his men fend off the rest of the guildsmen.

The Fangs of Fear thieves’ guild had become bolder of late so the Queen had instructed him to step up his efforts to destroy their operations. Someone had given them a tip about one of the guild’s warehouses. Where the tip had come from, the Queen didn’t say. She just told him to put a stop to them. Now the paladin and thirty of his best men were in the warehouse, driving the thieves back and killing any that resisted. He tried his best to take some of the men alive, but he would defend himself, and the lives of his men, when he was threatened. Strangely, the Queen didn’t mention anything about taking prisoners. Usually she was very explicit about bringing in members of the guild alive. Xander thought it odd, for a prisoner could tell them more of the guild’s operations. It may not do any good anyway, for the guild was notorious for its members killing themselves when captured. It helped prevent any information from being gathered. Maybe that was the reason for the Queen’s new orders regarding the infamous guild.

Xander moved further into the warehouse but most of the thieves were

already gone. His men ran off what was left of the bandits and the battle ended as fast as it had started. He sheathed his sword and took off his helmet. He ran his hands through his short blond hair to loosen up the matted strands. Then he knelt down to one of the men he had killed. A silent prayer for the dead came from his lips. When he finished, he picked up the mask that sat next to the body.

It was black with two slanted eye slits. The surface was flat and smooth. Two crimson fangs were painted over each eyehole that spanned the length of the mask. Xander was unsure why they wore the masks for he knew all it would do is hinder eyesight during battle. The man who wore it wasn't a man at all, but a young kid who looked to be not yet twenty. His face was smooth and his empty, brown eyes stared up at the ceiling. Xander reached over and closed them.

"It's a shame," said a voice from behind.

Janos Horant walked up behind Xander and looked down at the thief. He was second-in-command of the unit and one of Xander's closest friends. The two had known each other since they were kids. His face was sweaty from running and his black hair was ruffled. Dirt marked his smooth cheeks and sharp nose. Spots of blood also speckled his short beard.

"Why can't they join a merchant's guild? It's always the thieves. Why run the risk of ending up vampire food?" It was widely rumored that vampires were in charge of the guild but no evidence had ever turned up supporting the claim. Maybe in the days of old, but now it was just normal men. The guard still kept the rumor alive by joking about it every so often.

"Not much adventure in a merchant's guild," Xander said.

"No adventure for him anymore," Janos replied. Xander dropped the mask and stood. He looked at the warehouse.

"Did we loose any men?"

Janos turned around and looked into the warehouse. "Three and a few were injured. We killed over ten of the Fangs but the rest got away. Damned vermin they are. Blend right into the shadows and disappear. Any we surround kill themselves before we can take them. I don't think we'll ever capture one alive."

"Mighty fine days work," said a deep voice from behind Janos.

Pendon the Pleasant Palthric walked up and slapped Janos on the back. "More thieves dead and another warehouse operation thwarted." The almost six and a half foot tall man inhaled deeply. He exhaled with a smile when he saw Janos rubbing his shoulder. With arms like tree limbs, Pendon easily picked up the dead man at Xander's feet and brought him to the pile of dead

the other men were making. He dropped the body and slapped another man on the shoulder. Xander couldn't help but grin as that man rubbed his shoulder in pain. Nothing ever seemed to get his friend's spirit down, hence why the others called him pleasant. His cheeks always seemed rosy, which his long red hair complimented well, and his bright blue eyes shone like the sun. Xander sighed as he began the task of cleaning up.

"I'll tend to the wounded. Take the more serious to the temples. I only have limited healing ability."

Those that he could not heal would be taken to the Temples of the Healing Hand, which were located throughout Grimfall. The priests always did fine work so he was confident that his men would recover. He walked into the warehouse with Janos close behind. After a short time, all the dead were accounted for and the warehouse was boarded up. The men left the site to return to the barracks. Xander separated from the rest of the group. He told Janos he wanted to be alone for a while. His friend followed the others.

He walked through the streets of the city, nodding and smiling as he walked past Grimfall's citizens. As he walked, he noticed that although most citizens would acknowledge him in a pleasant manner, when he passed by, they would hurry along in fear. Everyone, including himself, knew well the ruthlessness of the Queen's royal guard, his royal guard. Though they answered to the Queen, both the city and royal guard also answered to him. He had been captain since she had taken the throne and he watched as she had changed from a just ruler to a ruthless dictator, but she was his queen and he would serve her. He had to obey his code. Every day he prayed to Kilgar, the god of justice, that he would grant her the strength to see the error of her ways.

Shortly after the royal guard had started their harsh practices, he formed a contingent of men, men he could trust, to become a beacon of justice that all the guards could emulate. Though it worked on many of the city guard, all of the royal guard continued to act as they wanted. The streets did seem safer, but Xander wondered if the cost was worth it. Safety in exchange for freedom didn't seem right.

He and his men had a heated confrontation with the royal guard once, almost coming to blows, but he learned that what they were doing was indeed the Queen's will. He didn't like it, but his code demanded he obey the kingdom's ruler.

Soon after the dispute, the Queen learned of his Hands of Justice band but tolerated them as long as they did their job. They were his friends and loyal companions, but another one had fallen at the raid on the warehouse. His men were dwindling while it seemed the royal guard had no end. More and

more people were joining her guard, wanting to work close to her rather than in the city streets. He knew eventually that his command of the royal guard may come to an end and someone else would take his place, possibly by the Queen's advisor, William the White. Until that day, he would serve loyally.

William was appointed the kingdom's advisor soon after the Queen took the throne. Xander was unfamiliar with the man but evidently, he had been in the royal guard for some time. Something immediately struck Xander as odd about the man the moment they met. There was an aura around him that he could not read and it troubled him. Being a paladin enabled him to sense the good, or evil, in most of those around him. The man didn't seem to be either one. He appeared to be a decent man and until he proved otherwise, Xander would let him be by the Queen's side.

When the Queen had first summoned him to her court, Xander was amazed by how young she was and for the first few months of her rule, they had spent almost every moment together because he had to teach her the ways of the kingdom. He felt an attraction to her immediately and he thought she felt the same based on her behavior, but as the years went on, he saw less and less of her. When he did see her, it was always for diplomatic reasons, though he caught a smile from her every so often. Though his feelings for her remained, he knew he was forbidden to act upon them. His position as a captain, and the code of a paladin, prevented any romantic relationship with one of her stature. In the past months, he actually did his best to avoid her for fear that his emotions would overcome him. It's a ridiculous notion anyway, he thought to himself every time he saw her. He was almost ten years her senior!

Though his position made contact with her unavoidable, it was one he took very seriously. Being almost thirty was young to be made a captain but she had insisted. The field of candidates hadn't been large for most of the older captains had been killed in the war, before she came to power. He was widely known and respected and she wanted someone that the citizens could trust. But he saw those citizens now and they did not look at him with respect. They looked at him in fear. Those that knew him personally knew that he was not like the other guards and they treated him well. There were certain places in the city where he could go where he did not feel like an outcast. He spent a lot of time at those taverns or inns, never once taking the free meals or drinks offered to him. He just liked being among friends.

A few city guards walked passed him and saluted. He returned the gesture and continued to walk. He looked up and saw the castle in front of him. One day, he prayed, the citizens of this great kingdom will not be afraid of their queen. Maybe one day he wouldn't be afraid of her either.



Dorend wandered the streets of Grimfall. Just hours ago, the cursed paladin had showed up yet again and destroyed another of their operations and he was forced to run away. Fleeing like a scared child was not something he enjoyed but it was becoming an increasing regularity. How the paladin had known where their hideouts were baffled him. The leader of the Fangs of Fear had assured all of them that they would be protected. Yet recently, the city guard had taken three of their warehouses. Being second-in-command, the other thieves looked to Dorend to confront their leader. That was one confrontation he was not going to make. Yet. If things continued as they were, he knew he would have to do something.

The guild was slowly losing people and the flow of gold was lessening. The Queen had issued orders that all thieves were to be killed. Usually they were taken prisoner but the code of the guild required you end your life if captured. Dorend and many of the others thought that was an unnecessary measure because with their contacts in the nobles and the guards, the guildsmen could easily be freed before they were interrogated. But their leader demanded nothing less than death for failure. Many of the thieves were getting irritated with the direction the guild was heading. It was only a matter of time before there was an attempt on the leader's life. Dorend wasn't so sure that would be a bad thing.

He slowly made his way through the streets, taking his time before returning to the hideout because he wasn't in a rush to hear the complaining and arguing among his fellow thieves. There may be blood spilt that night and he wanted to make sure it wasn't his. If he was the last to arrive, he could make sure there were no surprises.

While traveling through the alleyways, he spotted a guard out of the corner of his eye and ducked into the shadows. Raising his head, he realized it wasn't any normal city or royal guard, but the paladin himself. Xander Young strode through the streets of Grimfall alone. Dorend poked his head out and looked in both directions. None of the Hands of Justice were with him and no guards were in sight. He took to the rooftops and followed the man.

Dorend knew this was a perfect opportunity to kill the paladin once and for all, but after contemplating the idea, he knew it would be madness to attempt the kill himself. He also knew that if the paladin were to die, the people and the Queen would stop at nothing to completely destroy the guild. Maybe it was good to let him live, at least for now. They just needed to know how he

was finding out about their plans. He watched the man walk, a disturbed look on his face.

He feels it to, Dorend thought. The kingdom is changing and both the guild and the paladin were feeling its affects. He had no doubt that in the end the changes would hurt them both. Maybe the paladin wasn't the main problem. Ultimately, the Queen was the one who gave him his orders. She was the one who was receiving the information about the guild. It was time he called in a few favors.

Dorend looked at the troubled paladin one last time and made his way to the hideout.



Queen Steelwill sat in her private chambers staring at her large mirror on the wall, her face expressionless. Those bright blue eyes looked dull now and she did not recognize the person staring back at her. She looked down at her hands and flexed her fingers.

What was happening to her?

Then she felt something around her and looked up. A red aura glowed around her body and all her worries were washed away. The shine in her eyes returned as the aura faded.

She smiled. She is Queen and this was her kingdom. She picked up a silver brush and started to run it through her hair.

With the arrest of that female noble, the others would quickly fall into line and do as they were told. With the added tariffs, she would be able to increase her armies and tighten her grip on the surrounding lands. Everything was going as planned, except for what happened in the desert.

Someone destroyed the mines and taken over Shadowspar. The giants had abandoned the town and Druzeel was missing. All attempts to contact him had been unsuccessful and all the thieves that she had sent to the town were dead or missing. The only thing she knew was that the citizens had somehow overcome her forces and taken back the town.

Where in the hells was Druzeel? The wizard had been unreliable at times but he never failed to respond to a sending. She knew that if he did not answer, it meant that he was dead or somehow restrained. Either way, the mines were lost. She hadn't the military strength to send an army to retake the town. The nobles were upset and she had to have the power to overtake them. She did not think they were foolish enough to try anything but she did not want to take that chance, not after the last revolt. She sent a few men into the desert but it

would take days for them to reach the town. Until then, she had other matters to handle.

The thieves' guild had been resistant to her demands so she sent them a few reminders why this kingdom was hers. She expected they would fall into line as the nobles had. The commoners were getting restless as well and as soon as they found out about the tax increase, they may riot. She would have to speak with the paladin again to get him to assure them it was for the best. He was good at convincing the people she was right. The fool served her out of some ridiculous code but he served his purpose willingly. He was a handsome man and she even lost herself in his blue eyes every now and again but she had to remind herself that such pleasures were forbidden. Besides, he was beneath her. She is Queen and he is just a soldier.

Breathing deeply, she set down the brush and walked to her window to look out over her kingdom. She knew no one could see in and that the enchantment kept out the awful smells and annoying sounds of the city. If she had to listen to all that noise, she would go insane. Those people, her people, only lived for one purpose—to serve her. She looked to the horizon and a small amount of anxiety filled her.

Someone or something was heading toward her but she didn't know what or who it could be. She could feel it in her soul that something important was about to happen, but she reminded herself that anything or anyone that came against her would be crushed.

The door to her chamber opened, but she continued to gaze out the large window. The man's steps became louder as he neared her. His hot breath brushed against her skin and she shivered. A black gloved hand gently rested on her shoulder and a deep voice sounded from behind her. It was not the usual soothing voice she was used to.

"You are doing well. The nobles will obey you and the other cities will fall into your hands. Do not worry about the desert. I'll take care of everything."

Queen Steelwill shuddered a little but then smiled. "Yes."

She heard a small laugh behind her. "You are a fine queen and will be a fine wife. Soon all will bow to us."

More laughter filled the air but the Queen remained silent. After a few moments, the red aura around her flared to life once more and her laughter joined his. The sound echoed throughout the entire castle.

CHAPTER 1

After such a long and hard fought journey, it was difficult for Callobus to leave his mother behind but he knew she would be better protected in the newly named town of Swordstar than with him. When Thornel said he would be sending more dwarves to ensure safety, he felt a little better. Though the citizens had a long way to go to become a fully functioning city, they wasted no time in starting to rebuild.

With Mileena's help, the people had learned to navigate the underground tunnels with ease. She even supplied them with a detailed map that she was able to recover from the Resistance's destroyed hideout. It was easier to reach the mines through the cool underground tunnels than traveling over the hot surface of the desert. The new council had promised to rebuild the mines for the black mineral was very valuable and the dwarves promised to pay well for every barrel. With the new flow of gold, the town would prosper and the citizens would once again enjoy freedom and live a better life. That was all Callobus could hope for now that Druzeel and his minions were gone. Those thoughts eased his mind as he left Chandel behind.

After spending two years with the enslaved people of Shadowspar, Chandel was well known. The council, as well as the dwarves, promised she would be well taken care of. The ones that had been slaves hadn't forgotten her kindness while trapped in the mines. She lifted their spirits by staying positive and never gave up hope that they would be rescued. No one believed her, but they all clung to hope. When Callobus killed the wizard and the dwarves and lizard tribe freed the town, Chandel was held in high regard. He knew he could leave her and she would be safe. He needed to not worry and had to concentrate on his sister.

His mother told him everything she knew about her captors. She didn't

know whom Druzeel had taken his orders from but his men often spoke about Grimfall, the kingdom to the north, where all the mineral shipments were going. They did not speak like they had taken it over, more like they had people hidden within the kingdom's elite. Their agents were people in positions of power and influence. Callobus had to be very careful when he arrived.

The elves that they rescued from the mines spoke of the Queen of Grimfall often, but none had ever seen her. Based on what his mother said, Druzeel's masters may have put Katrina on the throne. If they were threatening her with Chandel's death, they could be manipulating her to do their bidding. The entire kingdom may be in their control, but that would not deter him. He would find his sister and kill those responsible for everything that happened to him and his family.

Many of the humans that were enslaved were from Shadowspar. Others were from Thornstone, although a small number. The rest had been adventurers or traveling merchants abducted from the surrounding lands. Callobus understood why no one noticed that adventurers were missing and even merchants left home for months or years at a time, but he couldn't explain why he never heard that people were missing from Thornstone. Maybe their families were threatened was well. More questions that would be answered later, Callobus thought.

All the dwarven slaves were from Thoriddon. They were part of the first and second party that had left the dwarven kingdom in search of ore in the Granite Ridge Mountains. They were the first to encounter the giants. After each battle, those dwarves that were able were driven back into the mountains and returned home with report of the giants' activities. They never would have left if they knew some of their fellow dwarves had lived, but they all thought their brethren dead. Finding over twenty of the dwarves still alive was a welcomed surprise. In fact, only five dwarves perished in the mines during the liberation, including Coal and Chaulk. The two dwarves were considered heroes and at this very moment, statues of them were probably being carved for a place in the grand halls of Castle Thoriddon.

When the liberation was over and after the wizard's forces were defeated, Thornel had communicated with King Thoriddon. He said the King proclaimed that the people of Swordstar were under his protection. Hundreds of tunnels that led from the Granite Ridge Mountains into the desert and he had dwarves combing those tunnels, setting up underground routes from Swordstar. If there was an attack on the town again, the citizens could flee quickly and with Druzeel dead the dark elves that watched the tunnels were no longer a threat. It would take a long time to find the correct passages but until then, the King was

sending over a hundred dwarves to protect the town. Callobus was thankful and knew the King cared about the people, but he also wanted to protect his investment. The black mineral was very valuable to the dwarves and they paid well for their share. The growing relationship would no doubt take Swordstar in a very profitable direction. In the future, some on the council even hoped to start a beneficial relationship with what was left of the giants. With their leader dead and their numbers dwindling, the large humanoids may be convinced to help protect the outer bounds of the desert, for a price of course. Since the giants were the only other intelligent race that called the harsh land home, maybe there could be peace between them and the citizens of Swordstar. Most knew it would be some time before that happened for there were still many things to do. Since all shipments to the north had stopped, many feared it would only be a matter of time before someone from the north came looking for the reasons why. Callobus and his friends were on their way now to stop that from happening.

The party traveled swiftly over the hot sand. After leaving Swordstar, they headed north, along the Cliffs of Despair. After many days of travel, they turned east toward cooler climates. It was still many days journey until they left the desert and the sun was hotter than ever. They spotted a few creatures in the distance, but upon their approach, they scampered away. It was an uneventful journey, which everyone welcomed. Callobus walked next to Mileena, at the very front of the party. Killian and Silverleaf walked behind them with over fifteen elves from Swordstar. Brom and Orin took up the rear. All of the elven slaves were from the Oakcrest Forest, from a city called Elvradar. Silverleaf heard of the city but he had never been there. From the elves that were with them, they learned about the city, and about Grimfall.

Unlike Faragard, Elvradar was a city composed entirely of elves. Humans and other races were welcome but never allowed to stay. The elves kept most of the cities activities to themselves, but the one thing they did share was that the city was ruled by a council of ten, similar to that of Faragard. They protected their forest just like the elves from Silverleaf's home, keeping any who wished to do harm away. Their explanation of that fierce protection led to Grimfall and explained why the relationship between their home and the kingdom was slowly turning hostile. As they told their story, what they revealed explained why Druzeel's masters did not have complete control over the lands.

The city of Grimfall was once known as Starfall. The named changed many years ago, but for what reason, the elves could not say. A queen ruled the city, but she had only been ruler for about two and a half years. Callobus realized that was about the amount of time he had last seen Katrina. Though

she was the sole ruler, the nobles—ten prominent families—controlled much of the kingdom's activities. Without their support, the Queen did not have a complete hold, which brought her hope that not all was lost. The Queen appointed the mayors of the surrounding cities, but some had not supported her since she started raising taxes. It seemed that the hold on the kingdom was slowly failing. With the elves help, they may be able to put it back in the right hands.

For the past two years, the elves had been at odds with Grimfall. The humans needed lumber to build but the elven council had refused to grant them access to the forest. They had tried regardless and there was a vicious battle. Many elves and humans died. Since then, the two peoples have been poised for war, only holding back because no humans dared enter the woods. The elves said they were sent into the kingdom, disguised as merchants, to find out more about the Queen. Somehow, the guard knew about their arrival and they were caught and sent into the desert to work as slaves. The elves said that with their return, the city might rally and help Callobus with his fight against Grimfall. They mentioned something about staying neutral during the last war but Callobus let the comment go without question. The pain on the elves faces at the mention of the past war was enough to keep him silent. He was just grateful for their offer of help because he doubted he and his friends could liberate the kingdom by themselves.

The elves continued their stories as they guided them toward their home. Callobus smiled as their stories quickly turned to past memories and the joy they would feel when seeing their families again. He remembered Chandel holding onto him for many moments before she let go. The memory clung to his mind as he wiped the sweat from his brow and looked behind him toward his friends. Brom and Orin were traveling in the back, conversing with one another about all that happened. A few elves spoke with Brom about the dwarven kingdom, which he was more than happy to talk about. Gromdar had wanted him to return home but Brom told his father he had to help Callobus. The old dwarf understood but Thornel still had to drag him away. Brom quickly made friends among the elves. On more than one occasion Callobus heard everyone, except Brom, break out in laughter. His dwarven friend looked confused but after a few moments, threw up his hands in frustration. Orin only smiled.

Everyone was thankful for the magical decanter the priest carried. He had discovered everything about the artifact before they left Swordstar. Using a few magical phrases, he could command anything from a small drip to a raging river to gush forth from the item. It served them well under the hot sun. He had debated leaving it in Swordstar for the people but decided they might need it

on the journey to Grimfall. He said something in Elvish and the elves around Brom burst out laughing again. Brom just grumbled.

Silverleaf spent most of his time learning about the elven city. He spoke with an older elf that had lived in Elvradar for many years. The city was old and had a rich history. Amazement and wonder painted his face since the beginning of the journey. Callobus watched him for a moment and could tell that he walked with more assurance since leaving Swordstar. His brother was avenged and his soul could now fully rest. He could have returned home but he wanted to accompany them. He had become a true friend and wanted to help. They were all thankful about his decision to stay, but there was another elf whose behavior had also changed since their last night in Swordstar.

Killian walked among the elves but he had hardly spoken to any of them. Some had met him while he was a slave in the mines but anytime one of them was about to engage him in a conversation, he shot them a look that made them think twice. Maybe he acted that way because he was among his kin. Something about his people seemed to offend him. He just kept to the side of the group, eyes peeled toward the open desert. The jewel-encrusted dagger he had taken from the demon's tomb twirled in his hand. The other artifact he found, the black leather armor, was so dark it made him look like a walking shadow. Whatever bothered him, Callobus was content to leave him be. If he wanted to talk, he would when he was ready.

“He is an excellent dancer.”

Callobus turned and looked at Mileena. She was watching him as he studied Killian. The night before they left, the elf had danced with his mother at the celebration. Chandel said it had been years since she had so much fun. Now that he was thinking about it, after the dance is when Killian's attitude changed. He was hiding something, but of everyone, Callobus knew some secrets one had to battle alone.

“My mother seems to think so,” he said. Mileena just smiled. The expression filled Callobus with joy as he looked into the eyes of the woman he loved. Those large green eyes sparkled in the sunlight. The smile she wore widened as she glanced toward Brom and Orin. She turned back around and saw Callobus staring at her.

“What?”

Callobus just shook his head. “Nothing.”

He thought back to when he had first met this woman and how much she reminded him of Bytia. The guilt he had felt was so overwhelming he wasn't sure if he could ever let anyone get close to him again. But now things were different. He had made his peace with Bytia and no longer carried any guilt.

After his battle with the demon, he had a vision of her and she had told him to move on. So he had, and opened his heart once again.

Mileena leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. She then turned and looked toward the north. "I wonder what a forest will be like. I have never been in one, at least as far as I can remember."

Callobus knew she had lived almost her entire life in the desert. She was used to the heat and her skin was tanned from years of being under the sun. It was only after the town was freed and the Resistance was no longer needed that she had decided to leave and help him. She loved him as deeply as he loved her and she would follow him to the ends of the world.

"The Aspenwood was calm and peaceful," he said. "I'm guessing being so close to the desert the Oakcrest Forest will be warm. I think you'll like it." She smiled at him and he could see the excitement in her eyes. Though they were heading into the unknown and danger, he was excited as well.

He had other reasons to be happy besides heading toward his sister. With Mileena next to him, the rage had all but disappeared. He was unsure whether it was because of her or the armor he wore, but he was relieved either way. His curse was brought on many centuries ago by the magic of a sorceress and he liked to think that the magic had waned because he was next to one. He hoped it would eventually break altogether. After he found his sister, Mileena promised to help him find a cure, as did Orin, but that was something to discuss in the future. Brom had mentioned something about all of them returning to Thoriddon so they could search the libraries, but Callobus thought he would have more luck heading south. It was there that the barbarian tribes originated and maybe some of the cities would have information about them. If he could rid himself of the rage completely, he had a chance at a normal life.

Sometimes he would feel it crawling in the back of his mind, but he easily pushed it away. The nightmares he usually experienced also lessened of late, but his friends were still worried about him. They all had something to worry about. They were heading to a place where everyone would most likely try to kill them.

"Don't worry," Mileena said as if reading his mind. She was able to read him as easily as an open book. It was becoming easier for her to do so as he spent more time with her. "We will succeed. If we can get the help of the elves, our quest will be all that easier."

"I know." Callobus still had his doubts about the elves. If they were anything like Lords Belemil and Vaellos from Faragard, it would be a short visit. Some elves hated all races but their own and wouldn't offer help, no matter what the cause. He hoped the council of Elvradar was more understanding. They

seemed to have a common cause. If the ruler of Grimfall had fooled the elves for this long, he was sure that when he revealed the truth to them, they would be more than willing to lend aid.

The very tops of the Oakcrest Forest came into view just over the horizon. Further to the south were the Razor Ridge Mountains, which ran directly into the forest. Callobus realized the name was appropriate for the tops of the mountains look like sharp daggers. The temperature slowly dropped as they made their way east, but it was still hot. Upon seeing the trees, Mileena's face lit up.

"They're beautiful." The trees were a dark shade of green, nothing like the few trees found in the desert. Those were a sickly brown and hardly had any leaves on them. The evergreens of the Oakcrest put them to shame. They rose hundreds of feet into the air and they all caught the slight smell of pine. Mileena inhaled deeply.

"When this is over," Callobus said, "I am sure Silverleaf will be more than happy to take you to Faragard. I have never seen or heard of a place like it."

"He's told me about it," she said. "I look forward to seeing his home, as well as yours."

Callobus had made a vow never to return to Denwald but he knew now that he would. Keld and Emaria needed to know that Chandel was safe. He often thought about them and hoped they were well. Orin had told him he could send a message with his magic but Callobus wanted to wait. He wanted to have Katrina with him when he talked to the blacksmith. Hopefully, Halles and the town guard had left his uncle alone. After Cindermane's death, the mayor tried to arrest them, but Callobus had persuaded him differently. The city prospered from the dragon's treasure, which helped to alleviate the mayor's anger. With any luck, when he returned, the mayor and everyone else will have forgotten about the incident.

"We'll return," Callobus said.

"I know," she said. "Brom has also promised to show me Thoriddon. He wouldn't take no for an answer." She and the dwarf had become fast friends during their journey.

"Stubborn he is."

"Aye," was Mileena's only response. They laughed and continued toward the forest.



Killian was lost in his thoughts. After the celebration in Swordstar, they

left the next day for Elvradar. He had never been to the elven city but going to a place filled with his race was not something he looked forward to. Except for Silverleaf, he never felt comfortable around other elves, especially ones who placed themselves higher than everyone else. He met a few of the elves from the city while in service of the guild and they always thought themselves higher than all other races. It was true that he had used their smugness to get close. Being an elf, he was able to gain their trust, and then plant a dagger in their backs.

Their self-righteous purity sickened him. He hated what they were, but the elves he had met while enslaved gave him a little hope that not all of his race were the same. It had been years since he had any dealings with those elves and maybe time had shown them they are just like everyone else. Truthfully, he was more comfortable around dwarves. At least they knew their place in the world.

He looked up and watched as Callobus and Mileena laughed and smiled at one another. Behind him, Orin and Brom joked with the elves they were guiding to Elvradar. Silverleaf was speaking with an older elf about the city and the forest. Killian had seen Silverleaf as an equal right away. He was an excellent fighter, but his loyalty to someone he had hardly known was beyond Killian. The forest elf was willing to throw his life away for someone he had only met a short time ago, but Killian was slowly feeling the same way.

Callobus was affecting him somehow. Why, he did not know. All he knew was that since the first day he had actually sat and talked with the boy, long ago in Hollowdon, he knew the boy was meant for great things. Killian even thought he would die for him. The thought of dying for someone was new to him and he didn't like the feeling. But the man said that they were friends. The others did as well, even the dwarf. Even the sorceress had been kind to him since the battle with the demon. Silverleaf watched him carefully but he felt the elf's eyes less and less since they left Swordstar. They trusted him, but he was not so sure that was a good idea. Dark secrets filled his past and if revealed, he had no doubt some of them would try to kill him.

One of those secrets bothered him now, ever since he had seen Callobus's mother. The woman was kind to him. She was one of the only people that when she looked upon him, he saw no hate or anger. He saw nothing but kindness and caring in those eyes. The look filled him with fear and as he danced with her, he had to fight to keep his face calm. The woman should have died long ago, by his hand! The memories of that night flowed through his mind.

Loud steps interrupted his thoughts. Some of the elves were walking over and were about to start a conversation with him. They wanted to know more

about the other elf in their group, but he looked over at them with anger and they backed away. His mind was full and he was in no mood for conversation. He kept his eyes on the desert and tried to clear his mind.

“You look troubled.”

Killian looked over and saw that Orin had walked up to him. He had been so immersed in his thoughts that he hadn’t even heard the priest walk up.

“Go away.”

Orin walked next to him and acted like he didn’t hear the remark. He looked out over the desert, toward where Killian’s eyes were.

“Are you going to miss this place?” Orin asked.

Killian chuckled. “Hardly. I grew tired of this place long before I was forced into slavery. The heat and the openness is no place for one such as I.”

“So where do you belong?”

Killian raised an eyebrow. “Have you ever asked yourself that question? Or are you content on following blindly?”

“My path is known to me.” Orin put on a smile as he looked toward the forest that just came into view. “I go where I am needed, and to help my friends. What about you?”

“Full of question today, aren’t you?”

Now it was Orin’s turn to chuckle. “Always. I am ever in search of knowledge. It helps me become a better priest and help those around me.”

“Even those that do not wish to be helped?”

Orin raised an eyebrow. “Perhaps.”

The two walked in silence for a few moments. The sun was high in the sky but the temperature had dropped as they moved closer to the forest. Killian looked over and noticed Orin was holding his holy symbol, an amulet shaped like a hand surrounded by blue stars. He muttered prayers under his breath.

“What turned you into a holy man?”

Orin finished his prayers and looked at Killian. “It’s what I have always wanted to be.”

“What you wanted or what your father wanted?” Killian recalled Orin’s account of how the demon had used his father as a weapon against him. In his vision, Orin had seen his father calling him a failure. He had told everyone what he had seen and how he defeated the demon’s influence. His victory had saved their lives.

Orin smiled. “I received the call before my father had ever mentioned it to me. Once he found out, he was overjoyed and I joined the temple, the same temple he served.”

“If you were serving his temple, what made you leave for Denwald? I’m

sure your father was not happy about you leaving.”

“Actually, it was he who recommended it. In our order, you go where you are needed. He did not want me growing up under his shadow. He thought it best if I accomplish things on my own. I have yet to tell him I left the temple to accompany Callobus, but when he finds out the reasons, I know he will understand.”

“How nice,” Killian said sarcastically. He turned his eyes back to the desert and never saw Orin turn in his direction.

“What about your father?”

“Never knew him,” Killian said without feeling. “I was left to fend for myself a long time ago. My parents were not as caring as yours obviously were.”

Orin let the comment go without a response. He could hear in Killian’s voice that thinking about his parents caused him pain, even if he didn’t admit it. The elf’s past was private and it was his choice if he wanted to keep it that way, but there was one thing Orin wanted to know.

“Why are you coming with us?”

Killian looked at him. “You don’t enjoy my company?”

“You know what I mean. Callobus said you were free to go. You have more than enough gold in your pockets to make a home for yourself wherever you go and Druzeel is dead. No one is looking for you, so why come with us?”

Killian turned back around to gaze out at the desert. After a few moments of silence, he turned back to Orin. “I have never been one to stay in one place for too long. Besides, think of how bad you would miss me. I wouldn’t want to place that burden on you.”

Orin shook his head but a smile crept to his lips. “We are your friends, Killian. If you forget everything else, remember that. You have proven yourself and have earned our trust. It’s all right to admit you don’t want to leave.”

Killian laughed. “Are you worried about me? Worried what will happen if I do?”

“Of course. I worry about all my friends, even the ones I do not see before me. I worry about Keld, Emaria, my parents and all whom I have befriended at the temple. I am sure they worry about me as well. Can we truly be the only people that worry about you?”

Killian didn’t respond.

Orin shook his head. “Trust us Killian, as we trust you. We will not abandon you in your time of need. That is what friends are for. Your life will be better when you realize that.”

He smiled and walked back to where Brom and the other elves were

laughing. Killian watched him go and turned his attention toward Callobus and Mileena. The two laughed and talked with each other and Killian found himself not being able to look away. He had spent many nights with females, but never had one spoken to him or looked at him as Mileena looked at Callobus. She turned at that moment and caught his eye. A smile came to her lips, but he tore his gaze away and looked back toward the desert. He never saw her turn her head, her merriment replaced with worry.



Mileena turned her head and looked back. She looked at all the elves and could see the excitement on their faces as they saw their home. It would be a few more days until they reached Elvradar but they were practically home. She couldn't wait to see the elven city. The only city she had ever been in was Shadowspar, and that was small compared to others she had heard about. If the stories were true, it would be a place she would not soon forget.

She noticed Orin walking back toward Brom and followed where he had come from. Her eyes met Killian's. He looked troubled but she just smiled at him. He looked away quickly and peered toward the desert. The smile on her face lessened and she turned around.

"Killian is not himself," she said. "He has been different since we left a few days ago. Should I talk to him?"

"No," Callobus said quickly. "He'll be all right. You have to remember, this is something he is not used to. He is used to being around people that are constantly plotting to kill and murder, evil beings that know nothing but death and destruction. I think he is unused to letting his guard down."

"I hope he realizes he is among friends."

"I don't think he has ever had any friends, only those that would use him for their own gain."

Mileena looked saddened. "What an empty life. If I did not have Marcus and the others in Shadowspar, I don't think I could have made it as long as I did."

"You don't give yourself enough credit."

Mileena looked at him and smiled. "I know, but what can one person do against such a threat?"

Callobus only looked at her and smiled back. He had been just one person and with the help of but a few, had killed a dragon and overthrown a wizard. She smiled back, knowing what he was thinking.

"They are getting restless."

Callobus and Mileena turned and saw Silverleaf and Brom walk up. Orin was still in the rear, talking with the elves. Killian was off to the side, deep in his own thoughts.

“They are just excited to get home,” Mileena said.

“Loldiah has promised to tell the high council everything that happened,” Silverleaf said. “With his help, he thinks he can get the council to agree to help us. He is unsure what help they will provide, but the elves of Elvradar will not let something like this go without action.”

“A war’s brewin’ lad.” Brom rubbed his hands together.

“That may be,” Callobus said, “but until we know, let’s try and handle this as calmly as we can. I don’t want anyone dying, elves included, for the wrong reasons.”

Silverleaf continued. “The elves and the kingdom have been at each others throats for sometime, ever since the battle over lumber. Regardless of our actions, all out war may be inevitable.”

“Did the elves not know what was going on in Shadowspar?” Mileena asked.

Silverleaf shook his head. “None of them seem to have known the town existed. Loldiah had only been in the mines a short time. Everyone else had been there longer. The last he heard, Grimfall and Elvradar were at a stand still. The fighting had only just ended before he was captured.”

“Why didn’t the council do anything?” Mileena was confused on why the elves would leave their people to such a fate.

“The elves were not supposed to be in Grimfall in the first place. If they came out and demanded their return, it would be evidence of their attempt to spy on the kingdom and they couldn’t send an army marching into the desert for that would also implicate them. When the elves disappeared, they had no choice but to let them go. If the elven wizards used magic to try and locate them, their search was probably blocked.”

“Like when we tried to find my mother,” Callobus said. “How did the guard know they were coming?”

“They suspect a spy from Grimfall, or someone under magic, somehow infiltrated their city.” The elves never did explain how they were caught. This new information did not bode well, for anyone.

“Why they be just tellin’ us this now?” Brom said in anger.

Silverleaf shook his head. “They were afraid we wouldn’t escort them back if we knew. I told them it didn’t matter but it seems the wizard had them afraid of their own shadows.”

Callobus thought on what he just heard. If they did have a spy in Elvradar,

perhaps it was best to go around. He quickly dismissed the idea. If there was any chance of getting help from the elves, he had to take the risk. They would have to be careful when they entered the forest because if there were spies from Grimfall, they would be looking for the ones that liberated the town.

“How deep in the forest is Elvradar?” Callobus asked.

“About three or four days.”

“Does he know any of the councilors?”

“A few and he has assured me he can trust them.”

“We need to speak to them upon arriving. If we can get to them and explain what is going on, then they can use their influence and speak to the others. My only concern is that if the elves decide to help us, if they do have a spy, Grimfall will know about our plans and be able to prepare. We need to keep our eyes open.”

Everyone nodded and looked back into the group of elves. All were looking toward the forest, relieved that they were finally going to be home. Callobus envied them in that they had a place to call their own. He looked to Killian and saw the elf still peering out over the desert. His eyes were troubled but Callobus turned away, leaving him to his thoughts.

“Find out if they know anything else.” Silverleaf nodded and turned to walk back to where Orin was.

“Don’t worry lad,” Brom said. “I be sniffin’ out the treach’rous dog an be cleavin’ ‘im in two.” He rubbed his hands together in anticipation and walked with Silverleaf.

Callobus and Mileena turned and looked at the forest. The trees were growing larger with each step. They both hoped the elves would help them. If they decided to turn a blind eye, then they were on their own.