

Kron Darkbow seeks vengeance, and he plans to have it no matter the costs. Returning to the city of his birth after 15 years, he hunts down the wizard responsible for the deaths of those he loved only to find out another was responsible for the murders. That other is Belgad the Liar, a former barbarian chieftain who is now boss of the city's underworld.

Following his path for blood, Kron comes across the magical healer, Randall Tendbones, and accidentally reveals Randall's darkest secret to the world. It's a secret about the past, a secret that has kept Randall on the run for three years. Now it has caught up with him, and Belgad the Liar is suddenly the least of Randall and Kron's concerns. The gaze of Lord Verkain, king of the dark northern land of Kobalos, has fallen upon Kron and Randall. And it is a gaze filled with madness.

City of Rogues

Book I of the Kobalos Trilogy

The Ursian Chronicles

by Ty Johnston



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for Greg

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Chapter One

1,994 years After Ashal (A.A.)

Trelvigor sat on a cushioned chair in the dark, his hands crossed in his lap over a curved dagger. Unmoving, he watched a young man with long hair and tattered clothes climb through the open shutters of a window into the top level of the tower.

As the stranger stepped onto the floor, Trelvigor's somber face formed a devilish grin. It had been a simple task casting an aura of darkness around himself. The trespasser could not see him, but the wizard could see the intruder through the open window's moonlight.

The young man glanced around at the cold fireplace and the long iron table holding up a heavy slab of wood as its surface. Built into the walls of the room were shelves lined with decaying books and glass vials filled with colorful liquids. He barely took notice of where Trelvigor sat, his eyes coming to the room's lone door of thick oak.

He took a step toward the door.

Trelvigor waved a hand in the air. "Ice."

The young man stopped, his feet planted to the ground and his arms hanging at his sides as if heavy. His eyes continued to roll from fear, glancing and darting about.

The mage's grin grew wider as he gripped the dagger and stood, allowing the spell of darkness to fall away from him.

The intruder's gaze sprang to the older man in a long tunic who appeared from nowhere.

The wizard raised his blade to eye level so they could see the moon glinting off its curved edges. "This is what happens to those who enter my home uninvited."

The blade slashed at air.

The young man's eyes went wider as pain like fire erupted in his gut. He stared down and saw his stomach slashed open, the intestines spilling onto the floor like fluid.

Trelvigor slashed up with the blade.

The trespasser's body arched, his feet remaining stuck to the floor. Through pain that nearly clouded his vision, he could see his chest had been ripped open, exposing scarlet ribs beneath.

The young man tried to scream but found he could not draw in air. His body quivered ever so slightly then slumped to the floor.

Trelvigor's grin was all teeth as he sheathed the dagger in his belt and kicked the still, bloody form of the youth.

The wizard chuckled. *These petty thieves would never learn.* Trelvigor did not consider himself a vain sorcerer, mainly because he was smart enough to realize he was not the best nor most powerful mage in the city of Bond, but he did have talent and had been a student to more than a few skilled teachers. He also had spent plenty of time on the darker side of the city and knew the right end of a dagger. Stupid thieves should beware, especially when trying to invade his home.

Satisfied the intruder would no longer be causing mischief, Trelvigor turned with his tunic swaying around him and reached for a handful of rags on a shelf. There had been blood spilled, and the wizard had much to clean, the one part of murder he detested.

Trelvigor bent with the rags to wipe blood from the floor. A distant noise, a glasslike tinkling, made him pause. His head came up as he strained his senses to pick up any sound.

Another remote noise followed, this one too like breaking glass.

Trelvigor gritted his teeth, gripped his dagger in its sheath. He strode across the room and out the door. Beyond, he paused atop the circular stone staircase and listened.

He detected nothing more.

Perhaps the young thief had a partner? Someone who had followed him into the wizard's den and now could not find his way out? Trelvigor doubted that. One lesson the mage had learned on the streets was that good thieves worked alone because there was less likelihood of being caught. The young intruder Trelvigor had slain had not been bright, but he had shown some skill; he had been caught only because Trelvigor had placed an alarm ward around the house.

The sorcerer hurried down the stone steps, then came to a halt once more. He could have sworn a shadow had moved above.

He waited patiently for a few moments. Another lesson he had learned on the streets of Bond was that a shadow could spell death.

A breath passed.

But nothing moved.

The wizard continued down a hallway. He had dealt with the thief and now had someone or something else within his home.

As he stormed into his private quarters, Trelvigor's grin returned in hopes of finding another opponent. But the wizard found no threat in his bedroom. His eyes followed the gilded curves of the huge master bed and the intricate embroidery of Hiponese tapestries hanging about the chamber.

Another shadow danced upon the wall in the hallway.

The wizard mumbled a few words of magic, simple protection wards, then stuck his head into the hall.

Nothing.

Trelvigor scowled. Someone was going to pay for their mischief.

He gritted his teeth and hurried down a stone stairway into the main apartments of the mansion, rounding a corner into a long, high-ceilinged entertaining room. He came to a halt. Before him stood a dark wooden cabinet, a piece of furniture nearly as tall as himself, that stored many fine liquors. The cabinet doors hung open and two bottles of Ursian brandy had been smashed on the rug in the center of the room. A trail of the dark alcohol ran from the shattered bottles into the hallway Trelvigor had just exited.

The wizard glanced around the room. Everything else seemed in place. The couches covered in tiger skins appeared fine, as did the bear rug before the burning fireplace and the gold-plated sconces that featured oil-filled lamps. The polished rosewood desk had not been touched, and neither had the brocade cushioned chairs or the Ursian tapestries on the walls.

Trelvigor glanced at the broken bottles again. It was bad enough to have found that fool breaking into his house, but now his home seemed a stranger.

The now familiar, distant chord of shattering glass came to him from the hallway.

For the first time since entering the room, Trelvigor peered inside the liquor cabinet. It was almost empty, only two dust-covered bottles of cheap wine rested in the back. Missing were nearly a dozen bottles of the strongest potables that could be purchased in West Ursia.

Someone had broken into his home and not only taken his rightful property, but was destroying those belongings and ruining his house. Someone was having fun, a little joke on the wizard. That someone would learn a lesson far harsher than had the dead thief. Trelvigor would take his time with this one, delighting in slicing flesh from bone.

The sorcerer yanked out the long, curved dagger. He stormed out of his entertaining room, turning left to follow a trail of dark liquor to the kitchen, the direction he had last heard the breaking of glass.

Once inside the kitchen, Trelvigor found on the floor two more busted bottles, one a black Kobalan whiskey and the other a lighter East Ursian brandy. Another liquid trail left the room through a doorway to the dining room.

The din of shattering glass came to him again, this time from above.

The wizard glared at the ceiling. Above him was the tower where he had disposed of the thief. Whomever was causing this mess had gotten past Trelvigor, and the only path to the tower was the one he had just taken. Someone either had slipped past him, which was not possible, or someone had exited the lower floor and in a matter of seconds been able to scale the tower and climb through the window on the topmost level.

Trelvigor gripped the dagger more firmly and charged through his home and up the stairs to the tower's upper level. He did not pause in front of the door, but plunged through with his weapon in front.

His anger drained as a dark, cloaked figure gave him reason to halt. The shape was in the center of the chamber, next to the remains of the thief. The being seemed human, but Trelvigor could make out little because of the enveloping black cloak and the hood pulled forward to shadow the face.

The mage's first inclination was to ask who this being was to invade his home, but he was more concerned with his own safety upon noting the large sword strapped on the figure's back, the weapon's pommel above the right shoulder.

The wizard noticed two more shattered bottles of expensive alcohol, this time in front of the door, leaving another liquid trail directly beneath Trelvigor's feet.

The dark figure lowered its cowl slightly, as if to menace. "It has been fifteen years."

Trelvigor leaned forward, staring at the black hole where a face would be if the cloak's hood were pulled back. He was trying to see lips moving, but could not. He guessed the figure was a man, or at least male, because of its sturdy voice, but even that was not certain.

With sweating palms, the wizard shifted his knife to the other hand and then back again. "What is it you want?"

"Fifteen years ago you murdered a man and woman."

Trelvigor had killed a lot of people over the years. How was he expected to remember two bodies out of dozens, especially from across fifteen years?

"There was an ambush." The figure crouched while it recalled the past. "You had half a dozen men at your command. You forced the couple's wagon to a halt and demanded surrender of their goods. The man said 'no,' and your brutes launched arrows into them, stilling their lives."

A dim memory surfaced in Trelvigor's mind's eye. "Belgad."

"What?"

"I worked for Belgad in those days." The knife shifted again, then shifted back. "We only hit merchants who were too cheap or stubborn to hire guards. We didn't kill them unless they put up a fight, or we had orders to make an example of them."

The dark form stood straighter, taller, the moonlight from the window stretching the figure's shadow across the floor nearly to Trelvigor's feet. "You mean Belgad the Liar."

"Had to have been."

"I see." The figure's voice was like stone grating against stone.

Trelvigor shivered. He normally had little fear of any mortal man, but he wasn't sure what this was in front of him. It seemed human, but there was no proof of that. "It's Belgad you should be speaking with."

"I will," the dark figure said, standing tall once more, its stature menacing, "but first I want to know if you remember the names of the couple."

Trelvigor's mind was a blank.

"You don't know, do you?"

Trelvigor's mind raced, but nothing surfaced in his memory.

"I should do to you what befell the young man on this cold, stone floor." The figure waved a hand over the dead thief.

Trelvigor's eyes darted to the dark hole of the hood.

"He didn't deserve the fate you offered." The figure clenched a black, gloved fist over the

corpse. "I only hired him to break out a window or two. I figured it would be best to have someone else disarm your alarm wards. It never occurred to me how sick you truly were."

The figure took a step forward.

Trelvigor jumped back, holding his dagger in front. "Stay away! Or I'll turn your insides out and feed you to a demon."

The dark shape chuckled.

Sweat dripping down his face, the wizard waved his weapon. "You laugh?"

The figure ceased its chortle.

"Then become my slave." The wizard snapped his fingers.

The figure stood motionless.

Trelvigor pointed at the large sword. "Fall on your weapon."

The dark figure chuckled again. "Charms only work on the weak of mind."

Trelvigor's nerve nearly broke and he almost turned to run. The dark thing was right, and if it had the willpower to ignore his charms, then it could possibly ignore other illusions. There was only one way to find out.

"Ice," Trelvigor said, pointing the dagger at the cloaked form.

"I've been studying you from afar for some time." The moon from the window outlined the bulky figure, outlining muscle beneath the black cloak. "I know your tricks."

"I've nothing to fear from you." Trelvigor's voice quivered. "You cannot harm me."

"Let me guess. You have placed a protection spell around yourself."

"Yes, so there is nothing you can do to me."

"Neither sword nor arrow can harm you, I suppose?"

Trelvigor nodded.

"How are you, then, with fire?" A hand gloved in black snapped out from beneath the cloak, flinging a small gray ball.

Trelvigor watched the clay orb sail across the room before it cracked onto the ground at his feet and burst, flames exploding from within and climbing up his limbs.

The wizard screamed as he dropped to the ground, rolling across the room's stone floor in hopes of smothering the fire sticking to his skin and melting his silk tunic. He rolled into the smashed liquor bottles, cutting his hands and face, and learned new levels of anguish as the spilled alcohol caught fire and began to cook the flesh on his arms. Further thrashing only spread the conflagration, catching ablaze the liquor trail leading to the stairs and beyond.

The dark figure slid backward, away from the burning and shrieking wizard. It gave Trelvigor one last glance, an evil grin of white teeth beneath the black cloak's hood, then was gone through the window.

Chapter Two

If one of his Dartague countrymen saw the fortress Belgad the Liar claimed as home, the man would believe Belgad was a king. The building was much like its owner, towering and solid. The grounds of the fortress included a yard of no few acres surrounded by a high stone wall. However, the property's surroundings proved Belgad was not royalty. His fortress rested in the west end of Bond within a region known as the Swamps, named so because it lay between two rivers that eventually ran into one another east of the city. If the northerner called Belgad were king of anything, it was the busy and crowded streets within the Swamps where the majority of Bond's rabble led their daily lives.

Despite this wealth and power, Belgad the Liar sat glum in a massive oak chair on a raised platform at one end of his grand hall, the room much like a chapel with high windows upon either side showing gardens beyond.

"Dismissed," the large, bald northerner said to a short man in robes before him.

The little man backed away quickly, bobbing his head. "Thank you, mighty one, thank you."

Belgad sneered and waved the stooping figure away. Acquiescence from others was expected, but it was nothing the large man respected. Looking much like a barbarian king of old in his lion-skin tunic, Belgad ran his fingers over the white mustache beneath his crooked nose while his eyes shifted to another figure standing at the foot of the steps leading to the throne.

This man was also short, as most were to Belgad, and he was covered in ratty clothes. His eyes glanced around nervously beneath the stern gaze of his liege

Belgad motioned the man forward. "Report."

"Sir, you'd asked me to keep watch on the Docks situation."

"Yes, Stilp. Proceed."

"That pope they got in the East has lowered the tariffs on all their goods," Stilp said, then added a shrug, "but the dock foremen, they don't want to pay no extra."

"How much have the tariffs dropped?"

"Three percent."

Belgad's hard eyes focused upon his employee. "More gold is falling into their laps, but they don't want to pay extra for their protection when it means there is more to protect."

Stilp stared down at his dusty boots. "Yes, sir."

Belgad leaned forward on his throne, rested his chin on a fist and stared through the high windows on one side of the hall. Beyond he spied a bountiful garden full of foreign trees and other plants he had brought to his fortress at great expense; he knew next to nothing about the greenery other than it was something a rich and powerful man like himself should have, and after a long day of dealing with a line of clients, the garden calmed his mind.

"The next guild assembly is in two days." Belgad continued to stare into the garden as if he were alone. "Take three men and make it clear the Docks does not profit without my protection."

"How far should I push?"

Belgad's blue eyes returned to the smaller man and made him shiver. "Roughen a few of them, if necessary, but no killings. Killings are bad for business."

"Yes, sir." Stilp backed away.

Belgad's gaze traveled down the center of the hall to an approaching thin fellow in a red silk robe swaying about his feet. The man passed Stilp, who exited between armed guards and through a huge door of oak. Belgad paused in anticipation of what Lalo the Finder would have to say. Lalo never minced words, and nearly everything he said was of import.

"I beg your pardon, my lord." Lalo halted at the bottom of the throne's steps, his head slightly

bowed. "There is a situation of which you should be aware."

"Speak, Finder."

"The house of Trelvigor the mage is in flames. There has been no sign of the wizard himself, and I fear the worst."

Trelvigor was an old client to Belgad, having been in the northerner's employ since Belgad had arrived in Bond fifteen years earlier. The wizard had dark, sometimes disturbing faults. But those same faults had often been used in Belgad's service. Being a patron meant one had certain responsibilities to one's clients.

Besides, Belgad realized this gave him an excuse to leave his fortress and to cancel the rest of his meetings.

The Dartague stood straight, at his full height, towering over Lalo. "Ready a carriage."

It was dark, but not late, and the journey by carriage from the Swamps to Trelvigor's mansion in Uptown took nearly an hour because of the foot traffic on the cobblestone streets. The trip could have taken longer for many, but Belgad's reputation cleared the way with help from an escort of two heavily-armed guards driving the carriage and two other men on horseback.

Mages Way was one of the widest roads in Bond, its fancy homes lining the street for a mile or more, but Belgad could not see the wizard's burning mansion from the open window of his carriage. There were too many wagons, horses and people blocking the path to see much of anything other than an orange glow in the distance. All classes of persons filled the street, from the bored wealthy who lived nearby to the dirty slum dwellers come up from the Swamps. The fire was the entertainment of the night.

"Stop the carriage," the Dartague ordered.

The guard steering the horses reined the animals to a halt.

Belgad shoved open the carriage door and climbed out to the street. "I'll walk from here."

He tromped away from the carriage and his personal guards. A person would have to be a fool to try and strike down Belgad the Liar in the middle of the streets. Even if Belgad were killed, the repercussions could be devastating.

Still walking, Belgad watched the glow that flowed over the crowd ahead. The northerner could make out a bucket brigade of well-meaning citizens and city patrolmen transferring water from the river several blocks south. Even from this distance, he could tell the firefighters were wasting their time. It was obvious there would be nothing left of the mansion other than its stone frame and tower.

Closer to the flames, Belgad could make out several orange tabards of the city guards. The men huddled together next to the bucket brigade. He made a straight line for the guards.

"Who is in charge in this district tonight?"

One of the guards stepped forward. "That would be me, Lord Belgad." A disquieted hand gripped the pommel of the sword at his side. "Sergeant Gris at your service."

Belgad waved a hand toward the flames. "Is river water the best you can do?"

"It is the best we could arrange for now, sir." Gris waved a hand toward the bucket line. "The water pumps at the Docks are being used to drain ships, and no mages along the Way are available."

Belgad stared over the crowd to other expensive homes lining the road. Several of the buildings, a number of them minor fortresses or mansions, showed burning lights in the windows.

"You mean none of them would come."

The sergeant nodded toward the wealthy abodes. "I asked several myself personally, but I was told they did not have the proper spells prepared to be of aid."

"They had no love for Trelvigor." It made a cruel sense to the Dartague. Wizards were a fickle lot, and Trelvigor was not welcome among their numbers. The mage whose home was in flames had

gained no love in sorcerous circles through his connections with the city's underworld.

The heavy ceiling beams in the burning structure collapsed with a cracking din, shaking the ground. Cries of fear went up from the crowd as orange and yellow sparks exploded into the air, showering the bucket brigade with soot and sending its members fleeing.

Belgad looked through open windows where the shutters had been burned away and saw a furnace with stone walls. "Has there been any sign of Trelvigor?"

Gris glanced at the blaze, then back to the larger man beside him. "Not yet, sir. And to be honest, I don't expect to find anything until the fire has been put out."

"Any idea what started it?" With a roving gaze, Belgad watched the bucket brigade reform its line to the river.

"I do not know, sir," Gris said, following the Dartague's look, "but others who saw it early on said the fire started from within. Probably the kitchen, but you never can tell with wizards. Sometimes they've got potions brewing and Ashal knows what other goings on."

Belgad had to admit the sergeant might be correct. Trelvigor had not been an exceptional alchemist, though he did know how to cook a poison or two.

A yell went up from the front of the bucket line.

"Excuse me, sir." Sergeant Gris took off at a run.

Belgad watched the man go. From his viewpoint he could make out the bucket brigade near the front entrance to the remains of the wizard's mansion. Several men were kneeling as Gris approached, but the flames and crowd kept Belgad from seeing more.

The sergeant spoke briefly with the bucketeers before jogging back to Belgad.

The Dartague nodded toward the flames and the gathering of men there. "What news?"

"They've found him."

"The wizard?"

"Yes, sir, and he's alive. He managed to crawl his way to the front door before passing out, but he's in bad shape."

Belgad waved to one of his bodyguards and the man came forward. "Go to the nearest healing tower and let them know we're bringing a man badly burnt."

"Yes, my lord." The man ran off through the crowd.

"He looked in bad shape, sir." Gris took a step back as Belgad turned to him once more. "I don't know if the healers can save this one."

"They had better." Belgad grimaced. "That's why I make donations to them every month."

Randall Tendbones had seen a lot of pain and death in his twenty-one years, but he had never seen someone burnt so horribly they were hardly recognizable as human.

The blackened, smoking husk that was Trelvigor the wizard was curled in a fetal position on a padded table. It was difficult for Randall to tell where the man's clothing ended and the remains of the flesh began; all had been burnt and melted together into a crispy mush. Hardened flakes of black skin protruded from the wizard in the few places raw muscle did not show.

The healer closed his eyes and rested a hand on a forehead that looked like cooked strips of beef. Randall breathed in slowly, allowing magic to flow from within his soul and to seep into the unconscious mage. He could not quickly heal someone injured so badly, but for now he could calm Trelvigor and keep the mage from waking to the anguish, if he could awaken at all.

A knock at the door caused the healer to remove his hand and open his eyes.

"Yes?"

A coarse voice spoke from beyond. "Lord Belgad would like a word with you."

"I'll be right with him."

Booted feet stomped away as the healer pulled off the white robes of his profession and dumped them in an open barrel next to the door. For a moment he stood in his simple tunic, contemplating the man he was about to meet.

Beyond the door was a circular chamber familiar to Randall, a portion of the tower proper that was a combination waiting room and work room for the healer. The man Randall knew by reputation as Belgad the Liar was sitting in the healer's chair behind his desk. Two men clad in chain armor stood opposite Randall next to the room's other door. Beyond that door could be heard the various comings and goings of other healers and patients.

Belgad stood. "What is his condition?"

Randall walked to his desk. "He will probably live."

"Probably?"

"There's been much damage," the healer explained. "He will take some time to heal. It's a wonder he's alive at all."

Belgad nodded and returned to the chair. "How long?"

Randall pulled up a chair and sat in front of his desk. "Master Belgad, there's no magic strong enough to entirely undo what has been done to him."

The Dartague grunted. "I should ask one of the other healers, or take him to the other tower."

"Believe me, Trelvigor will be best served here." Randall stared with earnest across the table top. "Healing magic takes much endurance. My youth allows me to channel far stronger resources from within than could another, older healer."

"Your youth also reveals your inexperience."

"I'm Kobalan. If anyone understands pain, it would be I."

Belgad blinked.

Randall regretted the slip about his nationality, but he wanted to prove to this man he was the best healer available.

He was soon glad to notice the Dartague let the remark go.

Belgad pointed to the healer. "You still haven't told me how long it would take to work your magic."

"About three weeks."

"How long until he can talk?"

"A couple of weeks, perhaps longer." Randall shrugged. "The inside of his mouth was seared, his tongue nearly gone, and his lungs have been singed."

"You can ... grow back his tongue?"

"That's why it will take at least a couple of weeks before he can talk." Randall motioned toward the room where Trelvigor lay in a stupor. "The magic needed to grow major tissue or organs is quite straining. I'm afraid I won't be doing much other work for a month or so."

Belgad stood, showing the conversation was at an end. "That is why you have other healers." The large man moved toward the door.

One of the guards opened the portal, but the northerner paused and turned back to the healer. "Let me know when he can speak."

"Yes, my lord." Randall watched the three men exit his chamber.

Chapter Three

The boy was only twelve, but he knew an opportunity when he saw it. From between two fruit stalls he spied Ezra the baker's shop across the way of the bazaar's central path.

Ezra had been foolish to leave a window open, and Ezra had been foolish to leave a loaf of nut bread cooling in the window. Ezra could expect to lose a little business that day.

The boy glanced from side to side. It was morning and the bazaar wasn't at its busiest, but a number of hawkers and early customers were on the streets. No one seemed to notice the lad in grimy rags kneeling between two stalls.

He glanced at the cooling loaf of bread again. It would be so easy. He could dart across cobbled stones and snag his breakfast, then it would be zig, zag, zoom! And he'd be gone. No one would know from where he had come and no one would know where he had gone.

He licked his lips. He could already feel the warmth of the bread on his tongue. It was time for breakfast.

The boy took a step.

A boot slid between his feet.

He dropped hard, his quick hands all that saved him from a broken nose.

Before he could roll over, a hand clamped on the back of his shirt and yanked him to his feet.

The boy tried to run, but he was held in a grip of iron and his struggles soon ceased.

He twisted his head to stare at a gloved hand that led up to a man in a deerskin tabard. He was tall, with dusty boots rising to his knees. A leather vest covered a linen shirt and a long, tan cloak hung from his back. The clothes were those of a man who spent much time in the woods or on the roads, but they were clean and in good condition. Also, the sizable sword on the fellow's left hip told the boy this was someone he should take seriously.

The man nodded across the way to the baker's shop. "Looked as if you were about to have breakfast."

The boy had learned early in his young life to read human character, and he knew right away this man was no fool. It would be stupid to lie. "A good breakfast it would have been, too, without your intrusion."

The man pointed to their right past a line of booths to the edge of a stone warehouse. "Two city guards around that corner," he said, then pointed to their left between another row of stalls, "and a member of the beggars' guild up that way. He probably would not like you scaring off his business. I think I saved you a bit of trouble."

The stranger released his grip on the youth.

The boy thought about running, but his curiosity got the best of him. He wanted to know how he had been caught. He was sure there had been no one near him mere seconds before. "Where'd you come from just now?"

The man chuckled. "That corner." He jabbed a thumb behind them to a dark spot aft of a fruit stall. "I was sitting on a crate finishing my breakfast when you showed. If you're going to have a future as a thief, you're going to have to learn to read your surroundings better."

"I'm no thief!"

The man chuckled again. "You were about to pay for that loaf of bread?"

The boy pouted. He would have stuffed his hands in his pockets, but his ragged pants didn't have any pockets.

Towering over the youth, the man showed no signs of allowing the boy to flee without answering questions. "What's your name, boy?"

“Why should I tell you?”

A smile remained on the stranger’s lips, but not in his eyes. “Because I’m asking, and in polite society, one generally gives one’s name when asked.”

“Who says we’re in polite society? Anyway, I don’t know you.”

“I am Lucius Tallerus,” the man said with a polite nod of his head. “Now you.”

The boy bit his bottom lip. He didn’t like giving his name to this man. The fellow seemed almost as if he were a member of the city guard. The lad didn’t think he was in trouble, but he didn’t want to take any chances. Still, there was no use in putting off the inevitable.

“Wyck.”

The grin on Lucius’s lips grew wider, but his stern eyes were not blinking. “Try again. Your real name.”

“I don’t know my real name.” The boy was telling the truth. “I never knew my mom and dad, but on the streets they call me Wyck.”

Some of the cold fled from the man’s eyes as he pulled a small leather sack from beneath his tabard. He opened it with one hand, retrieved three silver coins and held them out. “Take these.”

The boy’s eyes were wide as he stared at the coins.

Lucius’s gloved hand moved a little closer to the boy, the coins in his palm. “I want you to buy some food and new clothes. And I want you to get a room off the streets, at least for the night.”

Wyck’s eyes darted from the coins to the man’s face. “I’m not doing anything *sick* for you. I might be living on the streets, but I’m not desperate.”

The grin returned to Lucius’s face. “I didn’t mean anything of the sorts. The coins are for you, then we part ways if you wish.”

Confusion was plain on the boy’s face. “Why are you doing this?”

He saw a glazed look come over the man’s eyes. “Because I lived on these streets for a while when I was about your age.”

Lucius’s voice showed he was telling the truth.

The boy lifted the coins.

Lucius pointed to the money. “There can be more of those.”

It was Wyck’s turn to smile. “How?”

“I take it you spend most of your time here in the Swamps.”

The lad nodded.

“Then you are someone who hears things,” Lucius said, scanning their surroundings as if making sure no one else was listening, “someone who knows things.”

“I hear enough.”

“Good, because that’s how you can earn my silver.” Lucius stared at the lad again. “I want you to be my eyes and ears on the streets. If there’s news or gossip, let me know.”

Wyck stared at the coins in his hand. “That’s easy enough.”

“Off with you, then. I’ve business to attend to.”

The boy turned and ran as fast as his legs would carry him. His mind was already filling with fruit-filled pastries and sugar candies.

He pulled to a halt after a dozen steps and turned to see the man still standing next to the stall. “How do I find you?”

“You know the Rusty Scabbard?”

Wyck nodded again. He was familiar with the tavern.

“Leave word for me there.”

With that the boy rushed off.

Once the youth was gone down an alley, Lucius turned to his right. He had been telling the truth about the two city guards, and he needed to ask directions of them.

The blackened shell that had been the home of Trelvigor the wizard was little more than smoking walls and rubble by morning. Even the mansion's tower had fallen once the wooden roof of the main structure had collapsed.

It was the job of Sergeant Gris to clean up the mess. It was not a job he enjoyed, but it was not one he detested. It was merely another task to be performed among the steady stream of tasks he dealt with daily.

Soon after the sun was above the remainder of the wizard's mansion, Gris and three of his men were overseeing a crew of workers who had been pulled from various jobs around the city to attend to the burnt building. Someone from another division of the city's bureaucracy would normally be in charge of such an operation, but the mayor had wanted the Guard there because of the nature of the building. It had been a wizard's home and could present untold dangers. Gris believed any dangers would have gone up in flames, but he didn't question what he was told to do.

Wheelbarrows were lined up in front of the mansion's remains as workers loaded them with pieces of blackened wood and stone that had fallen outside of the residence proper. The inside of the structure was still too hot for anyone to enter, but the crew was cleaning as best it could.

Gris turned to face the street. There were still some gawkers, most fresh awake though a few looked haggard enough to have been there all night.

Surveying the surroundings, the sergeant was grateful the fire had been on Mages Way. The street's width would make it easier for a crew to move in with cranes to dismantle the leftovers and clear away the rubble. Trelvigor wasn't able to talk, but Gris couldn't imagine the mage would argue about tearing down the building. There was nothing to save.

Movement in the back of the crowd caused the sergeant to shift his gaze, and he spotted a man making his way toward him through the pedestrians. He recognized the tall, sturdy fellow dressed in tanned deer skins and leathers.

The sergeant's lips formed into a grin. "By Ashal, Lucius Tallerus." He marched forward with a hand outstretched.

Lucius returned the sergeant's firm grip with a smile of his own.

"You're a long way from the Prisonlands," Gris said as their hands parted. "What brought you here?"

"Looking for you."

"Busy this morning." Gris nodded toward the shell of a building. "But nothing I can't break away from for a few minutes. How'd you find me?"

"A clerk at the central barracks told me where you were stationed." Lucius pointed at the remains of Trelvigor's mansion. "What happened here?"

Gris glanced at the rising smoke. "Wizard's house caught fire last night. We don't know what caused it yet, and the wizard's in no shape to answer questions."

"I guess there's not much a dead man can tell you."

"He's not dead."

Lucius pointed at the house again. "He lived through that?"

"Managed to make his way to the front door." Gris shrugged as if almost disbelieving. "When he was pulled out, he wasn't much more than a husk. One of the local healers thinks he can have him back on his feet in a few weeks."

"Is that why the city guard are involved?"

"Usually we're not in on this sort of thing," Gris said, nodding as they walked away from the crowd into the center of Mages Way, "but it was a wizard, and a body was found in the rubble of the house's tower."

"Servant?"

Gris shrugged again. "To everyone's knowledge, the wizard lived alone, and this wizard didn't have too many friends. We'll look into it best we can, but I'll have to wait until the wizard's in better shape before I can find out what happened.

"Anyway, what can I do for you?"

"I'm seeking work."

"What about the wardens?"

"I resigned." Lucius's words drew a look of surprise. "My uncle passed away about six months ago."

"Sorry to hear about Kuthius. He was a damn fine warden. What happened to him?"

"Hard living and old age."

Gris chuckled, thinking about the tough old man who had been Lucius Tallerus's uncle. Kuthius Tallerus had lived hard. He had been a border warden for the Prisonlands nearly all his life, and that job meant hard living in the woods while catching some of the toughest and deadliest of men. Most wardens were young, in their twenties, and few lived long enough or kept the job long enough to make it into their thirties. Gris guessed Kuthius must have been in his mid-fifties and had probably been a border warden for close to forty years. Gris himself had retired when he had turned thirty only four years earlier, and he had no qualms about giving up the life.

"He should have retired long ago." The words came almost as if Lucius could read the sergeant's thoughts. "After he was gone, I figured it was time to move on."

Gris slapped his friend on the back. "If there was ever a fellow meant to be a border warden, it was you, Lucius. You were one of the best. I'm surprised the captains didn't try to keep you by making you a better offer."

"Who says they didn't?"

The two laughed together.

"It's good to see you again, but tell me what kind of work you're looking for." The sergeant gripped the handle of the sword at his waist and shifted it to a more comfortable position. "I'm guessing a soldier or guard's position. Or how about hunting? You're the best tracker I've ever seen."

"I'd prefer something in town."

"Guard work it is, then." Gris paused and stared out over the heads of the crowd still watching the work crew. "We don't have anything open with the city right now, but that can change any time. However, the Western church is always looking for guards."

"I'd prefer to work for more than food and a cot."

"I understand," Gris said, still watching the crowd. "The Western church just doesn't have the coffers of the Eastern."

Lucius nodded as they continued with their walk.

"There's a bodyguard's guild, but I don't think you'd work for them." The sergeant continued on, leading his friend through a group of pedestrians that gave way before his orange tunic. "If they find a fellow working in town without being a member, they take it out on him pretty hard."

"What else is there?"

"There's the Asylum."

"An asylum? I don't remember it."

"One of the wealthier healers had it built a dozen years ago." Gris brought them to a halt once more. "They use it for mad folk and a few others who are too sick to take care of themselves."

"A hospital?"

"Of sorts," Gris said as the two turned around to face across the street and back towards the remains of the wizard's mansion, "but it's more like a prison. It's a dangerous place, but I guess it's no worse than the Prisonlands. If you like, I can call on the chief guard there, or I can ask around to see if there's anything else available. Sometimes a local tavern wants to hire on some arm."

"The Asylum will do," Lucius said as they moved back toward the work crew and the other city

guards.. “I just need something to tide me over. I don’t have any long range plans, but it’s good to be home.”

Chapter Four

It was apparent by Stilp's awkward walk he was not familiar with wearing a sword. At each step his left hand would slap the pommel on his hip. But he did not expect to use the weapon. Three of Belgad's chain-clad goons followed as he marched along a dark alley. Stilp wore the sword to make a statement, to show he was important. The three bodyguards were the real threat to anyone foolish enough to accost the group.

Stilp halted at the end of the alley, the trio behind following suit. The little man glanced out into the path crossing before them. The alley intersected Dock Street, which ran along the northern shore of the Swamps. The street was lit well, lamps having been hung on the sides of buildings facing the North River. Warehouses of various sizes ran along the wooden quay that made up the shore of the river on the other side of the street. Empty ships rested quietly before they would be loaded again in the morning and headed to points elsewhere along the three rivers that converged in Bond.

Stilp was mostly interested in a smaller warehouse directly across from the alley where he skulked. Light flared around the edges of shuttered windows, throwing shadows across the dock.

Stilp glanced from side to side, seeing the street was clear.

"It's time." He said stepped out of the alley.

The three armored figures followed. Each wore a sword on his hip and stout cudgels were gripped in their hands.

Crossing Dock Street, out of the corner of his eye Stilp spied a shadow flitting atop a warehouse to his left. He paused, the guards stopping too, and stared at the building's roof.

"Something amiss?" one of the three asked as he and his companions glanced in the same direction their boss was staring.

Stilp stared a moment longer, then shrugged and continued forward. "Nothing." The sun had gone down, and the early darkness had been known to play tricks on one's eyes.

He marched up to the entrance on the side of the small warehouse, stepped to one side and pointed at the door.

The largest of the three rammed a shoulder into the wood, cracking the door and slamming it open.

Revealed were a dozen men sitting around a long table. At the opening stood a young man with scrolls of paper in one hand.

Stilp grinned. "Rush him."

The three guards were through the door. The first shoved the young man back, causing him to fall into a stack of crates while spilling his scrolls. The other two ruffians charged in with clubs swinging. Several of the guild leaders jumped up while others fell back or hid beneath the table.

The three armored men worked well together, showing their experience, and quickly hammered down their few opponents. When finished, four guildsmen lay with bleeding head wounds. The rest of the guild members had lined up on the far wall as far from the ruckus as possible.

The young guildsman on the floor grabbed at his loose scrolls. "This is barbaric."

One of Belgad's men kicked out, knocking the young scribe onto his back.

"This is business." Stilp stepped between his associates to face those of the guild still conscious.

None of the guildsmen said a word. The three guards stood looking ferocious, one with blood dripping from the end of his cudgel.

"Lord Belgad says you don't profit unless he does." Stilp gave as hard a stare as he could to those still standing. "And since the East pope is lowering tariffs, that means you boys have more to share."

No one said a word.

“Do you understand?” Stilp waved a hand towards the guildsmen. “Or are we going to have to do this again? Maybe at your homes?”

The guild leaders gave one another nervous glances. After a few seconds, one was brave enough to come forward. “We understand,” he said, his voice shaking, “and please, apologize to Master Belgad for us. We did not mean any disrespect.”

Stilp turned to the door and smacked one of his guards on his armored chest. “We’re done here.”

Stilp exited first, the three bullies following with caution, watching to make sure there would be no attempts at retribution.

Stilp sighed with relief as soon as he and his companions were on Dock Street again. “That went well enough.”

The first arrow hit him in the left thigh.

Stilp screamed, dropping as the pain roared up his leg. His three guards stood over him, too surprised to take action.

The second arrow took one of the others in the chest, dragging him to the ground.

“Archer!” another guard yelled. An arrow crunched into his throat.

The last guard standing dropped his club and rushed for the safety of the guildsmen’s meeting. A slammed door greeted him.

The man hammered on the door. “Let me in in the name of Belgad!”

“That name will not serve you here.” The cold voice came from behind.

The guard spun. A dozen paces away stood a figure covered head to toe in a black cloak, a large sword tied on its back. Stilp rolled around in pain at the figure’s feet.

“You’ll pay for mocking the name of Belgad.” The lone guard whipped out his sword, slicing at air.

“I don’t think you are the one to collect”

The guard roared and charged, sword swinging above his head.

Instead of retreating, the black form stepped into the charging man’s path. The guard swung for the cloaked head, but the figure grabbed his sword wrist with one hand and his arm with the other and twisted, throwing the guard to the ground.

The dark figure stepped back, giving the warrior room to stand and face him again.

Through a haze of pain, Stilp watched his last protector rub at his sword arm. The guard had not been injured badly, but the breath had been knocked from his lungs, and the man in black knew how to fight, even without drawing a weapon. Stilp hoped his last guard would be more careful the next time.

The next time was sudden. The armored man charged again, his sword in both hands and aimed at his opponent’s stomach.

The shadowy figure waited until the last second, when the guard was within reach, then slid to the side and slammed a fist into the back of the man’s neck.

The guard rolled past and crumpled to the ground.

The black form kicked away his downed foe’s sword and watched to make sure the man would not be recovering soon.

A whimper from Stilp brought the cloaked figure around to face the little man.

The stranger moved across the short space to Stilp, the swaying cloak making the figure appear to glide across the stony street.

Stilp had been in too much pain to notice much of what had happened, but the dark figure leaning over him drew his attention. He grabbed at the short sword in his belt.

A blackened boot stamped on Stilp’s hand, breaking fingers.

The brigand screamed.

“Yell as you like.” The dark figure towered over the downed employees of Belgad. “There are

no city guards within three blocks. By the time they arrive, I will be finished.”

The cold words made Stilp clamp his mouth shut. He tried to see a face beneath the black hood, but all he could make out was a pale chin that jutted from beneath shadow. His eyes shifted to take in the fate of his companions as tears streaked down his face beneath wide eyes. “You ... you killed those men.”

“Not all of them. Besides, they are Belgad’s men.”

“It’s murder.”

“Quiet yourself and pay attention.”

Stilp didn’t know how his attention could be any more focused.

“First, the guild had nothing to do with this.” The dark figure knelt next to the brigand, the black hole where the face should have been mere inches from Stilp's face. “This was my doing. There will be no retaliation against them or, by Ashal, I’ll make you wish I’d killed you this night. Do you understand?”

Shock had begun to set in for Stilp. He could do little more than give a brief nod.

“I am glad we understand one another.” The stranger stood. “Tell your master, Belgad the Liar, that Kron Darkbow is coming for him.”

Stilp’s head was shaking, as much from disbelief as from shock. He couldn’t imagine any man brave or stupid enough to want these words passed on to Lord Belgad, Knight of the Western Church.

“I will be watching.” Then the shadowy Kron Darkbow was gone, the swish of a black cloak the only sign of his passing into the night.

Stilp slumped onto the cobblestone street as the door to the guild leaders’ warehouse creaked open and heads peered outside.

Chapter Five

The strains from mending Trelvigor would not allow Randall Tendbones to expend his magics upon Stilp, who lay across the healer's desk, though a brew of fermented honey and cowslip flowers had been enough to knock the wounded man unconscious. Randall then used a small-bladed knife and two saw-edged spoons welded at the handles to remove the arrowhead from Stilp's leg.

He held the black arrow up to the lamp light to see it better. "Handmade." He used a cloth to blot blood trickling from Stilp's leg wound. "Someone knew what they were doing when they made this arrow. I wouldn't swear it's Kobalan, though it does have black fletchings and a broad head."

"Is there anything else you can tell me?" The voice came from behind the healer.

Randall turned to watch Lalo the Finder reclining in a cushioned chair. "Whoever he is knows what he is doing with a bow."

"Of that we are aware," Belgad's servant said with a huff, "but it is of utmost importance we discover who did this."

Randall turned back to his patient and placed the arrow on the edge of his desk. He lifted a small pestle and mortar from a nearby table and began crushing leaves into a dust.

"Trelvigor's a few nights ago, and now poor Stilp." The poured water to mix with the leaves. "Of late I seem to be doing an abnormal amount of business for Lord Belgad's associates."

Lalo grimaced. "That is Lord Belgad's concern."

Randall poured the mixture of leaves over several cloth bandages and began to wrap Stilp's wound, hoping the chervil leaves would do their job in keeping down infection. "My only concern is for my patients, good Finder," Randall said while wrapping, "because my healing powers are little use to anyone else while I am exerting myself on Trelvigor." With this Randall nodded to the door to his chamber, to the room where Trelvigor still lay unconscious and blackened.

"You are not the only healer available."

Randall knew the Finder was right. There were at least a half dozen other magical healers within the tower compound itself, and there were likely a dozen others who had enough training in alchemy or basic medicine to perform simple healing tasks. The city of Bond probably had fifty or so who at least dabbled in healing magics, while the other healing tower in the city, the one in Southtown, had at least as many decent healers as the tower where Randall plied his trade. Still, Randall's skills were natural to him, not like other wizards who learned their abilities from ancient scrolls or musty tomes.

"You won't find a better healer in the city." Randall was without conceit as he finished with the bandage.

"You're young, and you expect Lord Belgad and myself to believe you are the most powerful healer in the city? Quite unbelievable."

Randall wasn't sure how to answer. He did not like being asked about his past, the part of his life before coming to Bond.

"I do my best." He sat in the chair behind his desk and opened a drawer.

The outer door to the room slammed open and Belgad, dressed in leathers and a lion-skin robe, marched into the room, pausing to stare at Stilp sprawled across the healer's desk.

Lalo stood and bowed his head. "My lord master."

"Has he spoken?" Belgad pointed to Stilp.

Randall motioned toward the man on his desk. "I have had him unconscious while removing the arrow."

"What of the others?"

Randall sighed. "Two are dead and the other in a coma."

Belgad nodded to his sleeping vassal. "How long until he is awake?"

"About three hours. He needs time to rest and heal."

"Wake him now," Belgad ordered.

"As you wish." Randall leaned over Stilp and placed a finger on either side of the man's forehead.

Lalo moved toward his employer. "Is something amiss?"

Belgad waved a hand toward Stilp. "The guild chiefs say they had nothing to do with this."

Lalo blanched. "Do you believe them?"

"There was much fear in their faces for them not to tell the truth," Belgad said with a shrug, "but otherwise they were useless. They saw nothing and know nothing."

Randall's fingers massaged Stilp's face. "Awake."

Stilp's eyes fluttered, closed again, then popped open. "Ashal, I've an awful headache!"

"Don't move or it will grow worse." The healer leaned away from the patient.

The small man on the desk winced. "My leg! Did you cut it off?"

"It'll be fine in a week or so." Randall said, standing and moving to one side.

"Enough." Belgad towered over the wounded Stilp. "Tell us what happened last night."

"It was terrible." Stilp's eyes seemed the size of apples. "He came from nowhere. There were arrows all over the place, and the next thing I knew the guards were down."

Belgad grimaced. "Did you see the man?"

"Very little," Stilp said, squinting as if they would bring back his memories all the better. "He was dressed in black. Everything was black. Even the buckles on his belt and boots were black."

Belgad leaned back, no longer towering over his employee. "It was a man, though?"

"I believe so, sir, but it was hard to tell." Stilp opened his eyes. "I've never seen a man who could appear and disappear into shadows like that."

Belgad glanced at Randall. "Magic?"

The healer nodded. "Possibly."

Belgad turned his attention back to his wounded vassal. "Can you describe the man, his weapons?"

"He was big." Stilp closed his eyes again briefly, then they snapped open. "And he had a big sword hanging on his back. I never saw him draw it. He didn't need to. He was deadly enough with his hands."

Belgad grumbled softly, then, "Could there have been more than one?"

"I don't think so," Stilp said. "I only saw the one, but I guess someone else could have been the archer."

"Though possible for a man well trained." Belgad pointed out.

"His name!" Stilp blurted.

Belgad's eyes locked on the wounded man.

"He said his name is Kron Darkbow," Stilp said with a shiver, "and he said he's out to destroy you, Master Belgad. He wanted me to give you the message that Kron Darkbow would destroy you."

"Sounds like a fool." Lalo moved up beside his employer.

"Or a brave man on the brink of insanity." Belgad moved around the table until he was facing the healer. "I don't know this Kron Darkbow, but the name sounds northern. Perhaps Dartague or Kobalan."

Randall nodded agreement. "Darkbow could be a Kobalan name."

"I know of no man with that name." Belgad's gaze shifted to the wall, as if he were looking into his own past. "Nor do I know of anyone living who would have a grudge against me, at least no one who would dare confront me."

"Perhaps this isn't a personal matter, my lord," Lalo offered. "Maybe it is someone with a

business interest in Bond.”

“I don’t think that likely.” Belgad turned back to the face the others. “This feels like a grudge fight.”

Randall lay a gentle hand on Stilp's wounded leg. “Sir Belgad, if you are finished with my patient, he needs more rest.”

“Very well,” Belgad said, leaning over Stilp once more. “Heal yourself. I will need every ear on the street.”

“Yes, my lord,” Stilp said as Randall’s fingers returned to the sides of his forehead.

“Sleep.” And Stilp closed his eyes.

Belgad turned to the exit. “Come, Lalo. I need time to think.”

As Randall began to put away his instruments, he was grateful he was not Kron Darkbow. He would not want Belgad the Liar hunting for him.

Once Belgad and Lalo had exited the healing tower, Randall called two orderlies to carry the unconscious Stilp into the back chamber where Trelvigor lay beneath sheets dipped in a brew of daffodil leaves which would aid the wizard’s wounds. The orderlies lay their burden on a padded table next to Belgad’s wounded guard who remained in a coma.

Once the orderlies left Randall’s chambers, the healer collapsed into the chair behind his desk. Working his magic on Trelvigor, and the additions of the unconscious guard and Stilp, had weakened Randall’s endurance. If Belgad would need healing services again soon, Randall would suggest another healer. The services of all the healers in the tower, and the similar tower in Southtown, were free of charge. Surely Belgad would not be offended at needing the services of another.

Randall closed his eyes and eased back in his chair. He did not have time to sleep, as Trelvigor would need another dose of healing potion within a half hour, but he could relax for a few minutes and hope to recharge some of his magical energies.

The healer opened his eyes again and glanced at the black arrow resting on his desk. He should have disposed of the thing, or offered it to Belgad, but he had not. In truth, he had wanted to study the missile. Its carved shaft had been painted a dull black, the three feathers on its launching end were from some dark bird. Even the broad, sharp head had been smoked black. At first glance the arrow appeared to belong to the army of Randall’s homeland, Kobalos. The dress of the Kobalan military was black, black and more black. The only items a Kobalan soldier would wear that were not black would be the buckles of his clothes and armor, the blades of his weapons, a white edge painted on the borders of his shield and the blanched fletchings of his arrows.

Randall closed his eyes again and his mind turned to the description Stilp had given of his attacker. Kron Darkbow had been dressed all in black. Stilp had even gone as far to suggest the metals of the man’s garb had been painted black. This sounded Kobalan to Randall. A soldier might not dress in complete ebony, but a Kobalan assassin certainly would. But a Kobalan assassin would not have announced his presence as had Darkbow.

Kron Darkbow. Randall rolled the name around in his mind. It was surely a name from the north. Darkbow would fit in well as a Dartague family name, and even more so as Kobalan.

Was there a Kobalan agent operating in Bond? The thought made Randall shiver. He had hoped he was beyond the reach of his homeland.

Kobalos was more than a thousand miles away, and Randall had traveled long roads to become a healer in Bond. He liked being a healer. It brought him peace knowing he could be of help to others, even Belgad and those who tasked for him. In Kobalos, Randall had not had much opportunity to utilize his special abilities. Magical healing was not a wizardly skill taught in that dark land, but Randall had been born with the power. He was not a true sorcerer, one who spent years reading tomes

to learn magical knowledge, but he was the rarest of mages, one who could work magic naturally without artificial aids.

Randall did have training in other forms of magic. He had been forced to learn such skills, like a common wizard, or he would have been put to death. The memories of those training sessions caused him to shudder.

His eyes opened and he stared at the top left drawer of his desk. He needed to know if there was a Kobalan agent within Bond. He couldn't imagine why such an agent would seek vengeance against Belgad, as the Liar had not been a Dartague raider since before Randall was born. Still, it was unlikely a Kobalan assassin would act in such a way without orders from Lord Verkain, the ruler of Kobalos.

Randall shuddered again. It was because of the Kobalan lord Randall had fled his home.

The healer pulled open the top left drawer. He spied what he was seeking inside atop a stack of parchment. The gold ring was huge, too large to sit firmly on one of Randall's thin fingers; engraved in the flat facing on one side was a black, spiked fist.

There was a simple way to discover if a Kobalan agent operated within the city, Randall told himself. His hand reached for the ring. His fingers grazed its cold surface.

He pulled his hand back. No. He would not use the ring. That would alert others to his presence in Bond, and Randall could not have that. He had run long enough and was settled now; there was no need to take chances.

If this Darkbow character had a personal grudge against Belgad the Liar, Randall felt relatively safe. He was not directly in the employ of the Dartague. Randall's services were open to all who would come to him, even Darkbow. Besides, the healer had enough magical knowledge to protect himself. But if Kron Darkbow was some spy or killer from Kobalos, then that was a more dangerous affair. Even if someone from Kobalos was not aware of Randall's presence, they might take notice if they looked into who was tending Belgad's men.

How could Randall find out that which he needed to know? Without the ring, there was only one other option. He would turn to the one man who knew his secrets, the one man who had helped him when he first arrived in Bond and who had helped him gain admission to the Swamps healing tower.

Randall pushed away from the chair and began preparations for Trelvigor's next healing.

Despite his success and power, Belgad often found himself missing the simple days of the axe and sword.

To relieve that tension, the Dartague resorted to extremes.

He counted four of them. Then the tall, bald northerner with the thick, white mustache made note of their weapons. Two of the men in leather carried cudgels. One wore studded gauntlets. The last hefted a more dangerous weapon, a spear with a broad point.

Belgad placed his fists on his hips and grunted. "Are these the best Lalo could find?"

The four men kept serious faces as they stepped into the center of the long, tall chamber that was the main hall of Belgad's fortress. They had been told they would be paid fifty gold apiece, a monstrous sum, if they could bring down Belgad the Liar. There was even incentive in that the Dartague would be alone, unarmed and unarmored.

The smirk on Belgad's face turned into a full grin as he climbed down from atop the raised wooden platform that held his thronelike chair. These men were half his age, but Belgad could tell by their stances they were little more than thugs pulled from the streets with an offer of quick riches. They posed no real threat, but this was what Belgad had come to to keep his warrior's skills intact.

The one with the spear lunged.

Belgad spun to one side and slung out a hand to grab the spear just below the blade, his other palm snapping down to crack the weapon's shaft.

The Dartague found himself holding the head of the weapon and wasted no time turning the blade around and jamming it into the shoulder of the spear's original owner.

The wounded man fell away with a cry.

The next attack was better composed. The two with cudgels came at Belgad's front while the third arced to the northerner's flank.

Belgad did the unthinkable. He charged.

The two with cudgels were caught off guard and each took a step back.

Belgad used their hesitation. He crashed a fist into one man's face, crumpling him to the ground. The other thug had time to raise his club before Belgad planted a bare foot in his chest, sending him tumbling, his club flying from his hand.

The Dartague turned to face the last man standing, the one with fists wrapped in studded leather. The fool swung early, missing Belgad's chin by inches. The northerner stepped into the man and brought up a large hand that crunched into the turned elbow of his opponent's swinging arm. The man screamed as his arm snapped and he dropped to his knees as Belgad punched him in the face, knocking him unconscious.

When that man fell, Belgad slowly turned to survey the damage he had done.

The only man still moving was the one who had been kicked, and he was crawling for the exit.

"I should have hit you harder." Belgad strolled toward the man, grabbed him by his hair and slammed his face into the stone floor.

Blood splattered the Dartague's toes.

The big man bent over and wiped sweat from his smooth pate as he stared at his last victim. "There was a time when a little workout like this wouldn't have made me sweat."

The room was quiet.

The double wooden doors in front of the northerner eased open, pulled from the outside.

Belgad did not look up. "Were these four the best you could pull off the streets?"

"They were trying to stir up another pit fight in Southtown," Lalo the Finder said with his head slightly bowed. "I assumed, apparently incorrectly, they would know how to handle themselves."

Beads of sweat still forming on his head, Belgad looked up at his employee.

"Perhaps next time I should hire some foreign gladiators." Lalo handed his employer a towel. "Maybe the latest champion of the week."

"Never again." Belgad used the towel to wipe away the last of the sweat. "I won't set foot in the arena again. Even if I wished to, politically it would be a nightmare."

With the tips of two fingers, Lalo retrieved the towel. "Will there be anything else tonight, my lord?"

"Contact Fortisquo. I believe he still has a room at the Rusty Scabbard."

"It was my understanding Master Fortisquo has retired."

"He has. It was me who retired him. I'm sure he can become unretired."

"As you wish." Lalo turned to leave.

"One more thing."

The Finder paused and glanced over his shoulder. "Yes, my lord?"

Belgad waved a hand at the injured men littering the floor. "Have these four taken to a healer. Give them two gold apiece for their troubles."

"You are most generous, my lord."

Chapter Six

Lucius Tallerus slipped into the dark gray jacket that marked his station as an Asylum guard and plopped on a black, floppy hat that was also part of the uniform. He did not care for the garb. It seemed silly. A uniform was necessary, of course, but the hat looked like a toadstool and the rough jacket was more restraining than a tabard or cloak.

What bothered Lucius more than the uniform, however, was the lack of weaponry he was allowed within the walls of the Asylum. A simple oak club was the only armament an Asylum guard was given. It felt unnatural to walk the streets of Bond without heavy steel hanging from his hip or on his back.

He reluctantly removed his sword belt and slid it and the sheathed weapon beneath his bed at the Rusty Scabbard. Then he picked up the club and stuffed it into the front of his tied latigo belt.

Ready for his first day of new employment, Lucius made sure to lock the door to his room behind him, then bounded down the stairs that led to the main dining room of the Scabbard. As was his habit, he scanned the room for weapons, but saw few other than a long, slender rapier on the hip of a tall man dressed in foppish silks near the bar in the back of the room and another thin rapier on the hip of the tall man's companion, a young woman with long, dark hair. His eyes shifted to the usual morning customers, some with rooms on the premises and others who stopped in for breakfast and conversation, then he proceeded to make his way through the labyrinth of tables and chairs to the exit.

He was almost through the door when a youthful voice stopped him.

"Master Tallerus!"

Lucius spied Wyck sitting on a stool next to the counter where customers signed for rooms. The boy clutched a half-eaten muffin.

Lucius approached the lad. "I wondered when you would make an appearance."

Wyck stuffed the last of the muffin into his mouth, swallowed it whole and trotted across the room to save the man the walk. "I've been waiting for you nearly an hour. I didn't care much for it. I'm not used to being out of the Swamps."

"Walk with me," Lucius said, strolling out the Rusty Scabbard's swinging front door. "I start a new job this morning and need to be on my way."

Wyck didn't hesitate to follow. Soon they were walking side by side down the center of the dusty South Road that would take them to the Swamps and, eventually, the Asylum.

"You told me to find you when I had news." Wyck trotted to keep up with the man's longer strides.

"It's been four days. I didn't think you'd take my offer."

"You still have coin?"

The man patted a pocket in the side of his gray britches, a soft jingle coming to their ears.

The boy grinned. "Then I've got news."

"Out with it."

"Word is the Eastern pontiff is building his forces along the mountain passes for another invasion."

Lucius came to a halt.

The boy stopped a couple of steps in front and turned to stare at the man. "What?"

"You'll have to do better than that." What the boy had told Lucius was almost a joke. There had been peace between West Ursia and East Ursia for nearly three generations, but rumors still flew that Pope Joyous III was gathering troops to invade the West and reclaim it.

"It's true, I swear it." Wyck's feet danced a little as if he were suddenly nervous. "I heard it on

the Docks from one of the Hiponese sailors.”

“Wyck, I left the Prisonlands only a few months ago,” Lucius pointed out. “I think I would have seen signs of the pope’s army along the borders.”

A new look of respect came into the boy’s eyes. “You came from the Prisonlands?”

Lucius nodded and continued his walk, following the dirt road to Frist Bridge.

Wyck followed. “Were you an exile?”

Lucius glared at his companion.

“Just asking,” the boy said, falling in beside the Asylum guard. “I know they say Belgad is the only exile to ever leave the Lands, but if it could happen once it could happen again.”

“Not likely.” Lucius grimaced. “That was before my time, but I’ve heard Belgad had plenty of gold to buy his way out of the Lands.”

“You were a guard, then?”

“A border warden,” Lucius corrected as they passed through the open flood gates and crossed the bridge of stone, passing other denizens of the city about their morning tasks, “and aren’t you supposed to be telling *me* information?”

“Oh, yeah, sorry. Since you mentioned Belgad —”

“You brought him up.”

“Well, since Belgad was mentioned,” Wyck gave Lucius an irritated look, “I heard some news this morning outside the healing tower in the Swamps.”

“Go on,” Lucius said as they left the bridge behind and followed a curve between rows of brick buildings that led to Beggars Row.

“There’s going to be a street war.”

“Who would be brave enough to take on Belgad?”

“Don’t know,” Wyck said, struggling to keep up with his fast-walking companion, “but it sounds nasty. One of Belgad’s informers was roughed up and a few of his soldiers killed. They say there’s sure to be blood in the streets, but I don’t know. There hasn’t been a street war since I was little.”

“Is it a guild taking on Belgad?”

“I said I don’t know.” Wyck shrugged. “I’m not even sure Belgad knows. But it’s got to be somebody powerful if they think they can bring Belgad down. Even the city guard won’t touch him.”

“That’s only because of his considerable political might.”

“Yeah, why doesn’t Belgad just run for Chief Councilor or something? I bet he’d win.”

“He can’t. He’s nobility technically, even if it is only a knighthood.”

“*That’s* how he got out of the Prisonlands!”

“Yes.” Lucius nodded agreement. Under terms of the peace treaty signed between East and West Ursia after the war, it was unlawful to exile a noble to the Prisonlands, which was how Belgad had escaped his exile. The Western Church, the only power in Western Ursia with the ability to knight a commoner, had been in dire need of funds. Belgad had provided those funds, and he had been given a knighthood and property within West Ursia. He was the only man to have left the Prisonlands still alive. Belgad’s story had riled the border wardens of the time, Lucius had been told by his late uncle, but rules were rules, and there was little the wardens could do.

“Can’t be a guild that’s trying to take over the streets,” Wyck went on as they continued to walk. “Belgad already controls all of them.”

“What about an assassin’s guild, or thieves’ guild?” Lucius asked. He was curious on this point. Bond was one of the largest cities in the known world, and one of the most free. Thieves’ guilds were known to operate publicly in some towns, as occasionally were gatherings of assassins, but Lucius had not seen signs of such since he had returned to his home city.

“Belgad wiped them out years ago. I think he just wanted to control everything himself.”

“Any other news?”

“There was a fire the other night.” Once more the youth was forced to jog to stay apace of his friend. “A wizard’s house burnt down up on Mages Way. And this wizard worked for Belgad, too. That’s why word on the street is there might be another street war. Something’s going on.”

“It sounds so.” Lucius halted.

Wyck quit his march and looked ahead to the tall, dark walls that were the Asylum. The place, gloomy and covered in dull vines, seemed to suck any cheer from the boy’s bones.

“We’re here.” Lucius drew forth another three coins.

The boy’s hand was already outstretched.

“You’ve done well.” Lucius dropped the coins into the lad’s hand. “Keep your ears open and there’ll be more silver for you.”

Wyck’s fingers closed over the coins.

“Where can I find you?” Lucius straightened the floppy hat atop his head. “Not that I don’t trust you, but there may be a time when I’ll need your services before you’ll need my coins.”

Wyck’s look was sheepish. “The Frog’s Bottom.”

Lucius blanched. The place was a den of prostitution in the west end of the Swamps.

“The madam lets me sleep in the basement in the winter,” Wyck said with a nervous grin, “but I rent one of the servants’ rooms when I’ve got the coin.”

Lucius’ interview for a guard’s position had been brief, a perfunctory questioning about his experience and background. He had been hired on the spot. Apparently the Asylum had a difficult time keeping help. Chief Guard Shaltros had told Lucius the mad stares of the inmates often wore at a man to the point he could no longer perform his duties without breaking into tears or pounding one of the inmates in the face with a club.

At the Asylum during the interview, Lucius had seen very little of the place. It set on ten acres, most of which was taken up by the building proper, a black fortress three stories tall with a tower in its southwest corner. The few windows were on the ground level and shuttered and barred. Adding to the brooding surroundings was a high wall around the grounds.

Lucius knocked at the front of the Asylum and watched as a wooden slat in the door slid aside to reveal a peephole.

“State your business.” It was a gruff voice from beyond the portal.

“Guard Lucius Tallerus reporting for duty.”

The slat banged closed and Lucius could hear the clankings of inner bolts being turned.

The door opened to reveal an old, stooped man dressed in the dark colors of an Asylum guard. “You’re supposed to come around back when you report for duty.”

Lucius stood there nonplussed. “My apologies. The chief guard did not inform me.”

The old man motioned for Lucius to move forward. “Don’t fret it this time. Besides, you’ll have to have a tour of the place before taking over for me at lunch.”

Lucius entered the Asylum for the second time and found himself in the small entrance apartment that was a ten-foot square cage of iron bands. He stared through the bars at the giant vault of the front room of the Asylum. The wall across from the cage rose to the ceiling and housed three levels of walkways with handrails. Behind the walkways were barred rooms by the dozens. To the new guard’s ear, each of those cells seemed filled with hatred, anger and insanity. The screams and hollers explained why few guards remained long in this place. It reminded Lucius of the Prisonlands. It reminded him of home.

“You’ll get used to it,” the old guard said as he bolted the entrance and removed a skeleton key from a pocket, “or you’ll join them in one of the solitary cells in the basement.” He chuckled while using the key to open the cage’s inner door.

Lucius and the old fellow exited the cage and entered the Asylum proper. Other guards, orderlies and healers in white robes rushed from one barred cell to another in attempts to calm or subdue one inmate or another.

Lucius could only stare at the chaos. "Is it always this bustling?"

"Not always." The old man grinned, showing several teeth missing. "It's morning feeding, and the nuts are well rested."

The aged guard cackled as he motioned for Lucius to follow. "The jailing rooms is here," he said, pointing at the three stories of cells, "but one of the healers will go over what you're supposed to do there. Just don't trust the healers too much."

"Why is that?" Lucius followed the man down a stone hallway lit by torches.

"They'll get you killed." The old man plodded along. "They're all about saving these nuts. Just let your club do your talking for you."

The words were harsh, but made a certain sense to Lucius. In the Prisonlands, he had dealt with any number of dangerous men who were not mentally stable, and he had seen more than a few border wardens mutilated or killed because they had tried to deal in a logical fashion with such a prisoner.

"I didn't get your name," Lucius said as they turned to the right down another hallway.

"Vitman." The old man stopped at the end of the hall before a heavy oak door covered in bands of iron. Using his skeleton key, he unlocked the door and grunted as he pushed it forward.

Lucius followed into another dark hallway.

The old man pointed ahead. "At the end of this hall is the back entrance for servants and the like. This is where you would come in every day. It's locked, but just knock and announce yourself and somebody'll let you in."

Vitman led Lucius along another side hall, then down a lengthy flight of stone steps. "I'll show you the basement next. The most dangerous nuts are down here locked away in solitary. They're tied up pretty well, but every once in a while one of them chews his way out of his bonds."

As they reached the bottom of the steps, Lucius noticed a narrow black hallway to their right, but Vitman took a lit hall to their left.

"What is this place?" Lucius pointed at the dark side passage.

Vitman stopped in his tracks and turned to see what the younger fellow was asking about.

"That goes to the river shore." Vitman pointed into the blackness. "Don't worry, though. It's locked up pretty tight. We use it to dispose of bodies from time to time. Most of these nutters don't have family that wants anything to do with them, so when they pass on we dump them in the North River."

Vitman turned away. "All right, this way to the worst of the nutters."

Lucius walked behind the old man, his thoughts lingering on the tunnel to the river.

Chapter Seven

Randall felt at peace as he crossed the University of West Ursia's verdant campus. He meandered along the main brick path, between rows of young trees and students bustling between one class to another.

He had spent six of the most fulfilling months of his life on the campus. It had been a time to learn and grow, and not only concerning his education. He had been a stranger to West Ursia when he had arrived and had been fortunate to be singled out by the head of the College of Magic. Maslin Markwood's discovery of Randall had been no accident, though it had appeared so to the young healer at the time. Markwood had sensed a new magical entity within the city, and upon investigation had discovered Randall sleeping in an alley along Beggars Row. After an examination and interview period, Randall had been offered a student position within the college.

Tendbones smiled as he passed the brown stone building of the College of Military Science and spotted ahead the white columns that bordered the entrance to the College of Magic.

The healer had known his own power when he had first entered his studies, but Markwood had shown him his true potential during those six months. Normally a student would have had to attend the school at least two years before gaining a basic degree in magic, and an additional four years before becoming an adept within one of the multiple majors. For a while Randall had considered earning a degree in ensorclements, but he had known in his heart what he truly wanted. As the healing arts were already natural to him, he had felt his six months of study more than enough to prepare him for the outside world. Unfortunately he had not completed his degree in medicinal magics, but that was because several of the professors felt he had not had enough time to learn his studies proper, and the young healer was anxious to begin using his skills. Markwood had stood by Randall, and had found the young man employment at the healing tower in the Swamps. Since then, the healer had been indebted to the old wizard, and Markwood had proven to be more than a teacher. He had become a trusted friend, the only person who knew why Randall now called Bond home.

The smile on the young man's face did not lessen as he trotted up the marble steps to the college's entrance. Once inside he twisted to his right in the main hall and proceeded up a staircase to the second floor.

Randall turned right along a narrower hall and proceeded until he came to a wide door on his left with the words "Markwood" engraved in its center. There was no doorknob, but that didn't stop the healer.

With rolling eyes, Randall spoke the secret words taught to him by his former teacher. "All hail the mighty Markwood."

The door swung inward on invisible hinges.

"Old man!" Randall called out as he stepped into the outer chamber. Paintings of famous wizards hung everywhere, covering the walls. A desk to the right of the entrance sat empty, as it always did when Randall visited. Markwood didn't believe in having a secretary, especially when there were so many students willing to do chores for a stipend to help with their tuition.

"In here, Randall." The voice came from behind the room's other door. "Come in, as long as you are not carrying an open flame."

This door did have a knob, and Randall used it before pushing through to the next room. Revealed was Markwood's inner office, a small chamber of brick with three windows on the far wall. A large, dark desk was shoved into the back of the room beneath the windows while rows of shelves covered the other walls. Upon the shelves were thousands of books, manuscripts and scrolls stuffed together.

Markwood appeared the typical wizard, his gray hair lengthy and running into the beard flowing from his chin. His light purple robes were gathered around him as he sat with legs crossed in the center of the room. A floppy hat that came to a point rested on the ground next to one of the wizard's knees.

On the floor in front of him had been inscribed in yellow chalk a circle with a five-pointed star drawn within. From the center of the star floated upward a tawny fog in the shape of a human head.

Markwood looked up at his visitor. "Have a seat," he said, motioning to the floor on the other side of the chalk circle.

Randall squatted and stared at the fog. For a moment he thought he could see a pair of dull eyes staring out at him.

Markwood waved a hand at the vapor. "I'll talk to you another time, father. I've company."

The fog shook, appearing to nod, then sank into the center of the star. After a second it dissipated, breaking apart into mist.

The old wizard looked to his guest. "What can I do for you?"

"It concerns Belgad."

Markwood's eyes narrowed beneath bushy brows. "What of the man?"

"One of his people was burnt badly in a fire several nights ago."

"Trelvigor." Markwood spoke the name with distaste.

"I'm not sure how much I can help him, but he'll likely live."

"I wish no harm on any living man," Markwood said with bitterness in his voice, "but believe me, that one was deserving. He is the worst breed of mage there is, feeding the fuel of the Eastern church's hate."

Randall frowned. "As a healer, I'm bound to help him."

"I wasn't suggesting otherwise."

"Besides, Trelvigor is in no state to cause me harm. The man can barely breathe." Randall eased back so he was sitting on the floor. "And Belgad does not view me in a negative light. I have done a good bit of doctoring for him of late."

"As long as that is all the use Belgad has for you, you should be safe."

"My safety is the reason I am here." The healer leaned back, his arms at an angle behind him, to rest on his hands. "Last night there was an attack upon Belgad's men. Two were killed, one crippled and another suffered a wound. The injured one, Stilp, said the man who attacked them was dressed all in black and went by the name Kron Darkbow."

Randall watched Markwood's eyes widen. "Does the name mean anything to you?"

"Not specifically, but ... you said this Darkbow was in black, and attacked Belgad's men?"

"And he told Stilp he was declaring war against Belgad. It sounds like a personal vendetta."

Markwood nodded agreement. "Belgad would have many enemies over the years. I take it it has crossed your mind this Darkbow character could be Kobalan."

"It has," Randall said with an anxious sigh, "which is why I am here. I don't know what Kobalos would have against Belgad, unless it were something he did long ago. But even then, an agent of Verkain would likely choose a more direct approach."

"You haven't used the ring?" The wizard's look was one of concern.

"No."

"Wise decision. Do you have it upon you?"

"Locked within my desk."

"Good."

"Do you think you can help?"

Markwood rested his chin in a hand. "I can make inquiries that should not draw too much attention, but this Darkbow is no wizard or magical creature. If he were, I would have been aware of his presence within the city."

Randall shrugged. "I can't imagine why Verkain would send anyone against Belgad. It would make no sense. Belgad is no threat to Kobalos."

Markwood's gaze grew stern. "Belgad can be a threat to anyone under the right circumstances. Remember that."

"I will, professor," Randall said mockingly.

"I mean it, Randall." The wizard was in no mood to joke about the Dartague. "If Belgad finds a way to profit from you, he will use you. The man has little regard for others. He might not be an out-and-out murderer, but the mentality is similar. Do not allow yourself to be used by this man."

Randall did not know what to say. He did not trust Belgad, but had not considered the man an overt threat. He would take the wizard's advice, however, and be on his guard.

Upon seeing the look of concern on his friend's face, Markwood softened. "I apologize. I sound like your father."

Randall chuckled. "Believe me, Maslin, you sound nothing like my father."

A smile crossed the old wizard's lips. "I suppose you are right, and let's thank Ashal for that."

"Yes, let's do," Randall said, using the edge of a heavy shelf to pull himself to standing. It was time to let the mage get to work.

Markwood also rose from the floor. "I will contact you in a day or two with whatever I discover."

"Thank you again, Maslin." Randall thrust out a hand.

The wizard pulled the younger man to him and hugged his shoulders. "Don't get yourself into trouble, you hear me?"

Randall hugged the man in return. "It's not like I'm rushing off to war, or returning to Kobalos," he said with a lopsided grin.

"I suppose it isn't," Markwood said, easing the younger man back to look at him, "but you've been safe here for three years. I would like to see it stay that way."

"I will be on my guard." Randall turned to leave.

As the young healer exited, the wizard's eyes upon him were full of concern.

Chapter Eight

A river at his back, Kron Darkbow knelt on the ledge of a warehouse rooftop as he stared at the city stretching below. For blocks were hundreds of smaller buildings, some with glowing windows and others remaining dark.

The night's wind stirred, bouncing the edges of his cloak in the air. The minor tumult brought him to his senses once more. After dealing with Trelvigor he had been running on instinct, but it was time to act on the plan he had put together since discovering Belgad the Liar and not the burned wizard had been responsible for the deaths of those he would avenge. Kron did not know why Belgad had had Marcus and Aurelia Tallerus put to death, but words from the wizard Trelvigor had been enough to convince him Belgad was his primary target.

Dealing with Stilp and his three guards had been a simple matter of watching Belgad's fortress in the Swamps. He had noticed Stilp leaving with the others, and all he had had to do was follow by rooftop. He only hoped the Docks guild had not suffered for his actions.

Seeing no one on the streets below, Kron eased a small grappling hook from a pocket of his cloak and latched it to the edge of the roof. Connected to the hook was a spool of dark silk which Kron promptly tossed over the edge. He was quickly over the side and sliding down the cord as fast as his arms and legs would allow.

As soon as his boots touched cobbled stones, Kron jerked the rope and watched the grapnel twitch, jump off the ledge and fall into his waiting gloved hand.

He eased into a shadow provided by the warehouse and glanced around.

There was still no one on the streets.

Kron slid from the blackness and trotted to his left toward another warehouse and the darkness it provided. He wound the silk cord into a tight ball and returned it and the hook to a hidden pocket.

It had taken a good bit of coin for Kron to study Belgad the Liar. The man had his hands in everything legal and illegal within Bond, but he had little real property other than his mansion fortress and whatever gold and silver he kept locked away. The only exception Kron had discovered were three sailing vessels tied up at the Point, the eastern most portion of the Docks where the North and South rivers ran into one another to form the Ursian River. From drunken sailors in several taverns, Kron had learned Belgad rarely used these ships but wanted them for personal reasons. Apparently those personal reasons involved smuggling.

Darkbow drifted into another shadow and paused, again keeping his eyes on the street. His fingers walked over his body to assure him his weapons and tools were in place. The bastard sword was slung on his back, as was his bow and a soft leather quiver filled with arrows. A dagger was stuffed into the front of his belt and another sheathed deep within his right boot. Three small throwing darts hid in the back of his left glove and another three in a leather pouch at his waist. Attached to the back of his belt was a small satchel holding various tools he had found useful. Hidden among pockets of his cloak were the grappling hook with rope and his favorite weapons, three flame-spewing grenades of hard clay.

Everything was in place.

Kron eased out of the shadow and stared further east to a point between a pair of smaller warehouses. He could make out a wooden quay with three small sailing vessels tied to it. There were no torches lit, but the moon showed some movement on the dock. Belgad wouldn't leave his only ships unguarded.

The man in black trotted across an open area to one of the smaller warehouses near the ships. The moon splayed its light across his side of the warehouse, giving him little room to hide, but he

flattened against the building as best he could and hoped his dark garb would blend in well enough with the graying wood of the building.

He paused to listen but heard no cries of alarm or marching feet. Sensing no threat, he stole across the front of the warehouse to a corner and spied around the edge.

His brief glimpse told him there were three guards chatting among stacked barrels on the dock. None appeared armored but one wore a heavy sword on his hip while the other two had iron clubs stuffed into their belts. There was no sign of anyone aboard the ships, but that wasn't anything Kron would count on.

He strained his ears again, hoping to hear what the three men were saying, but the slight breeze was blowing the wrong direction.

Kron worked to control his breathing. Excitement and tension had been known to kill more than one man. He had not had as much time as he would have liked to form a proper plan to destroy Belgad, and now he was faced with going ahead or backing off.

Kron Darkbow was many things, but patient was not one of them.

He slid his bow and two arrows from their places on his back. One hand gripping the bow and an arrow, he laid the other bolt against the bowstring.

He took a step around the corner of the warehouse and let the arrow fly.

A voice went up. "Archer!"

The arrow thunked into a guard's chest, dropping him.

The other two dove behind barrels.

Kron put his second arrow to his bowstring and sauntered forward. The two foes he had left appeared to have no weapons of distance. He did not need to hide from them. And if there were others aboard the ships, they would make themselves known soon enough.

Sure enough, soon there were the thumpings of running feet from a vessel. A man appeared at the top of a gangplank.

An arrow took his life.

Kron took another arrow from his quiver and placed it against the bow.

The two men behind barrels were talking again, but Kron could not make out what was being said.

Suddenly, one of them took off at a sprint for the gangplank.

Kron turned his aim toward the man.

From behind the barrels, the other guard sprang up, a large crossbow in his hands pointed at Kron.

The man in black had no place to hide.

Kron's mind turned to foreign men he had known, men who had brought the philosophy and fighting styles of their faraway homelands to Kron, who had studied under them and learned much. It was to one of those lessons he turned now.

His eyes closed and his mind tuned out all his senses except hearing.

There was a twanging and suddenly something was rushing at him. It whistled as it sliced through the wind.

Kron lashed out with a hand.

When he opened his eyes he saw he was gripping a short arrow.

"That's impossible." The guard with the crossbow stood nearly dumbstruck.

The other guard whimpered as he lay on the ground trying to yank Kron's arrow from the back of his left calf.

The man in black dropped the crossbow bolt and slid another arrow from his quiver.

The crossbowman tugged on his weapon, but its pull was too strong to reset an arrow quickly.

Kron walked forward slowly, aiming at the man.

"Run or die."

The guard stared at his dark foe. His hands stopped fussing with the crossbow.

“I give you my word no harm will come to you if you leave now.” Kron’s aim was straight and true. There was no way he could miss his target. “And take your friend. He needs healing.”

The guard glanced back at his hurt companion.

“I’ll give you until the count of three, then I’m killing you both.” Kron raised his arrow so it pointed at the standing man’s head.

Both guards’ eyes locked on the man in black.

“One.”

The crossbowman dropped his weapon and ran for his wounded companion.

“Two.”

The man with the bad leg was tugged to his feet.

“Three.”

Both men shuffled away from the dock, the injured one nearly dragged by his fellow.

Kron lowered his bow and watched until they disappeared down an alley across the street.

Once he was sure they were gone, Kron took his time examining the dock and the ships from a distance. It was unlikely there would be anyone left on board after the tumult that had just taken place, but he did not want any surprises.

The only persons he saw were the two men he had killed.

He put away his bow and arrow and made his way to the ships. He paused at one of the barrels to flip its top open to reveal its contents.

It was oil, barrels and barrels of oil.

The grin on Kron’s face would have done a demon proud.

Chapter Nine

Black smoke clawed its way through a thin layer of river fog to grasp at the early morning sun. For miles the inhabitants of Bond could see the belching imprint in the sky that marked the ruin of Belgad's ships.

The bald man himself stood on the street of the Docks, staring up at the inky line of smoke rising above his small, ruined fleet. He faced the remains of his ships, husks of wooden hulls floating on the North River, with fists on hips and a crowd of riffraff at his back. A group of his personal guards kept the morning onlookers at bay while Belgad fumed.

He could hear the chatter amongst the masses. Some were wondering who would be stupid enough to do such a thing. Others were wondering who was so powerful as to do such a thing. Still others kept their mouths closed because they knew better than to draw out the rage that was building in the breast of the large man before them.

The clippings of an approaching horse caused Belgad to turn.

Sergeant Gris dismounted at the edge of the masses, handing the reins of his steed to one of Belgad's men.

"I heard as soon as I started my shift," the sergeant said as he walked forward.

Belgad glared at the other fellow. "Out of your jurisdiction, isn't it?"

Gris ignored the question. "Captain Chambers will speak with you later, but I wanted a word before his interview."

Belgad was silent as he turned back to watch the remnants of his ships bouncing in the river's flow.

"That fire at Trelvigor's a week ago," Gris said, counting off on gloved fingers, "then I hear some of your men were killed several nights ago, and now this. I'll be blunt. What is happening?"

Belgad's brow creased, framing his eyes in anger. He owed nothing to the sergeant, even as good a man as Gris was. Belgad was technically a knight, thus he had to answer only to the Western church. Besides, it was not in Belgad's nature to confide in those outside his inner circle.

He grunted. "Nothing with which I can not deal."

"That's fine for you," Gris said, "but word is spreading there is a street war brewing. If that's the case, the guard doesn't need it spilling over to innocent citizens."

Belgad glared at the man again. "There are no innocent citizens."

It took every ounce of inner strength Gris had not to step back from those brooding eyes and the menacing voice.

"There is no street war." Belgad turned his gaze back to his burnt prizes. "There is only some fool with a thirst for vengeance."

"Do you know who it is?"

"I have no idea," Belgad lied, "but my own people are asking questions. Once they discover this devil, I will deal with him."

"Lord Belgad, let me be of aid." Gris tried a different approach. "My men could be of much service to you, and I know a man who is a fine tracker."

Belgad's dark eyes were flat and steady on the blackened remains of his ships. "I have no need of your services, sergeant, and as a Knight of the Western Church, I can call upon my own authority in dealing with this matter.

"You may go now."

Sergeant Gris knew he would get no further with the big man. Belgad did not act much like a knight, but a knight he was, and he had his own authority under the law of the land.

Gris nodded and backed away. "I'll make Captain Chambers aware of the situation," he said as he retraced his steps to his horse.

Belgad said nothing and did not bother to watch the sergeant climb into the saddle.

Soon after Gris rode off, the crowd began to thin. Many of the gawkers had to be to work or to breakfast. It didn't pay, watching a rich man's fortunes go up in smoke.

"Master Belgad." The voice came from the crowd.

Belgad wouldn't have moved if he had not recognized the speaker. He turned as Lalo the Finder eased between two armed guards and approached his employer.

"Fine of you to join me." Belgad waved a hand toward the remains of his ships. "You see what a fine gift master Darkbow has left?"

The Finder frowned at the vision before him. "Are you sure it was him, lord?"

Belgad nodded. "I questioned Gossimer and Fortrude. They described him the same as Stilp."

"Did this Darkbow speak with them?"

"A little, but his purpose is apparent. He wishes to ruin me."

"And perhaps more than that."

Belgad turned to stare at his man. "What do you mean?"

"This Darkbow has no qualms about killing. And he's rather bent upon revenge against you. It seems likely to me he will eventually make an attempt on your life."

Belgad's eyes remained brooding. So what if his enemy wanted him dead? Plenty of men had wanted Belgad dead. He did not fear death, as was the custom among the men of his Dartague homeland, but that did not mean he would greet finality with open arms.

Belgad turned back to glare at his dead ships. "Cancel my meeting this afternoon with the economics forum."

"What of Fortisquo?"

"I still want to meet with him. Fetch him yourself if you have to, but I want him in my hall before the day is done."

"As you wish, my lord."

Adara Corvus wasn't sure what woke her. Perhaps it was the light steps of Fortisquo as he tiptoed away from the bed. Perhaps it was the jangling of his belts as he slipped into a pair of pants. Perhaps it was the soft metallic click of the bedroom door as he opened it and stepped through. Or perhaps it was simply that Adara no longer felt his warmth next to her in the bed.

No matter. The tall, slender form of the man with the goatee was gone, like many men in Adara's life.

She opened her eyes and stretched, running a hand through the place Fortisquo had been sleeping only minutes before. Her eyes roamed the room and came to rest on the chair next to the bed. Two long, thin swords with stylish pommels leaned against the chair, while a pair of black boots sat crumpled in the seat.

Adara's eyes darted to the bedroom door as she realized Fortisquo was not, in fact, leaving her. The man wouldn't have gone anywhere except the privy without his weapon.

The door stood open an inch and Adara could hear soft voices beyond.

The curiosity was too much for her.

Gathering silky sheets around her slender body, Adara slunk from the bed, each toe of her feet settling gently on the thick rug beneath the bed. She was halfway to the door when she heard Fortisquo speaking with someone who expressed a feminine voice.

Jealousy did not build itself in Adara. She felt no man was worth the effort. But she did grow intrigued.

Stepping to the open door, Adara stared into the apartment's entertaining room, which bore padded furniture and more expensive rugs on the floor.

"Where is he now?" Fortisquo reclined on a couch while lifting a glass of red wine to his lips.

To Adara's surprise the person who sat in a chair across from Fortisquo turned out not to be a woman, but a man nearly as slender and tall as Fortisquo himself. His body was at an angle so Adara could not see his face, but still she could make out the man's expensive blue robes and the traveling cloak that covered his shoulders. She could also see the stranger's casual movements. Adara knew a man trained in the arts of diplomacy when she saw one.

"He is still at the Docks," the newcomer said, motioning toward a window. "He is waiting to hear word you will meet with him this afternoon."

Fortisquo set his glass on a table next to the couch. "I see no reason to meet with Lord Belgad."

The robed man leaned forward as if to add gravity to his entreaty by closing the space with Adara's lover. "He means you no disrespect and no harm."

"In the past—"

"The past is of little concern," the man interrupted. "Lord Belgad is only concerned with the present."

Fortisquo's eyes sharpened. Adara recognized the look. It was the same stare Fortisquo gave an opponent at the start of a duel.

The stranger eased back in his seat. "Will you meet with him?"

Fortisquo shook his head. "No."

"Lord Belgad does not enjoy disappointments."

The slender fencing artist held his ground, saying nothing.

"Very well, then." The robed man stood, his cloak and robes swaying about his feet. "I will inform Lord Belgad of your refusal. Let his reaction be upon your head."

"Tell Lord Belgad I have already played my part in his play." Fortisquo's voice was cold.

The robed man opened his mouth, then seemed to think better of it. He stopped himself from saying more and exited the room.

Once he was alone again, Fortisquo drained the glass of its wine.

Adara silently turned to go back to the bed.

"How long have you been there?" It was Fortisquo's voice from the entertaining room.

Adara thought to play quiet but realized that would not do. Fortisquo was an excellent fencer with superb senses. He was trained to notice small details and to take advantage of them. He would know if she were there or not, now that she had been detected.

She stepped back to the door and opened it so Fortisquo could see her body outlined beneath the silk sheets. "Since you asked about the whereabouts of some man," she answered.

Fortisquo's long fingers played with the glass in his hand, finally placing the object neatly in the center of the table in front of him. "You didn't hear much."

Adara nodded.

"But, still ..." The fencing master hesitated, running his fingers across his lips.

Adara let the sheets fall from her body.

Fortisquo's eyes widened.

The woman pursed her lips. "Still?"

"Dammit all!" Wearing a grin, Fortisquo jumped to his feet and marched toward her. "I suppose I can kill you *after* we make love!"

Of course Fortisquo had been joking when he'd threatened to slay Adara. He would no more kill a woman of her beauty than he would drop a bag of gold into a river. Both ideas would be

repugnant to him. Besides, he knew he would have one hell of a fight on his hands. He would win. Of that he was sure. But he was positive he would not walk away unscathed from a duel with the slender female.

He grinned as he slid from the rumpled bed and into his pants. He could not imagine knowingly attacking Adara, but daydreaming about ways to conquer a formidable foe was another matter. Fortisquo didn't get to be one of the best rapirists and assassins in West Ursia by daydreaming about women and sex all day long.

"Why are you smiling?" Adara asked from the bed. "What are you thinking?"

Fortisquo's grin grew wider beneath his thin mustache as he pulled a silk white shirt over his head. "That's a woman's question."

Adara squinted one eye. "Then give a man's answer."

Fortisquo laughed and strapped on his sword belt. He placed one finger on his chin while staring upward as if in deep thought.

His playful eyes shifted back to her. "I don't know." Then he laughed.

A pillow smacked him in the face.

The swordmaster gripped the cushion, bringing it above his head to fling back, but the woman had already slid across the bed and was standing there naked with a thin sword, a rapier, in her hand.

Fortisquo chuckled as he saw the pointed end of the blade leveled at his eyes. "What are you planning to do with that?"

Adara gave a half bow, then stood in a fencing posture, her left hand behind her back and the right hand slightly extended with the rapier's blade pointed at Fortisquo's face. She stood on the balls of her feet as her right foot faced forward a couple of steps ahead of her left foot, which was turned outward slightly.

The fencing master tossed the pillow onto the bed. "Enough play, woman! I'm hungry!"

Adara took a step back. "You've already eaten this morning," she said with a squinted eye.

It was too much for Fortisquo. A hungry belly laugh erupted from him as he turned away and waved a hand at the woman.

Adara lowered her weapon. "Where are you going?"

Fortisquo shot a look back. "I'm going to have breakfast while you dress. We can't spend all day in bed!"

Adara tossed the sword on the sheets. "I don't know why not," she said, pulling on her britches. "It wouldn't be the first time we stayed in bed all day."

She could hear Fortisquo chuckling again from the front room.

"That's true, my dear." His voice was followed by a chomping sound Adara decided was his teeth biting into one of the apples left from their dinner the night before.

She pulled a white shirt over her head. "Are you going to tell me why that man came to see you?"

There were more chomping sounds from the other room. "You're sounding like a woman again."

Adara's eyes narrowed as she glanced at the door. *That's because I am a woman!* Instead of shouting the words aloud, as she wanted, she thought it best to keep the peace until she had learned all Fortisquo had to teach her. "Anyone would be curious."

There was another biting sound. "True. I suppose it wouldn't hurt to tell."

Adara reached for her tall boots. This was one part of the day she detested. Without servants, pulling up thigh-high leather boots could take all morning.

"Well?" she said testily as she yanked on black leather.

"He works for an old associate of mine," Fortisquo explained from the other room, "and he had a business proposition for me. I refused him."

Adara huffed, ran out of air and halted her tug-of-war game with the boots. "Why did you do

that?”

She heard Fortisquo’s familiar chuckling again before he spoke. “Because I am no longer in that line of work. This associate made sure of that years ago. He bought out all contracts for the guild where I was provost, effectively putting me out of business. I owe him no favors.”

Adara huffed again as the first boot slipped into place and she grabbed the other one. “I take it you don’t need the money?”

“The associate was kind enough to make sure I was well compensated before my forced retirement.”

“It sounds as if you got a good deal.” Adara tugged on the other boot. “You made out with some gold and don’t have to work.”

“Let’s just say I enjoyed my profession.”

Finally, Adara pulled up the last boot.. “You at least could have heard the fellow out.” She stood and stomped the boots into perfect fit, then appeared in the doorway.

Fortisquo stood in the center of the front room with the remains of a mostly eaten apple skewered on the end of his sword. He gulped down the last of the fruit in his mouth. “I am no longer in that line of work.”

“And what line of work would that be?”

“I killed people, and I was quite good at it. I headed the assassin’s guild for nearly five years.”

Adara’s jaw dropped.

Fortisquo slung his sword’s tip, sending the apple flying across the room to land in a corner on a fine rug. “I’m going to need more than this for breakfast.” He belched and dropped his sword into its sheath.

Adara stood motionless, her jaw still hanging.

Fortisquo snapped his fingers in front of the woman’s eyes. “Adara.”

She blinked and scowled. “I never knew you were a hired assassin.”

Fortisquo laughed again. “Would it have made a difference?”

Adara thought about it for a second. “Probably not. I guess it’s no different from what we do.”

“Don’t fool yourself,” Fortisquo said. “It’s quite different from what you and I do. An assassin kills anyone he has been paid to kill. A professional duelist only kills when necessary.”

The swordsman turned and headed toward the exit. “Are you coming, or do you wish me to send up food?”

Adara sighed. “I’m coming, I suppose.” She took several steps toward Fortisquo.

“Good.” The swordsman glanced back at Adara as he turned the brass knob on the door. “I’d hate to spend breakfast with the bartender again. The man can pour a decent ale but he can’t fry eggs worth —”

Fortisquo went silent and stared out the door.

Adara looked across the room to see two muscular figures in leather armor in the doorway. Each of the men carried a large crossbow with arrows pointed at Fortisquo’s chest. Behind the two in leather stood the man who had spoken with Fortisquo a half hour earlier.

“Master Belgad insists upon meeting with you,” Lalo the Finder said.

Fortisquo looked to Adara. “It seems we will be having breakfast with that associate after all, my dear.”

“Tell me your problems.” Fortisquo sat in a chair of iron bands on a second-floor verandah overlooking one of Belgad’s gardens. Next to him sat Adara. Across a table from them, Belgad lounged on a marble sofa layered with silk pillows and a pale Hiponese throw with edges of gold stitching. Behind the master of the manner stood Lalo the Finder, patiently quiet.

“Do you know of Trelvigor?” Belgad sat up straight. Now that Fortisquo was here, it was time for business, and Belgad never relaxed when it was time for business. One’s senses became dull when reclining.

The former assassin nodded to his former associate. “I passed the house a few days ago.”

“I’m having him tended in the central healing tower.” Belgad looked to Adara, then back to Fortisquo. “He’s expected to live, but will likely wear scars the rest of his days.”

Fortisquo eased back in the iron chair to become as comfortable as possible. “What do the wizard’s misfortunes have to do with you?”

“Possibly nothing,” Belgad said, “but events since look to be linked to the fire. A few nights ago two of my men were killed, another crippled and yet another wounded. They were attacked by a man calling himself Kron Darkbow.”

“Is the man insane?” The assassin seemed seriously doubtful of Darkbow’s sanity.

“It would seem so.” Belgad sat up straighter. “But he is also talented at lurking in the dark and causing me trouble. My men were ... on business when they were attacked, and these were experienced men in chain with weaponry. He took down two of them with a bow and proceeded to pummel the others.”

Until then, Adara had held little interest in the conversation. Upon hearing of the skills of this Darkbow, her interest rose along with her eyes. She stared at Belgad, following his every word.

The Dartague went on. “Last night he killed two more of my men at the Docks, and burnt my three ships down to the water’s line.”

“I wondered about that smoke to the north.” Fortisquo retrieved a strawberry from a copper bowl on the table and popped the fruit into his mouth.

“Darkbow again. He wounded another of my men, but allowed him and one more to go free.”

Fortisquo swallowed his breakfast. “Are you sure it was the same man in all these instances?”

Belgad brooded for a moment, then shook his head. “I’m not sure it was one man, but it would seem to be. The description of my men at the Docks matched the description from the other night. As for Trelvigor, I won’t know what happened in his home until he is able to speak again, which the healer tells me isn’t likely for at least two weeks.”

“Is there any evidence why this man wants to harm you?”

“None for sure, but it’s not as if I wouldn’t have enemies.”

Fortisquo stared off into the garden. Adara could tell his mind was at work behind his eyes.

Belgad leaned forward as if to impress his situation upon the others. “He is more than adept with a bow, and he carries a large sword on his back, though none of my men have seen him put it to action.”

Fortisquo looked back at the hulking northerner on the marble chair. “If he can use his fists, then he’s likely proficient with the sword.”

Adara nodded, thinking the same thing. A man who could fight well with one weapon could generally fight well with another. He might not be as experienced with a particular weapon, but if he understood close combat tactics he would soon learn the limits and reaches of whatever weapon he had in his hands, at least if he lived long enough to become familiar with the weapon.

Fortisquo picked up another strawberry. “Have all of these attacks been at night?”

“So far.” Belgad’s gaze narrowed as he followed the small red fruit to the assassin’s lips. “He dresses in black and uses the shadows. I’m sure you’re familiar with the type.”

Fortisquo grinned. Of course he was familiar with the type. He had even been that type.

“Stilp described him as a large man, but he also seems quick of foot and hand.”

“Strong, agile and experienced.” Fortisquo hesitated in eating further, the strawberry stopping halfway to his lips. “He also uses the darkness to his advantage and softens his foes from a distance before moving in, so he’s clever and stealthy. It’s a superb mixture of talent, skill and brains. I would like to meet this Darkbow.”

Belgad frowned. "I want him dead."

"Your description of him has intrigued me, but it's going to cost you." The swordmaster bit into the fruit, his lips suddenly stained crimson.

"I'll pay one thousand gold."

Adara sucked in air. A thousand gold could purchase a small kingdom.

Fortisquo finished his strawberry and grinned. "I have little need for your funding."

The corners of Belgad's mouth drooped further. "I don't *have* to hire you. I have plenty of men who would take on this man."

"True, but you have no one with my talents. Admit it, you need my skills."

"I *want* your skills," Belgad said. "I don't *need* anything from you."

"Then what Belgad wants is going to cost more than a bag of coins."

"Tell me your price."

"The contracts from my guild. Sign them over to me."

Belgad nearly rose from his seat to shout at the sword master's face, but gritted his teeth to keep from doing so. It took him a moment to regain his composure. "I am not going to allow an assassin's guild in this city again. You know my position on that matter."

"You've always said killings are bad for business, but that's not true if killing *is* your business."

"Killing isn't my business. Making money is. Blood in the streets means fewer people to spend their coin. Fewer people spending coin means I make less. I've come a long way since Dartague, my friend, and I do not foresee returning to those ways. I spared you ten years ago because we came to an amicable agreement. You have stood by our agreement since, but if I was wrong in my judgment of you, then I will have to have you removed."

Adara eased a hand toward the rapier on her hip as she felt the tension rise on the verandah. She had seen no weapons on Belgad, or Lalo for that matter, but she had no doubts Belgad could take care of himself and there were likely numerous guards within shouting distance.

"There will be no need for that." Fortisquo waved a hand at the Dartague. "I am retired. But it would do my ego good to have those contracts again."

"I would rather not take the chance on your changing your mind at some future date." Belgad's voice was firm.

Fortisquo stood with slowness and walked to the edge of the verandah to stare at the greenery below.

"One thousand gold," Belgad repeated.

Fortisquo continued to stare, his eyes following a yellow bird feeding from the long pink tube of a foreign plant he could not name.

Belgad forced himself to stand. "Fortisquo, I am not a man of patience."

The swordsman turned slowly, a grin still stretched across his face. "A thousand gold will do fine. But there will have to be some arrangements."

The big Dartague appeared confused. "What do you have in mind?"

"First, you are going to throw a party." Fortisquo winked at Adara.

Chapter Ten

Seemingly flummoxed, Belgad returned to his seat. “What do you mean by *party*?”

Adara and Lalo leaned forward in curiosity. They had been discussing killing Kron Darkbow, and now the former master of Bond’s assassins’ guild was talking about festivities.

“A ball.” Fortisquo continued smiling “A festival of sorts.”

“Have you gone mad?” The look on Belgad’s face revealed his displeasure. “Should I have you admitted to the Asylum?”

“Darkbow isn’t set on killing you, at least not immediately, or he would have tried. First he wants to humiliate you.”

“He did that by burning my ships for the whole town to see.”

“Yes, but that was a message to you. If he had wanted to embarrass you publicly he would have left some sort of calling card, perhaps his name written in flames or something else as silly. He wants you to feel small and powerless. Oh, he might get around to trying to kill you eventually, but only after he thinks he’s emotionally crushed you.”

Lalo opened his mouth for the first time since the gathering began. “How does Trelvigor fit into all this?”

Belgad answered. “Perhaps Trelvigor provided information that led Darkbow to me, or perhaps Trelvigor was the original target, and somehow this man’s fury was passed on to me.”

“All possibilities.” Fortisquo shrugged. “But we have to keep our focus on the fact Darkbow’s main target is now you, Belgad.”

“None of that explains why you think I should have a festival.” The northerner remained unsmiling. “I would think I should have more important things with which to be concerned.”

“Let’s say you have this party here at your mansion,” Fortisquo said, holding out his hands to the opulence that surrounded them. “It would be an invitation-only affair, of course, but you would invite hundreds, everyone who is someone in Bond. The doors to your home would be open and crowds of people would be coming and going all night with the liquor flowing freely and the food unloaded by the wagon. What do you think would happen?”

A dull, angered look grew in Belgad’s eyes, but after a moment pondering the sword master’s words, his eyes turned wide.

Fortisquo grinned. “That’s right. Darkbow would make an appearance. How could he turn down the chance to insult you in your own home?”

“It would give him the perfect opportunity.” Now Belgad’s lips showed a thin smile.

Lalo, however, was unconvinced. “The perfect opportunity to try and assassinate you.”

Belgad waved a hand to brush off his underling. “I am much harder to kill than that.”

“Yes, you are,” Fortisquo said, lowering his arms to rest in his lap, “but we should still have you guarded well that night. I don’t think he would try to slay you with hundreds of people around. More than likely he would want to humiliate. Though it’s not impossible he might find a place to hide and wait until everyone has gone before trying to confront you.”

“As insane as it seems, yours is not a bad idea.” Belgad’s grin slowly faded. “But it seems overly complex. I wanted to hire you to kill this man, and now you’ve come up with this idea for a festival.”

Fortisquo rubbed his hands together as his own grin continued to grow. “This way is much more exciting. Have you no flair for the dramatic?”

Belgad’s face remained impassive. “No.”

Fortisquo chuckled. “It will be faster this way. I could spend weeks trying to track this fellow

down, and I still might not find him. We don't know who he is or where he's from. Kron Darkbow might not even be his real name. With the party, however, we can proceed with our plan ... in a week or two. You should at least give the upper crust some notice. Also, with us using your place as the stage, we control the environment. We'll be on your home ground."

"And if Darkbow should succeed in killing me, you will be available to regain your contracts."

"That is always a possibility," Fortisquo said, "but once I take a job, I see it through. The matter of those old contracts is something we can discuss at a future time."

"My answer will be the same."

"Time can change a man." Fortisquo winked. "Here you are, a man who says killings are bad for his business, but what are you doing? You're hiring me to kill. It's almost like old times. In effect, you are offering me a contract."

Belgad planted his hands on his knees and lifted himself to his full height. "Do not remind me. Will you be staying for lunch?"

Fortisquo looked to Adara. "What do you say, my dear? We haven't had a proper breakfast as of yet."

She nodded. "We might as well stay. I could use something to eat, and there will be planning to do."

"There's your answer," Fortisquo said, motioning to Belgad. "Now, we just need to find an excuse for the party. You can't have a celebration without something to celebrate."

As the four exited the verandah, Adara's mind turned to Kron Darkbow once more. Was the man really as good as she had heard? Or was it trickery and luck that had made him so dangerous to Belgad's men? She wanted the truth, and the only way to do so was to follow through with Fortisquo's plan. She had been lucky Belgad had not balked at her presence, but the northerner appeared to have enough confidence in Fortisquo to know the sword master would not include someone who was untrustworthy. Adara wondered if she deserved Fortisquo's trust. Her interests in him had nothing to do with loyalty and everything to do with handling a sword.

Randall could feel his life force flowing through his fingers into the wizard Trelvigor. It was a tiring, time-consuming process, but one necessary for magical healing to take full effect. Potions, salves and bandages could only do so much, as could more complicated measures such as surgery.

"Enough for now." Randall blinked his eyes open and leaned back on the stool next to Trelvigor's bed.

"You should not do so much on your own." The young voice came from behind.

Randall twisted his head to look up at the orderly standing over him, and gave a weak smile. "We give the most we can," he said, waving a hand at Trelvigor, "and this one needs much."

The orderly returned Randall's smile, patted the healer on the shoulder and went back to work collecting medical instruments from throughout the room.

Randall returned his gaze to the still unconscious wizard. The first few days had been shaky with the mage, but he apparently had a strong will to live and that helped Randall. The healing arts did little for those who did not want to live. Trelvigor, though, had the will and Randall could tell the man's soul and body were fighting back from the brink of death.

Randall reached out a gentle hand and unwound a cloth bandage from the back of Trelvigor's right hand. The flesh was no longer black but a bright red that told Randall the muscle had been healed though the layers of skin had yet to grow back.

The healer's vision blurred and his head swam, causing him to droop in his seat. The fatigue was catching up to him.

The orderly was suddenly at his side. "You should rest. Go back to your office and lie on your

couch.”

Randall knew he looked haggard, his eyes drooping and his skin gray. He had spent all his inner strength on healing Trelvigor of late, and perhaps it was time to take a day or two off and allow one of the other healers in the tower to take over temporarily.

Randall shook his head again. He couldn't allow someone else to work on Trelvigor. The wizard was Randall's charge and, besides, he thought it best none of the other healers became involved with Belgad. The big Dartague did not seem a threat to Randall, but the healer took Markwood's warnings to heart.

“I'll rest for a few hours.” Randall gave a weak smile to the orderly as he pulled himself from his chair.

The healer exited Trelvigor's recovery room and turned left down a narrow curving hall, passing several other healers and a few local citizens who lent a hand at the tower. Trelvigor had been moved from the operational room connected to Randall's office to allow the wizard solitude while healing.

Randall found the door to his office and opened it without hesitation. The idea of sleep sounded warming.

He halted before he could close the door.

Stilp was sitting on the couch, his legs spread out before him.

Belgad's client was all smiles. “Hello there, healer.”

“Good day to you.” Randall shut the door behind him and plopped into the chair behind his desk. At least sitting allowed him some rest. “What can I do for you?”

Stilp pointed at the wrapping around his leg. “It's been a couple of days, so I thought maybe you could take these bandages off.”

“Too soon. You should give it a good week to let the herbs do their work. If infection sets in, you could lose the leg.”

“What do you mean, ‘lose’ it?”

Despite his tiredness, Randall's gaze was intense. “I mean I would have to amputate it or the infection would spread to the rest of your body, eventually your heart, killing you.”

“Oh.”

“Yes, ‘oh.’ Now sir Stilp, if there's nothing else I can do for you, I need to rest. I've been working on your lord's other client.”

Stilp's eyes popped open wider as he suddenly seemed to remember something. “That's what I was supposed to ask you about. The Finder told me to check on Trelvigor.”

Randall sighed, mostly from weariness, but also from annoyance. It seemed he would never get any sleep. “Tell Lalo that Trelvigor is coming along as expected.”

“Can he talk yet?”

“No. It will probably be a couple of weeks before he can utter speech.”

“Has he come around?”

“No, he has not. I promise the very moment Trelvigor finds consciousness, I will send a message informing Lord Belgad.”

Stilp leaned forward, as if ready to leave, then hesitated. “One last thing, healer, I promise.”

Randall sighed again. “What is it?”

“Lord Belgad wanted me to tell you there's going to be a party a week from today, and that you're invited. You can bring as many guests as you like.”

Randall thought his tired ears must be deceiving him. “What is there to celebrate at this time?”

“Master Belgad is planning to make some big announcement, something about building new ships at the Docks.”

Randall sat nonplussed. What did Belgad's economic plans matter to him? “You have delivered your message. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

Stilp hopped up on his better leg. “Not unless you want to throw on some of your magical whatsis to make this leg stop hurting.”

Randall shook his head. “Sorry, but I’m all out of magical whatsis today. You can ask one of the other healers.”

Stilp gave the young man a quick salute and hobbled toward the exit. “Never mind, I can get by limping a bit longer. Maybe I should stick to the bed for another day or two.”

“That would be wise,” Randall said, watching the man’s back as he exited.

As soon as Stilp was gone, Randall pulled himself from behind his desk and collapsed onto his cushioned couch. His final thoughts before falling asleep were about Belgad’s party. Should he go? It might do him some good to get out of the tower for some fun.

Maslin Markwood had not reached nearly eighty years of age by being a fool. He was well aware divinations could draw unwanted attention from others. Wizards, witches and devils of all kinds were drawn to magic, especially when intentionally looking for it. To ensure safety, after breakfast Markwood borrowed a donkey and a two-wheeled cart from one of the university’s groundskeepers and rode north out of town along the bricked Old Road.

Markwood wished he could put more distance between himself and Randall while divining for information about Darkbow and Kobalos, but speed was of the essence and he could not spare the energy to travel by magic. After several hours of travel north of Bond, he stopped the cart and donkey near a cluster of trees set off from the road. He did not want to be disturbed, but he also did not want to be too far off the main path in case it was necessary to flee or call for help. Divining spells were fairly simple, using one’s mind to probe for information about a particular person or place, but the spells could draw the attention of the one being watched.

Markwood paused long enough to have a lunch of dried beef and pears, sharing a slice of fruit with the donkey before getting down to serious work. He knelt in a patch of grass several yards from the cart and recited protective incantations he hoped would shield him from being discovered. It was not impossible Darkbow was a mage, and Markwood did not want to take any chances. Also, the wizard planned to look in on the land of Kobalos, far to the north and ruled by a tyrant who was known for his powerful magics. If Markwood drew the attention of Lord Verkain, he hoped for Randall’s safety that Verkain would not be able to tell from where Markwood was divining.

The wizard closed his mind and softly chanted words taught to him a lifetime ago. Markwood knew the words themselves held no power, but the repetition of the chanting kept him focused and allowed his mind to roam free.

He focused outward into the darkness beyond his closed lids.

A tugging feeling came over the wizard as his mental form twisted, making him feel tempered as if he were pulled and flexed by a giant hand grasping at his soul. His mind turned in the direction of Bond, not so very far away. He floated along above the very road he had traveled with donkey and cart. His inner eye blinked and he was before the northern walls of Bond, quickly over and floating above Uptown near the university and Mages Row.

Markwood was stumped, not knowing where to go. He knew little of Kron Darkbow other than a general sense Randall had provided. He was seeking a focus, something to anchor to in hopes of finding the man fond of black.

Markwood went over what little he knew of Kron Darkbow. Randall had said the man dressed all in black and was bent on revenge against Belgad for an unknown crime. *Blackness*, Markwood thought, *blackness of the clothes suggested blackness of the soul*. Perhaps it would be enough.

The wizard closed his mind’s eye and thought of a complete, still darkness. He felt his form swirl from one direction to another, seeking out his subject.

A moment later his inner mind opened. He faced a pair of eyes, red at the rims and full of hate and insanity, a blurred darkness around the edges blocking out everything else.

Markwood retreated within himself. His eyes opened and he came to sitting on the grass. The eyes he had seen sickened Markwood, making his stomach sour.

Had that image of madness had anything to do with Kron Darkbow? The mage hoped not. If so, there was true evil, twisted evil, loose in the city of Bond.

Yet there was no strong evidence Markwood's vision had been about Darkbow. He had randomly sought out an image, and what he had found had surprised him. That did not mean he was any closer to discovering anything of this Darkbow person.

The old wizard shook himself free of the vision. The most dangerous part of his casting had yet to come. He turned his focus to Kobalos.

After a few minutes of chanting, Markwood's mind stretched again, reaching far to the north. His mind's eye looked down upon green fields with horses grazing. *That would be Caballerus*, Markwood told himself before reining in his senses and moving on. When next his mind opened, he was staring down at rocky crags with white tips. He recognized the mountains and a narrow pass that wound its way through them. He had traveled through this place when he was younger. It was the Needles, the mountain range separating West from East Ursia and other lands.

Markwood closed his inner eye again and moved on. He was getting closer to Kobalos. When next he dared a glance, he saw a land of darkness. The sun shown above, but the lands below were covered in shade. Dreary grasslands stretched to the north to a gray shore hammered by uninviting waves. The wizard had never been to this land, but he recognized it all the same. Such a sad place could only be Kobalos.

Markwood's soul shivered.

He glanced around, seeking a landmark, and spotted a black outline miles away near the shoreline. Markwood moved toward the spot, his mental form lifting as a bird on the wind. He pulled back when he saw a castle of dark stones surrounded by a high wall of black that reached higher than a tall man would stand.

Markwood surveyed the castle and noted guards in ebon plates roaming its battlements. His mind turned to the wall and found pikes embedded into the dull sand beneath; atop each pike was a skull, some still with flesh clinging or dead eyes gazing from a socket.

A voice boomed. "*Who would dare?*"

The mage retreated, floating above the pale grass surrounding the fortification. He glanced side to side, but saw no source for the voice.

"*You shall pay for your snooping nature!*" The voice was like thunder.

A high wind sprang around Markwood, knocking his ethereal form into a spin and flinging him back.

The voice crashed into being once more, questioning. "*Who has commissioned you to watch my lands?*"

Even in his flustered state, Markwood knew better than to answer. Speaking to the voice would only empower it.

The spinning became worse, hurtling the wizard through the air until he could not focus on his surroundings or his spellcraft.

Then all came to a stop, and darkness deeper than the night sky flooded Markwood's vision. The old wizard felt himself held still, unable to move even to withdraw into his physical form.

"*Tell me your purpose and your title or you shall suffer the entitlements of the damned.*"

Markwood realized he should have known better to look in upon Kobalos. He had no knowledge of the limits of Verkain's power. Verkain had enormous magical strength and was rumored to be more than two hundred years old.

A sharp pain, like a knife of ice, jabbed Markwood in the chest.

“Tell me!” It seemed impossible, but the voice was louder than before, tearing at the soul.

Markwood summoned the remaining mental strength he had. From the level of power he was sensing, he knew he would not likely be able to break free of the voice’s spell. The only option available to him was to try to startle the voice in hopes surprise would allow him escape.

Markwood plunged forward into the darkness.

There was an audible gasp within the wizard’s head.

Markwood had his chance, and in his mind he yanked back on his mental form, snapping it back to his body.

His eyes opened and he dropped on his back into cool grass. His breathing was harsh, but he was glad to be alive as he stared at white clouds sifting through a pale sky.

After a brief rest, he sat up and ran a hand over his aching chest. Markwood cried out softly at the tenderness he found, but there was no physical wound. His attacker was powerful indeed, but he had not been able to breach the ethereal void.

The wizard blinked and slowed his breathing as he crossed his legs. He had not been able to tell much from his vision quest to Kobalos, but he had not expected no better. That nation was well protected by the magic of its lord. Even old Maslin, as skilled as he was, knew he would have had a hard time trying to fend off Lord Verkain if he had not been able to backtrack into his own body, and battles on the ghostly planes tended to harm more than just the body.

The old wizard leaned to one side and vomited into the grass.

Sometime later Markwood stumbled to his donkey and leaned against the animal for a respite. He regretted not discovering more about Darkbow, but he was in no shape to attempt another divination.

Markwood opened one eye and stared into the donkey’s gray face. “Be a good ass and get me home.”

The animal’s answer was a bray as the old man climbed aboard the cart.

Lucius ducked the blade just in time to avoid a slit throat. Later he would wonder how the inmate had managed to sneak a knife into his cell, but for now Lucius had to stay alive.

He rolled away from his attacker, and came up on the balls of his feet facing the crazy man and the blade. With an opponent prepared for him, the mad killer suddenly lost the inclination to attack.

Lucius glanced down and saw the other guard who had entered the cell to feed the inmate. The man was already dead with a gash to his throat.

Behind him, from the Asylum’s entrance room, Lucius could hear the jeers of other inmates and booted guards running. The guards would help disable the lunatic with the knife, Lucius knew, then the lunatic would be put in a holding cell in the basement. Eventually the madman would return to his cell here on the second floor where he would receive free meals for the rest of his life. The dead guard at Lucius’s feet would only receive a pine box.

Brooding red eyes blazed back at Lucius. The knife stained in red hung from one hand, barely held by two fingers.

Lucius pointed to the dead guard at his feet. “That man had a family.”

The murderer said nothing. He had had his moment and it was over. He knew what was going to happen, that he would be carted away to a dungeon cell, and there was no reason to fight. He had killed again as the voices in his head had told him to, but now it would be a time for rest. At least until he was told to kill again.

“No more.” Lucius stepped into the lunatic’s reach.

The killer’s eyes grew broad. He gripped the knife and slashed, but Lucius sucked in his stomach to avoid the cut.

The killer screamed and lifted the knife over his head.

Lucius planted a fist in the man's face, knocking him back against his bunk where he dropped his weapon.

Lucius scooped up the blade. He stared into the killer's eyes and saw no remorse, no feelings at all.

The knife sank deep into the man's stomach.

As the murderer crumbled to his knees and his blood flowed onto the floor, gurgling noises and bubbles of red escaped from between his lips.

Lucius twisted the knife and jerked it free of the body.

The killer dropped to the stone, cold floor. His eyes blinked and his fingers twitched, then he died.

Lucius sat on the edge of the bunk and stared at the dead guard's face.

Three other Asylum guards burst into the cell.

Lucius sat on a bench in front of an apothecary shop. His hands in his lap squeezed the dark floppy hat he wore for his job at the Asylum.

Across the street, Lucius could spy the Frog's Bottom. The wooden structure was a three-story house that had probably belonged to one of the wealthier inhabitants of Bond a hundred or more years earlier before the Swamps had become a refuge for the poor. Occasionally someone, almost always a man, would come or go from the place, marching hurriedly up its front steps or stumbling drunkenly down the same stairs. In the half hour Lucius had sat on the bench, he had counted thirteen men entering and seven men leaving. Twice he had seen some of the women who worked at the Bottom, one looking out a window from the second story and another helping one of her more sloven customers out the front door.

So far there had been no sign of Wyck. Lucius had not seen the boy in several days and thought it time to hunt him down. Lucius wanted the boy's company. Wyck cheered him, reminding him of his young days on the streets of Bond when he too had lived alone with only his wits. Wyck's life seemed similar to Lucius's when the man had been that age. The main difference was Lucius had found sleeping quarters in his abandoned home after his parents had been killed. There had been no servants or family or friends who were available to take in the young Tallerus, so he had lived on his own, surviving on the streets until his uncle Kuthius had arrived from the east and taken him along on the return trip.

"I wondered when you'd show." The familiar voice came from behind.

The Asylum guard craned his head around to see Wyck standing nearly at his heels, gripping a sweet roll with several bites missing.

Lucius gave a weak grin. "Thought I'd find you here."

Wyck plopped down next to the man. "Only at night. By day I stay away. The madam wants to put me to work if I hang around too much."

Lucius watched the boy take a bite of his food, then pointed to the roll. "I'm sure you paid for that."

Wyck nodded as he swallowed. "Of course, though my purse is getting a bit light. I'm glad you showed up. I've got more to tell you."

"Such as?"

"I heard there was a killing at the Asylum this morning."

"It was me."

"What?"

"I killed an inmate." Lucius lowered his head. "It was after he murdered a guard."

“Remind me not to make you angry.” Wyck finished the last of his breakfast as if the man’s admission had no effect upon him.

“It’s against regulations.” Lucius looked up. “The other guards said I had no choice. But they didn’t see it happen. I didn’t have to kill that man.”

“Then why’d you do it?”

“He was too dangerous to live.”

The youth plopped his fingers into his mouth and sucked off the remaining stickiness. Hearing Lucius’s tale of death was just another story to him, one he would pass along to another street urchin when the opportunity presented itself.

“What other news have you?” Lucius asked.

“The Eastern pope is still raising an army.” Wyck glanced at Lucius out of the corner of his eyes.

“Old news, and not true. What else?”

“Some of Belgad’s ships caught fire down at the Docks.”

“You told me about Belgad last we spoke.” Lucius twisted the beret in his hands. “Is the man always in trouble, or do you enjoy talking about him?”

“Don’t look at me,” Wyck said with a shrug. “You’re the one wanting to know the word on the street. I just let you know what I know. Also, Belgad’s planning a party.”

“A party?”

“Yeah, he’s announcing some new deal down at the Docks.”

“When is this party?”

“About a week.” Wyck shrugged again. “I don’t know the exact day. But there’s supposed to be a ton of people there. All the local gentry are invited, and the Ruling Council and Chief Councilor himself is expected to show up.”

“You know a lot about politics for a kid off the streets,” Lucius said, opening the leather money purse tied to his belt.

“Hey, I know who runs this town. That’s what you pay me for.”

Lucius offered the boy two silver coins.

Wyck frowned. “Only two this time?”

“I’m running short. I’ll make it up to you. I get paid at the Asylum in a few days.”

Wyck took the coins and stuffed them inside his tattered shirt.

Lucius twisted in his seat to face the boy. “Would you like to attend Belgad’s party?”

“How? They’re not going to let me in.”

“Leave that to me.” The man smiled.

Chapter Eleven

One of Stilp's duties as a client was to make a monthly remittance to Lord Belgad in the form of twenty gold. Some months Stilp was short, but as long as he was close to the twenty gold little was said, at least as long as he could make up the loss in a week or two. In the rare month Stilp was far short of the twenty gold, he took on additional tasks for Belgad, which was how he came to be a fixer, a lobbyist who dealt with lesser government officials and the various workers' guilds.

To raise the twenty gold he needed, Stilp had a string of businesses throughout the city that supplied him a monthly stipend of varying amounts depending on the type of business and how profitable things had been of late. In return for the monthly payments, these businesses received insurance. When they paid, their employees and customers went unaccosted and their buildings and goods went untouched; when they didn't pay, employees would receive a thumping during a late shift, customers would be threatened, goods were damaged or stolen and warehouses were broken into or set ablaze. The culprits behind these acts always remained a mystery. Stilp swore he had no part in the deeds, and that the monthly payment would allow Stilp, through Lord Belgad's resources, to protect the businesses. The city guard rarely intervened, mostly because they were more a military presence within Bond than a policing force.

As Stilp cruised down an alley in the middle of the night, his money belt beneath his tunic weighted down with ten silver and four gold, he had few worries. He had feared he would not be able to make his rounds because of his limp, but it had been nearly a week since he had been wounded and the healers at the Swamp's tower had done a good job treating him.

Despite his lack of worries, Stilp occasionally glanced at the rooftops while his short sword remained on his left hip. Until the incident with Darkbow, he had not worn a sword on his rounds, but now he felt safer having the weapon available. Overall, he felt fairly secure. Only bad luck would have Stilp fall into Darkbow's hands again.

A swishing noise from behind made Stilp look back.

A nightmare of black dove at him from the night's sky.

Stilp took off at a run. He didn't know what was after him, but he wasn't going to let it catch him to find out.

"Good evening, master Stilp." The speech was hauntingly familiar.

The dark form engulfed Stilp, grabbing him around the waist and lifting him off the ground.

Stilp screamed, hollering for Ashal or any other god to save him.

"Quiet," the dark thing said as they swung through the air.

They came to a stop on a roof and Stilp went stumbling, rolling to the edge of the building and almost going over before a black glove caught him by the collar.

Stilp looked up to see a dark hood with grinning teeth beneath.

It was Kron Darkbow. "We meet again."

Stilp shivered, speechless.

Kron released the man and began to roll up the silk rope attached to his grappling hook.

Stilp put his face in his hands. "I thought you were some night terror come to suck all the blood from my body."

"Who says I won't." Kron returned the hook and rope to their hiding spot in his cloak. He pointed at the sword on Stilp's belt. "Why do you carry that thing if you're not going to use it?"

Stilp glanced down at the sword. "I figured you would kill me if I touched it."

"I might kill you anyway."

Stilp looked up at the black figure. "I know you don't like me, but your fight is with Belgad."

I'm nothing to you."

"But you *are* something to me. You can provide information."

Stilp saw a glimpse of hope in what he had thought was a bleak and short future. He wouldn't knowingly betray Belgad, unless it was maybe at the point of that big sword Darkbow had on his back, but he had no qualms about providing a little information if it meant he wouldn't have another arrow in his leg.

The night's wind twirled the black cloak around Kron's stout figure as he stood tall. "I've already learned much just by watching you tonight."

"What are you talking about?"

"I've been on you since you left that little hole you call a home in the Swamps. It's a nice racket you have going. I've counted six places you've stopped. You must have a goodly amount of coin on you."

Stilp winced. He didn't like where this conversation was going.

"In fact," Kron said, nodding to the belt around the other man's waist that had been revealed when Stilp's tunic was yanked up during his tumble, "I am in need of coin at the moment."

Stilp pulled down his tunic to hide the belt once more. "Belgad will have me flayed." His words were shaky.

"Not likely. He knows your worth, and he knows you'll find another way to pay your debt."

"Please, don't take it all." Stilp sounded like a mouse squeaking.

Darkbow's grin grew wider. "That's what I like to hear." He held out a hand.

Stilp hesitated, noticed Darkbow's grin was fading, and reached inside his tunic and pulled out several coins. He dropped them into Darkbow's hand.

Kron counted. "Four gold and six silver," he said, pocketing the coins. "You *have* had a good night."

"You could make more if you worked for Belgad."

The punch seemed to come out of nowhere, out of the very night itself. It landed across Stilp's face, sending him sprawling to the edge of the building once more. A gloved hand saved him again and shoved him down to the roof's top.

"Get this through your head," Kron said, towering over his prey. "I will never work for your lord. I don't enjoy taking your money, but my war is expensive."

Stilp wiped blood from beneath his nose. "You could have just told me. I think you've broken my nose."

Kron glanced at the man's face. "It's not broken, but it'll be swollen a day or two. If I had wanted to break it, it would be broken. Count your luck I didn't toss you over the edge."

Stilp looked over the side of the building. It was only two stories, not far to fall, but he didn't look forward to broken bones. "Can I go now?"

"Not yet. I've heard Belgad is throwing a ball in a few days. Is this true?"

Stilp nodded. "It's a party for his new economic agenda at the Docks. After what you did, he's planning to expand."

"More ships?"

"More ships and more control of the Docks."

Kron pulled back a fist ready to hit the man again, then lowered his hand. There was no reason to hit Stilp for what he said. The little man was merely passing along information.

"Tell Belgad he had better watch what he does to the Docks," Kron said. "If he wants more river ships to go up in flames, I'm more than willing to do it for him."

"He won't take kindly to hearing that." Stilp wiped away more blood with a sleeve.

Darkbow's grin returned. "No, I suppose he won't. Also tell him I won't disappoint by not showing for his party."

For the first time that night, Stilp grinned. "*That* he'll like to hear."

“I’m sure he will, but you can warn him I won’t walk through the front door and announce myself. Whatever happens that night, let it be on his head.”

“I’ll tell him.”

“Good. Now goodbye.”

The man in black disappeared over the edge of the roof.

Stilp barely had time to see Darkbow land in a crouch, roll to his feet and trot off down the alley.

“Don’t you worry,” Stilp said barely above a whisper, still nursing his busted nose. “I’ll tell him.”

Chapter Twelve

Lucius Tallerus rose earlier than usual the next morning. There was no work ahead for him in the day, so he pulled on the leather road clothes he had worn upon arriving in Bond and hung his large sword on his back.

A handful of dried fruits served as breakfast in the main room of the Rusty Scabbard, and Lucius was on his way along the streets of the city within a half hour of the sun rising.

He followed South Road nearly to the southernmost wall of the city and turned west along a dirt road for several blocks.

Before him stood the barracks of the city guard, two stories tall and the longest structure in the city. Lucius figured it must be nearly a half-mile trot all the way around the building.

He looked around for a public entrance, spotted what he thought was it and jogged up the stairs between several orange-garbed guards who were exiting. Once through the door, Lucius found himself in a long hallway lit by open windows. He was brought to a halt by a table to one side of the hall and two men in guards' uniforms sitting behind it.

The older of the two guards sat up straight and stared at Lucius. "Your name and business?"

"Lucius Tallerus. I am here to see Sergeant Gris."

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No, but I am a friend."

"Sure you are," the guard said, pointing at a parchment, pen and ink bottle on the table in front of him. "Sign here."

Lucius put pen to parchment while the older guard ordered the younger to find the sergeant.

After the one guard jogged his way down the hall, Lucius looked up from signing his name. "Should I wait outside?"

"No need." The older guard glanced at the parchment. "Gris is just starting his shift. He will be along in a minute."

The guard was proved correct when Lucius soon saw his friend marching straight for him.

Gris smiled and offered hand. "I wondered when I'd see you again."

Lucius took the hand and shook. "Sorry I didn't search you out again sooner, but the Asylum has been keeping me busy."

Gris opened the exit door and motioned for Lucius to follow him outside. "You coming by saves me a trip."

The two men were soon walking side by side down a dirt path away from the barracks.

Kron rolled his shoulders as if to loosen stiff muscles. "Why did you need to see me?"

"I heard what happened at the Asylum."

Lucius's lips remained closed as he stared ahead.

"How do you feel about it?" Gris paused in his tracks.

Lucius stopped next to his friend. "The lunatic killed a man. He got what he deserved. We faced worse in the Prisonlands."

Gris gave a dark grin. "That's true, but it's different in the Asylum. The place ... it rots the mind. It can do funny things to a man."

Lucius nodded in silence.

The sergeant put a hand on his companion's shoulder. "Why were you looking me up this morning?"

"I had the time, for one thing. The chief guard at the Asylum gave me a couple of days leave."

"You're not looking for another job already, are you?"

“Not exactly, but I could use more coin. Living at the Scabbard has grown expensive. I need to find a proper place of my own, or find employment that allows me room and board.”

“That would be the city guard.”

“Or the military.”

“You don’t want to sign up with the service.” Gris’s brows furrowed in concern. “The city guard might not be much, but at least we know the right end of a sword. The West’s army is a joke. You might as well join the militia. I’m sure your own weaponry is better than anything the army has to offer.”

“What about a knight?”

Gris laughed. “You? A knight?”

“You misunderstand me.” Lucius added a chuckle of his own. “Could I not sign on as one of their attendants?”

“They’re called squires,” Gris explained while they continued to walk, “and it’s doubtful they’d have you. You’re not a regular churchgoer, are you?”

“No.”

“That would cinch it. The church appoints them, so most knights only take the faithful.”

“I don’t suppose *you* have any openings yet?”

Gris shook his head. “Nothing permanent.”

“I hear there’s going to be a social affair at Belgad’s.”

Gris stopped walking and glared at Lucius. “How did you hear about that?”

“Word gets around.”

The sergeant frowned. “I want you to stay away from that man.”

“Who? Belgad?”

“Yes, Belgad. He’s a powerful man who can be trouble.”

“Remember who you’re talking to. I can take care of myself.”

“No, you listen to me.” Gris stepped nearer his friend and pointed a finger at him. “This is not the time to become involved with Belgad the Liar. There are rumors a street war’s brewing, and Belgad is in the middle of it.”

Lucius stepped back with the palms of his hands facing his friend. “I didn’t mean to rile you, and I definitely didn’t mean to imply I have any desire to work for Belgad.”

Gris huffed and stepped back, giving them both breathing space.

Lucius lowered his hands. “I was only asking about the party because I thought you might be hiring on extra help.”

“We’re hiring temporary recruits for that night, but I won’t be working. I’ve been invited to the damn thing.”

Lucius grinned. “So, you warn me off, then you go and jump into the lion’s mouth.”

“I might not be officially working, but it’s part of my duties to attend such events.”

“Couldn’t I sign on for the night even if you’re enjoying yourself?”

Gris’s gaze was not one of mirth. “I doubt I’ll be enjoying myself.”

“Don’t make me beg,” Lucius said, holding out a hand. “I need the coin.”

Gris shook his head and stared at the dirt beneath his boots. Lucius was trained in taking care of himself, but Gris didn’t feel right about sending the man to the home of Belgad the Liar. Then again, he had gotten Lucius employment at the Asylum, and there weren’t many local places more dangerous.

“Alright,” Gris said, taking Lucius’s hand and shaking it. “I’ll get you signed up for deputy duty that night, but I’ll make damn sure you’re assigned outside the mansion. It’ll be street duty for you, my friend.”

“As long as it pays.”

A healer had to find time for relaxation and enjoyment, especially a healer who hailed from Kobalos. Randall told himself that as he eased back in a cushioned chair in his office and opened a leather-bound codex.

It had been a long day for Randall, applying herbal wraps to Trelvigor's flesh and focusing his own magic upon healing the wizard. Stilp had dropped in while sporting a nose nearly broken and had sought curing for his ills, but Randall had sent him to another healer within the tower complex. There was only so much Randall could do, and his body and mind were taxed enough.

Randall needed to forget his weariness and turned his attention back to his book. It wasn't often he had an opportunity to relax.

A knock sounded at the door to his office.

The healer placed his reading material on the desk next to his chair and sighed. "Enter."

The door swung open to reveal Maslin Markwood.

Randall was instantly out of his chair. "Maslin, come in," he said, motioning the wizard to a seat.

"Thank you, my boy." Markwood took a chair across from where the healer had been sitting. "Please, sit. I know how tired you must be."

Randall consented by returning to his cushioned seat.

The wizard shifted slightly into a more comfortable position, with a hand flattening out his robes over his knees. "I apologize for not coming sooner."

"What happened with your divinations?"

"Someone, most likely Verkain, was attracted by my presence." The wizard did not appear happy at his own words. "There was a brief struggle in the outside worlds, but I managed to escape. I do not believe I was traced here."

"You weren't. Otherwise I would already be dead."

Markwood nodded in agreement. "Which is why I've been keeping an eye on you. I had to be sure my little adventure had not caused you any ill effects. Only after a couple of days did I feel enough time had passed to warrant meeting with you."

"Did you find anything in Kobalos?"

"Nothing informative, other than your Lord Verkain is likely quite insane."

Randall's gaze traveled to the floor. "I don't claim him as my lord."

"I understand," the wizard said, waving off his words. "On the matter of this Darkbow character, I found out even less. What little I did discover gave me the shudders. Like Verkain, he is likely not in his right mind."

Randall looked up, his face somewhat pained. "What did you see of Darkbow?"

"Rage and death. I don't believe it was directed at you. However, I felt nothing good about the man."

"I will be wary of him."

"As long as you work for Belgad, you will need to be."

"It's worse than that," Randall said, his face clearing, allowing a slight grin. "I've been invited to a party."

"A party? Who is throwing it?"

"Belgad."

The look Markwood gave the healer was not a happy one. "I've warned you to stay away from that man."

"I haven't made up my mind if I'm going, but I'm glad you're here. I was thinking of asking you to come with me."

Markwood huffed and twisted in his seat as if exasperated. "Why in the name of Ashal would you want to go?"

Randall had to think about that. Why did he want to go? Because he was tired of spending all

his time cooped up in one room or another at the tower? Randall wasn't sure. He had not taken Stilp's invitation seriously at first, but over the last couple of days it had crossed his mind more than once. He was also curious to see if Kron Darkbow would make an appearance. Randall wanted to see the man, maybe to find out if Darkbow was Kobalan.

The healer finally answered the old wizard. "I'm not sure."

"My advice is against it." Markwood frowned. "However, if you do decide to go, then I will allow it only if I am along."

Randall smiled. "I was hoping you would say that."

"Swans?" Belgad watched three of the white birds preen themselves on his front lawn.

"They are all the rage this year, my lord," Lalo the Finder said from behind his employer. "All the ladies are having them shipped in from Port Harbor for their gardens."

Belgad turned a skeptical eye to his servant. "Do they have to shit on my lawn?"

"They have to go somewhere, my lord, and you said you wanted this to be a lavish event."

Belgad glared back at the feathered beasts. "How much do they cost?"

"A mere three silvers apiece, my lord."

Belgad continued watching the birds, his eyes more those of a displeased hunter than a wealthy business showing off for the masses. "For that kind of money we're going to eat the damn things after the party."

Lalo the Finder gave a rare smile. Humor was not something that surrounded the life of Belgad the Liar. Thinking he would find nothing more humorous in his day, Lalo was surprised at the sight of Stilp approaching through the front gates of the mansion's surrounding wall. Stilp walking toward them wasn't funny in itself, but the two pieces of thin wood wrapped to the sides of his nose were more than Lalo could stand. Belgad's employee laughed out loud.

Belgad turned to see what the laughter was about.

Stilp pointed a finger at the Finder. "You can stop the hilarity right now."

As the man with the busted nose approached, Belgad and Lalo could tell small balls of wool were stuffed beneath the sticks on Stilp's face, and the skin around the man's eyes was black.

Lalo had to put a hand over his mouth to stop his chuckles.

Belgad's visage was little more pleased than it had been watching the swans. "What happened?"

"Darkbow." Stilp could barely meet his boss's gaze.

A glance from his employer turned Lalo's demeanor serious.

Belgad grumbled. "What did he want?"

"To tell you he's going to be at your party," Stilp said. "Then he gave me this cracked nose and took nearly all my earnings for the month."

Lalo suddenly appeared amused. "He's resorted to stealing."

Stilp gave the Finder a dark look. "He said it wasn't cheap fighting a war."

"I suppose it's not." Belgad glanced from Lalo and back to Stilp. "Did he have anything else to say?"

"He said to stay away from the Docks."

"He's still concerned about that," Belgad said with a smile, showing a slight delight in being able to perturb his enemy, even if in only a minor way. "But I've no ill intentions on the dock workers. He's behind this. Not them."

"I also suggested he come to work for you."

Lalo let out another chuckle.

"What was his response?" Belgad asked with a look of curiosity.

Stilp pointed to his nose. "This."

Laughter burst from between Lalo's lips.

Belgad let out a chuckle of his own.

"What's going to be done with this madman?" Stilp fumed, one of his toes tapping. "Beating me up is one thing, but now he's interfering with business. I don't know how I'm going to pay your stipend this month."

"Don't worry about that," Belgad said, still smiling. "If you're a few silver short, I can swallow the loss for a month. The big prize will be Darkbow, and we have plans for him."

Belgad turned and pointed a finger at the swans.

Stilp appeared none the wiser. "Birds?"

"The party." Belgad rolled his eyes at the dimness of his employee. "I have a special guest coming just for Kron Darkbow."

Stilp brightened. "You got Fortisquo out of retirement?"

Belgad looked at the man. He was surprised Stilp had been smart enough to figure it out on his own.

"Yes," the northerner said, "and he has a student with him nearly as skilled as himself. I'm positive they'll make short work of Kron Darkbow."

Chapter Thirteen

The day of Belgad's party began with a red sun rising over the rooftops of Bond. The city looked at peace. The morning crowds trudged to one job or another, while the thoroughways were filled with carts and wagons weighted with goods from the Docks. Boats of all sizes were untied from quays and shoved off into the depths of the two rivers running through Bond. Ribbons of smoke curled their way to the sky from morning breakfast ovens. The scent of baking bread layered the streets of the working class districts in Uptown and Southtown, while the stench of rotting vegetables and sewage permeated the air of the Swamps.

Amid all this normalcy, three swans the color of clean wool waltzed around the circular driveway of crushed stones that trailed from the front gate of the walls surrounding Belgad's mansion to the entrance of the main building the Dartague called home.

Belgad stood with his fists on his hips at the top of the stairway in front of his mansion's main entrance. "We're going to eat those damn birds."

Lalo dared to smile. "Whatever you desire."

"That's right," Belgad said, turning to enter his home. "And it's going to be that way tonight, too. Now let's finish the last of the preparations."

"Yes, my lord." Lalo slunk through the door behind his master.

As they were in better condition than his road clothes, Lucius decided to wear his Asylum uniform but without the floppy hat. He also went without the cudgel he carried for his employment. A sword would be more appropriate for a social setting, though Lucius was mildly concerned his large hand-and-a-half weapon was currently out of style except on a battlefield. It would have to do, however, because he had neither the gold nor the time to purchase a fancy-hilted broadsword or rapier.

Once bathed and dressed, Lucius made his usual morning stroll through the Rusty Scabbard, pausing long enough to enjoy a breakfast of oatmeal and biscuits. Outside, he made as direct a route as he could to the barracks of the city guard. Gris had told him to show at least by lunch. Lucius wasn't expected on actual guard duty until the night, but there were logistics and placements to figure before the party began. Gris expected trouble from whomever was giving Belgad grief of late, and he wanted none of it to spill over into the city proper.

Lucius grinned as he walked. He expected the night to be one to remember.

It was a simple matter to find the sergeant at the barracks. Gris had Lucius assigned one of the guards' orange tabards and cast a doubtful eye at the big sword Lucius wore.

"You planning on hunting bear tonight?" the sergeant asked.

Lucius shrugged. "Better to have it and not need it than need it and not have it."

"Carry on." With a lopsided grin, Gris turned away to deal with other guards hired for the party.

By the afternoon, Lucius and eleven other men in orange tramped their way along Beggars Row to the wall that surrounded the grounds of Belgad's mansion.

One of the younger guards stared up at the high walls behind them. "Think they'll invite us in?"

Lucius watched the road ahead of them. "Doubtful."

Sergeant Gris soon handed out placements outside the wall. Lucius was stationed with another man to the right of the large iron gate that would open to the grounds once the party commenced.

"You twelve are to watch the streets," Gris said, pointing east along Beggars Row. "It's doubtful there'll be any real trouble, but you have to keep a check on the riffraff. Lord Belgad will have four of

his personal guard on the inside of the gate, but if anyone uninvited tries to get through, you escort them away. If they give you trouble, a good clocking of the head and a night in jail should give them a new perspective come morning. Do not enter the walls of Lord Belgad's home unless there is an emergency. There will be a score of men Lord Belgad has hired, so your services should not be needed inside.

"Any questions?"

"What time does our shift end?" The man was stationed with Lucius.

"When the party is over. I don't know when that will be, but probably late into the morning. Anything else?"

Another man stepped forward. "Food? Privy breaks?"

"Lord Belgad has been kind enough to supply meals that will be brought to you around midnight," Gris said, "but I must emphasize none of you are to drink any liquor. Any man with the reek on his breath will forfeit his pay and spend a night in jail. Toilet breaks you can work out amongst yourselves. The Royal Bear is just down the Row, so you can make yourselves familiar with their utilities."

With that, Gris was on his way home to change out of his street uniform.

Lucius turned his eyes to the mansion behind the black iron bars of the gate. There would be excitement tonight. He could feel it.

At lunchtime, Fortisquo found himself wandering the main hall of Belgad's fortress where servants bustled around setting up dozens of long tables and high chairs for the night's festivities. Several dishes had already been placed in the center of one of the tables. Fortisquo nibbled on dried fruits and salted minnows. It would be a light meal, leaving him hungry, but that was good. The duelist did not want a heavy stomach.

Fortisquo swallowed a slice of pear as he watched Stilp emerge from behind Belgad's thronelike chair atop a dais.

The tall sword master dressed in foppish silks watched with a smirk as the much shorter man in tatty leathers nearly tripped down the wooden stairs. "I wondered when you'd show."

Stilp caught himself from falling and gave a crooked smile of his own. "Looks like Belgad finally got you out of retirement."

"It does, indeed." Fortisquo pointed at Stilp's bandaged nose. "What happened to you?"

"Kron Darkbow happened to me."

Fortisquo couldn't hold back his laughter.

"It's not funny!" Stilp stamped a foot as if he were a child.

Servants near them suddenly had other, more important tasks to see to elsewhere.

Once his laughter had died, Fortisquo pulled a chair from a table and relaxed. "Tell me, is there anything you can add to what Belgad told me about this Darkbow? You've had two run-ins with him from what I've heard."

"He's fast and strong, and he's pretty big."

The sword master appeared inquisitive. "What kind of weapons does he carry?"

"Big sword on his back, but I haven't seen him draw it. He's a dandy of a shot with a bow. And he's got this little ... I don't know what you'd call it ... some kind of a miniature hook tied to a rope."

"A grappling hook small enough to carry." Fortisquo nodded. "It's probably attached to a silk line. I've seen it done before."

"He's good with his fists, too."

"And also apparently likes fires."

"That, too," Stilp said. "So what do you have planned for him?"

“Nothing special. No fancy, complicated plans. Just a party to draw him out. Once he appears, I’ll deal with him in my own way.”

Stilp didn’t look convinced. “You’ll have to catch him. He can disappear like a black cat on a cloudy night.”

“No doubt he has talents, but I’m positive I can deal with him when the time comes.”

“Especially if you have my help,” a female voice added.

Both men turned to look toward the entrance. Standing just inside the door was Adara dressed in silky garb similar to Fortisquo’s and wearing a rapier on her left hip. A black whip had been added to her costume, riding on her right hip.

Fortisquo frowned. “I thought I told you to find something more fitting to wear.”

“And I told you I wasn’t wearing a dress if there was fighting to be done.” The woman appeared adamant about her decision.

Fortisquo chuckled and motioned her to come forward. “Stilp, this is my fencing student and current favorite female, Adara Corvus.” The swordsman gave a slight bow to the woman and motioned toward Stilp. “Adara, this is an old associate of mine and Lord Belgad. He is called Stilp.”

Adara took Stilp’s hand and shook it. “Just Stilp?”

The smaller man blushed. “It was what my mother gave me. She didn’t know who my father was.”

Fortisquo continued to chuckle.

“My apologies if I have offended,” Adara said, taking her hand back.

Stilp looked as if he had not wanted to let go of that hand. He had seen beautiful women in his time, but few had both looks and the strength of body Adara conveyed. Though she was not a large woman, Stilp could plainly see the muscles in her arms and legs.

He smiled. “Nothing to apologize about, m’lady.”

Fortisquo laughed again. “I think poor Stilp here is taken with you, Adara.”

The woman blushed. She was not shy of men, but being noticed by one of the lesser classes was not something she was used to or necessarily wanted. It embarrassed her to be fawned upon by such a lowling as Stilp, though she didn’t think less of Stilp himself.

“My pardon, m’lady.” Stilp’s smile faded.

Fortisquo laughed yet again. “Stilp and I were just discussing Kron Darkbow.”

Adara gripped the hilt of the sword at her side. “You haven’t told me where we will be hidden tonight.”

“I haven’t decided,” Fortisquo said with a shrug.

Adara shook her head, obviously annoyed. “You need to choose our ground. This fellow won’t come right out in the open for us. All this is nonsense.”

“Yes, it is, which is why it will work. He’ll be busy half the night trying to sneak in here, watching every nook and corner for a hidden attacker.”

Stilp looked almost uninterested. “It sounds crazy.”

Fortisquo kept on laughing. “A great wheel is in motion, and Kron Darkbow will be impaled upon its spokes.”

“I’ve a carriage waiting for us outside,” Markwood said to the young healer still dressing in his private chambers.

Randall pulled a gray cloak over his shoulders. “Will this do?”

The wizard looked the young man up and down. Randall wore simple black trousers below a simple white shirt; he appeared as any number of the lesser castes within Bond.

“It’s simple, worthy of a healer.” Markwood smoothed down his own purple robes with gold

trim. It was appropriate for a healer to wear simple garb for such an event, but a leading professor of the University of Ursia's College of Magics would be expected to wear finery.

Randall nodded and opened a desk drawer to remove a small leather purse, in case he should have need of spending money. As his hand grasped the purse, his eyes fell on the heavy gold ring inside the drawer. He hesitated, then stuffed the ring inside the purse. Randall could not imagine having to use the ring, but he did not know what the night would bring. If Kron Darkbow made an appearance at Belgad's party, Randall wanted to be prepared for anything.

The healer slipped the purse into a pocket. "I'm ready."

The sun was closing on the horizon and a long line of revelers were thronging on the hill in front of the gate to Belgad's home when Lucius spotted Wyck with a group of other boys his age sitting on the stone steps of a nearby shop.

Upon seeing the orange garb Lucius wore, the other boys skittered away quickly.

"I thought I gave you coin to purchase some new clothes," the approaching guard said as he frowned at the boy's rags.

"You did, and I haven't. You think they'll chase after me if I'm dressed like some noble's kid?"

Lucius whispered with gritted teeth, "Hush."

"What about your clothes?" Wyck glared at the swordsman's orange. "Got a new job?"

Lucius stopped in front of the boy and turned his attention to the line of folks waiting to get into Belgad's mansion. "Only for the night."

"When are they going to let everyone in?"

"Another hour. Lord Belgad's servants are busy making last-minute preparations."

Wyck patted at his belly. "I bet there'll be lots of fancy stuff to eat."

"I'm sure there will be." Lucius allowed a grin as he turned an eye on the youth.

"So, are you going to be able to get me inside?"

"You don't mind a little trouble, do you?"

The boy screwed up his face as if the answer should be obvious. "Not me."

Lucius had to stop himself from laughing. "I've got a plan, and hopefully I'll be able to bail you out if you get in over your head."

The boy was all ears.

From a window overlooking the front of his estate, Belgad watched the wall's gates tugged open by his guards. The masses began their way to the inner grounds. He watched them follow the circular path of gravel that wound its way to his front door, and he heard more than one cry of surprise or enjoyment at the sight of the silly white birds flocking on the grass in the center of the round path.

Belgad glared at the swans. "I'm going to dine on those damn things tomorrow."

"What did you say, master?"

Belgad turned to face the Finder, who was standing near the closest of two doors to the room, a small library covered in shelves of books from wall to wall. Heavy rugs kept the cold of the stone floor at bay as did flames in the fireplace. A desk to one side was stacked with books and scrolls, evidence Belgad was no longer quite the barbarian many believed him to be.

"I said I'm going to eat your damn birds for breakfast tomorrow," Belgad said, crossing the room to his servant.

"I would think one would be more than sufficient, even for a man of your appetites." Lalo held out a maroon robe trimmed in white fur.

Belgad turned his back to his employee, allowing the servant to slip the robe over his white tunic.

“Is the robe too much?” Belgad looked into a mirror nearly as tall as himself. The Dartague was not a vain man when it came to clothing, preferring a simple wardrobe, but he realized to be a leader one had to look the part.

“Not for such an event. In fact, I suggest you put on something with more silk, perhaps a jacket with open sleeves.”

Belgad shook his head. “I might be gentry, but I’m not one of these fancy southerners with their flimsy swords and flimsier wardrobes.”

“As you wish.” Lalo gave a short bow.

Belgad and his servant left the room and made their way down a marble stairway to the ground level and the front entrance where a handful of guards in chain shirts waited. Other servants stood in a line, each holding a platter of food or drink.

Belgad eyed the line of his employees from one end to the other, then turned his look upon garlands of pine that had been hung along the bannisters of the stairways. Everything was in order.

“Has Fortisquo made his preparations?” the master of the house whispered to the Finder at his shoulder.

“Yes, my lord.”

“Then let the festivities begin.” Belgad gripped gilded door handles and pulled them toward himself.

Chapter Fourteen

The first through the door were the upper middle class, local guild chiefs and wizards and merchants who arrived at Belgad's mansion early in hopes of obtaining the best seats and the best food. They flocked through the entrance room in their best finery while nibbling finger fare and slurping expensive wines offered by the manor's servants. Most would have gobbled down more, but they did not want to fill their stomachs before the main course.

"This way, this way," Lalo called over the din of the throng as he motioned them toward the open doors leading to the main hall.

Belgad stood to one side like a king greeting nobility, shaking hands with those brave enough to approach.

"Thank you for coming," the large, bald northerner said as he shook the hand of a litigator, then turned his attention to the wife of a knight who offered her fingers. Belgad leaned forward and grazed his lips on the woman's wrist. "So glad to see you again, m'lady."

From the main hall, Lalo pointed to the rows of tables and pillowed chairs ahead in the dining room. "Everyone find a seat. There is room for all."

With a snap of the Finder's fingers, servants carrying trays of food and drink began to make their way through the masses into the dining hall.

Belgad glanced to Lalo. "It's going to be a long night." The northerner only hoped Fortisquo's plan would work to make all this worth his while.

Outside the mansion, carriages delivered wealthy passengers near the front door. Then the carriages lined up side by side on Belgad's lawn. Knights in their finest silk shirts and jackets with slit sleeves held the hands of their ladies and pranced their way through the front entrance into the main hall. Some of the more well-to-do merchants followed suit as did a number of local politicians.

Randall and Markwood found themselves stuffed among this crowd, edging their way inch by inch toward the dining hall.

Randall raised his voice to speak over the chattering groups. "Everyone in town is here."

Markwood merely nodded and proceeded to push toward a table.

Soon they were seated with other university professors whom Markwood and Randall recognized by face if not by name. Quick pleasantries were passed around the table while jostling servants placed silver plates of various steaming dishes before them.

Randall was hungry, having not eaten much, and feeling drained from his magic expenditures on Trelvigor, but he couldn't make up his mind what he wanted to try first. There was a platter covered with a dark green garnish upon which rested a basted hog. A goose smothered in a thin, orange gravy also caught the healer's attention, as did a bowl of rolls with steam rising from its contents.

Markwood silently scowled as he reached for an apple among the many trays before them.

Randall supposed the wizard wasn't glad to be there. Markwood had no love for Belgad and little patience for the types of characters who normally attended such public displays of opulence.

The healer decided to make the best of it. "The food looks good," he said, piling sausages on his plate with an iron fork.

A voice boomed toward the front of the room. "Ladies and gentlemen!"

Randall turned his eyes to a wooden platform upon which stood Belgad.

"It is a night for feasting," Belgad bellowed over those few still chatting, "but it is also a night

for commerce. Please enjoy my hospitality, and in a small while we shall get down to business, mainly concerning the restoration project upon the Docks district.”

A clamor of applause greeted the host as revelers dropped their knives and forks to clap or hold up drinks.

For the first time, Randall realized how popular the northerner was. A foreigner and a ruffian Belgad might be, but he was a knight of the republic and held a major influence over the city and beyond.

One of Belgad’s guards spun upon spying a flash of movement. “Hey!”

The boy was too fast. He had hidden patiently among the line of those still making their way onto the grounds, then just as he reached the gate he darted away from the crowd and charged across the gravel parkway, scattering squawking swan behind him.

The guard moved away from the front gate, ready to give chase to the urchin. “Damn brat.”

Suddenly a man in the orange tabard of a city guard was before him.

“I know the boy.” Lucius stepped between Belgad’s man and the fleeing Wyck. “He doesn’t mean any harm, just mischievous. Let me go after him.”

Belgad’s sentinel glanced at the running boy who was nearly to the front entrance of the house, then back to the man in front of him. “It’s against the rules.”

“It wouldn’t take long.” Lucius nodded toward the street, then to the front of the mansion. “We’ve enough men on the road to cover my shift. Besides, it will save you from having to run in that heavy chain.”

The gate guard looked down at his shirt of links and the sword strapped to his waist. It would be a lot of sweating and grunting to chase the boy down.

“All right,” Belgad’s man finally said, “but leave your orange here. I don’t want to get on Lord Belgad’s bad side because of you.”

“Done.” Lucius pulled the tabard over his head and dropped it near the gate. In his Asylum garb he could pass for any common citizen attending the festivities.

“And the sword.” The guard said pointed to the large blade Lucius carried.

Lucius unbuckled his sword belt and dropped it next to his tabard. “I want those back.” He pointed to his spilled goods before running off after the urchin.

Wyck dared a quick glance back as he reached the top of the marble steps to Belgad’s mansion. He saw the gate guard wasn’t in pursuit and decided to slow down. He might be dressed in rags, but he was small enough not to draw attention once inside if he didn’t run around like some fool.

Through the open iron-banded doors he found himself in a large chamber with more marble stairs on the sides of the room curving their way to a landing on the upper level. There were plenty of Belgad’s watchmen in this room, but there were enough adults milling about for Wyck to stay below eye level.

When a pair of guards turned away from one of the marble staircases, Wyck saw his chance and darted forward. He was fast enough and quiet enough to make it behind the guards’ backs and up the stairs without anyone taking notice. He saw no guards on the upper landing, and this was a good thing; it fit the plan he had worked out with Lucius. Wyck was to make his way upstairs, find a room to hide in temporarily, then work a path to the back of the building where the servants’ quarters likely were located. Once there, Wyck did not expect to have any trouble blending in with the servants, and he would have a chance to taste some of the fancy foods he had always wanted to try. Secretly, Wyck was

also hoping he might find some decent clothes to trade for his rags.

At the top of the stairs, the boy turned to the first door on his left, a heavy portal of dark pine. He tried the gilded handle, found it unlocked and proceeded into the room.

What he found was a library. A monstrous fireplace at the far end of the chamber held a small flame that illuminated rows upon rows of shelved reading material.

“Books. What good are *books*?”

Once inside the front doors, it was an easy matter for Lucius to mingle with the crowd.

Out of the corner of his eye he spotted Wyck bounding up the marble stairs to the second floor. He grinned as he continued to make his way through the throng to the dining hall.

A hand grabbed his shoulder.

Lucius turned, ready to offer an excuse or to throw a punch.

It was Sergeant Gris. He did not look happy. “What in Ashal are you doing here?”

“A young boy snuck through the lines and ran indoors. I thought it better if I chase him down than one of Lord Belgad’s sentries.”

Gris nodded, grinning slightly. “You’re probably right, but that won’t save me from Belgad if he finds out one of my men has been inside his home.”

Now Lucius smiled. “What does he have to be nervous about? He’s a fine, upstanding merchant spreading a little cheer tonight.”

“Don’t be a smart donkey.” Now Gris couldn’t help but smiling outright. “At least you’re not wearing your uniform.”

Lucius scanned the crowd. “Do you want me to keep looking for the boy, or return to my post?”

Gris sighed. “Keep looking for the boy, but keep it on the ground level and out of any back rooms.”

Lucius saluted. “With your permission, I’ll be on my way.”

Gris waved the man on. “Be quick about it.”

Fortisquo hated to miss a good party, but he hated to miss a good challenge even more. From the mansion’s roof he stared down upon an atrium containing one of Belgad’s gardens, glass windows revealing the partiers in the dining hall. The tall, slender frame of the assassin-turned-fencing-master wore what he had once called his working clothes, a plain but dark shirt over black pants and soft leather ankle boots. On his head was a black bandana. On his hip was a plain rapier with a simple swept hilt, not the fancy weapon he carried in public. In Fortisquo’s left hand was a hollow reed nearly as long as he was tall that he carried lightly by one end, as if it were a cane.

Adara Corvus walked up behind her lover. “Do you think he will approach from the roof?”

Fortisquo turned in the moonlight so his attention was on the beautiful woman he had been training. “I know he’ll approach from up here. He prefers the shadows and has a fondness for rooftop work.”

“What is he going to do? Fly down from the clouds?”

Fortisquo gave the woman a sly grin. “I think this Darkbow is skilled enough to make his way past a few guards and over a wall.”

“What if he shows up as a guest? That would be easier for him.”

“That is likely what he will do,” Fortisquo said with a nod, “but he will have to come up to the roof at some point.”

“What makes you think so?”

“This.” Fortisquo used the reed to point to a corner of the large square hole that was the top of the atrium.

Adara spotted a package of black cloth. “What is it?” she asked as she approached the bundle.

Fortisquo stopped her with a hand on an arm. “It belongs to Darkbow. I found it last night.”

“He’s already been here?”

“He planted this.” Fortisquo again pointed to the bundle. “It’s just a cloak, gloves and shirt. The only weapons were some throwing darts. He’s a smart one, planning ahead like this.”

Adara appeared confused or unconvinced. “He’s going to sneak into the party, slip up here and change clothes?”

“He wants to make an impression. That’s why he’ll wear his black wardrobe.”

Then the swordmaster smiled at his student. “But you’re learning fast. I’ll make you a fine assassin yet.”

Adara spun on the man, heat in her eyes. “I didn’t sign on with you to be an assassin. I wanted you to teach me more of fencing.”

“I promised to teach you how to win. Sometimes that takes a knife in the back. Not all battles are won through chivalry. In fact, few are.”

Adara turned away so he could not see the disgust upon her face. She wasn’t a rapirist because she wanted to kill people, though she had done so on occasion when warranted.

Fortisquo placed a hand on her shoulder. “Darkbow will be arriving soon. We must be prepared. I suggest we conceal ourselves.”

Markwood drained the last of his wine, placed the empty cup on the table and turned to speak with Randall.

The healer’s seat was empty.

The old wizard glanced around the busy room, but there was no sign of the young man.

A table of sturdy oak had been placed atop Belgad’s dais next to his chair. Across the table was laid a dark red cloth upon which rested bowls and platters of the host’s favorite dishes, including baked quail, roast pig and plenty of red wine. For the night, Belgad would only sip the wine. He had no idea of Fortisquo’s plan, but he would be prepared for whatever would come. To that end, beneath the table lay Belgad’s most-prized weapon, a two-handed sword nearly as long as the Dartague was tall. He hoped he would have the occasion to use the large blade tonight. Darkbow had been enough of a thorn in his side.

Belgad finished a bite of bread, then stood and hammered a fist on the top of his table, jarring the plates of the others whom he had allowed to dine with him.

“Lords and ladies!” the big man bellowed.

The chattering throng quieted, all attention upon the host.

“I wish to thank everyone for being here tonight,” Belgad spoke to the assembly. “Each of you in your own way has added to my prosperity over the years, and I hope I have been able to do the same for you.”

There was a minor uproar of clapping.

“I wish to personally thank representatives from the see of the Western Holy Church.” Here Belgad waved a hand toward a group of clergy in purple robes assembled at the table nearest his raised platform.

The priests nodded their thanks in silence.

“I also wish to thank those members of the Western Ruling Council who have graced us with their presence.” Belgad nodding toward another table filled with men and women dressed in the finest fashions in the room.

With arms spread wide, the Dartague went on. “And a thanks to all the guild leaders and their constituency who are present tonight.”

The room erupted in applause.

Belgad soaked in the applause, a grin forming beneath his white mustache. “Last, but far from least, I want to thank the professors and staff of the University of Ursia who are with us.”

The clapping and hollering boomed again, but died as soon as Belgad raised his arms once more.

“Tonight is a special night,” the manor’s lord continued. “Most of you are aware of my recent misfortune along the Docks.”

A soft murmuring spread through the crowd. There was no telling the rumors running through the room.

But Belgad did not let that stop him. “These events gave me pause to think, to think about the condition of the Docks and the economic future of our fair city.”

The masses quieted again. Belgad was talking about money, a subject dear to most of their hearts.

“The Docks have served Bond well over the years,” the big man said, motioning toward the room’s windows as if pointing out city beyond, “but to compete fairly with other cities and other nations, it is time we took steps to improve the Docks. It is time a full development plan was prepared to increase the safety, the conditions and the economy of the Docks district.”

The crowd remained quiet, hanging on each of the man’s words.

Belgad went on with a flourish of a hand over the gathering. “I understand such a proposal would require an endless, but necessary, series of meetings. After all, the taxpayers of our fair city do not need another burden upon their purses and their bellies.”

There were nods of agreement throughout the room.

“Thus, to save the city much time and effort and money, I am in the process of personally putting together a proposal for the city leaders, with full financial responsibility falling solely upon myself.”

All was quiet. No eye strayed from the northerner.

Belgad smiled broad enough to show teeth even to the those seated in the back. “I have this very day deposited fifty thousand gold into an account of the Western Ursian Treasury, with an attachment that proclaims the funds are strictly for improvement projects and ship building in the Docks district.”

The crowd went wild with applause. Fifty thousand gold was enough to build a small city, let alone reconstruct the Docks.

It was a simple matter for Kron to find his way to the roof. A set of creaking stairs led from a closet on the second floor to a door to the roof.

He stuck his head out the door and scanned Belgad’s rooftop. Everything was black and quiet, the only light from the moon above and lamps shining from the atrium's opening in the center of the roof. On his first visit to the rooftop a week earlier, Kron had been suspicious after finding no guards posted, but after watching for several days he concluded Belgad felt no need for guards on his roof. How wrong Belgad was, as Kron had proven by placing a package there two nights earlier.

Kron eased out the door, squatted low and made his way near the ledge overlooking the garden. He found his package easily enough and began to remove its contents. He was glad to have the

throwing darts again; his sword and bow were out of the question for the type of work he had planned, but he had the darts and a dagger hidden beneath his belt and a trio of clay grenades stuffed in one pocket. It would be enough, along with his favorite grappling hook and silk rope he had wrapped around his waist. He wasn't planning on combat if he could help it, his goal merely being to make Belgad look a fool.

Kron slung his cloak over one shoulder and pulled the hood down. No use anyone seeing his face.

From near the parapet overlooking the front lawn, a kneeling Adara nudged Fortisquo, but he would have none of it as he squatted and held the long reed to his lips. He had to wait for the perfect moment. Darkbow had not taken notice of them and Fortisquo did not want to ruin his chance at surprise. They were a good distance from their intended victim, at extreme range for the weapon at his lips, and he wanted his foe completely still before launching an attack.

They watched Darkbow uncurl a rope from around his waist and pull on the clothes from the bundle. Then the man in black appeared to be looking himself over as if he were going over a mental list of his weaponry and tools. He was still while doing so, his back to Fortisquo and Adara.

Fortisquo sucked in air through his nose and blew into the reed.

Kron was checking the throwing darts in the back of his left glove when he felt a tug at his shoulder. Looking back and down he saw a long, thin dart with a round ball of mud at one end sticking out of his hanging cloak mere inches from his arm. For a second he did not realize what he was looking at, then his training and instincts kicked in.

From out of the darkness came two charging figures, one tall and one shorter, each with lengthy swords pointed in Kron's direction. Kron had only a moment to realize the tall figure was a foppishly-dressed man while the other was a woman who moved with grace and speed.

Kron would have none of their games. He had been surprised, but he knew how to extricate himself from such situations. He slung out his grappling hook, listened briefly for it to attach itself to the side of the roof, then dove head first into the garden.

Two jabbing blades missed him by inches.

"The man's insane." Adara watched the figure in black tumble through the air. The fall was only a little more than twenty feet, but the man had dove as if he were aiming for the ground.

"No, he's not," Fortisquo said, pointing with his sword.

Adara's sight locked on the miniature grappling hook attached to a silk rope unraveling faster than her eyes could follow.

Kron knew he wouldn't have long. The two above would quickly cut his cord.

He yanked on the silken rope as hard as he could, halting his plummet but sending him into a swinging motion.

He looked up just in time to see he was swishing through the air straight for a gigantic glass window. Through the glass he spotted crowds of people feasting at long tables.

“Now, ladies and gentlemen,” Belgad said to the masses before him, “without further talk of economic plans and hard work, it is time for the festivities.”

The large northerner waved a finger at Lalo the Finder seated upon the dais at Belgad’s own table.

Lalo stood, moved away from the table and stooped behind it.

“To show my appreciation for the beauty of this city,” Belgad continued, “I have some beauty of my own, shipped in from the south, which I wish to share with all of you.”

Lalo lifted a door on a small cage of reeds.

The three white swans lifted to the air, free from their confinement. They soared overhead, looking for an escape route, while the crowd below clapped and whistled.

Then one of the large glass windows looking upon Belgad’s garden exploded.

Shards of glass danced on the air before crashing to the tables amidst screams of surprise and fear.

Kron’s rope snapped at the edge of the window, and the man in black found himself tumbling through the air with the shattered glass. He somersaulted and landed on his booted feet in the center of a table.

People screamed and charged for the doors. Women with ribbons in their hair fainted into the arms of their escorts. Men wearing swords for show backed away from the black figure who had suddenly, explosively appeared among them. The few guards found themselves swamped by the running and frightened masses.

Kron faced the front of the room where an astounded Belgad stood with his mouth hanging open.

“Well met at last, Lord Belgad.” Kron’s evil smile revealed itself beneath the shadow of his hood. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Kron Darkbow.”

“Kill that man!” was Belgad’s response.

Markwood was as surprised as everyone else when the man in black came crashing through the window, but unlike most, the wizard was not afraid to act after his moment of shock.

He said a few magic words and waved a finger in the air. The falling shards of glass slowed, floating to the ground as if feathers upon a wind.

Before he could act further, Markwood was shoved from behind and tossed into the fray of the panicked party-goers trying to reach the exit. He tried to get off another spell to escape the madness, but the quarters were too compact to loosen a proper incantation.

In the mass of bodies that shoved him toward the door, Markwood kept an eye out for Randall, but he saw no sign of the healer.

Wyck had been using a bent fork to pry at the locked drawers of the desk in the library when the hubbub downstairs reached his ears. He darted to one of the library’s doors, popped his head out and heard the confusion before he saw it. A second later an entangled lump of legs and arms poured into the

entrance room below the stairs. Guards tried to keep control as best they could, but quickly found it no use and threw open the doors to allow the frightened gentry of Bond to flee with their screams.

Wyck pulled back into the library and closed the door.

He told himself he wasn't leaving empty handed as he dropped the fork.

The boy glanced around trying to find something worth taking. He had had some little while to study the library, but the only portable items he had found were books. Wyck knew some books could be quite valuable, but he also knew he did not have the resources to sell such items on his own without drawing attention to himself.

His eyes finally landed on a silvered mug with the words "Belgad of Thunderclan" engraved on its side.

"That'll do." Wyck snagged the item.

As he ran for the door, he wondered how he could melt the mug down to make a profit. He wasn't stupid enough to try and sell it on the market with Belgad's name written across it.

Out the door, Wyck charged down the stairs, dived into the exiting crowd and hurried away from the home of Belgad the Liar. Not once did he look back to see if he was pursued.

Kron found himself in a position difficult to escape. The obvious exit was full of screaming rich people and guarded by anxious men hefting big swords. The path by which he had entered still held possibilities, but he knew his attackers on the roof were waiting for him if they weren't already sliding down his own silken cord. The opposite side of the room held more windows to another of Belgad's precious gardens, but there was no easy way out of the garden except climbing to the roof. Toward the front of the room, Belgad screamed and kicked over a table from beneath which the large, bald man pulled forth a gigantic sword.

Kron knew he'd quickly have to choose the right exit.

With a wave of a hand and a deep bow, his cloak surging wide behind him, the man in black motioned toward Belgad. "I apologize for not staying longer, Lord Belgad, but it seems I have made my point and overstayed my welcome."

The lord of the manor roared as he hefted his sword in both hands above his head and charged down wooden steps.

Kron spun on his boot heels and dove out the window he had recently busted through. Landing on spongy green plants, he stood and looked up to see the two on the roof still waiting for him there.

Kron removed one of the clay balls from his pocket and without looking tossed the grenade into the dining hall.

This time flame did not erupt from Darkbow's favorite weapon. Instead, a dense, ebony smoke poured forth, blocking the view of all inside the dining room.

Kron grabbed the rope still hanging where he had left it and hoisted himself up several feet, fully expecting his enemies above to cut the line at any moment. When they did not, he dared a glance upward.

The tall man and attractive woman still peered over the ledge watching him.

Straining, Kron glowered at them. "If you're not going to finish me down here, make yourselves useful and pull me up where you can kill me proper."

Fortisquo sheathed his sword and yanked on the rope with Adara's help.

Within seconds the dark figure was hanging on the edge, overlooking the atrium. Dark smoke had filled most of the garden below, but screams of fear and yells of anger could still be heard.

Fortisquo offered Kron a hand.

Kron grabbed the swordsman's wrist.

Fortisquo grinned. "I could fling you back into the nether."

“And I could pull you with me,” Kron answered.

The sword master nodded and pulled his foe over the ledge onto the roof.

Adara drew her sword.

“I have no weapon.” Kron held up his empty palms for the two sword fighters to see.

“I doubt that,” Fortisquo said, his grin thinning to evil, “but it does appear you are without a sword. That is your bad luck.”

Adara scowled. “We can’t kill an unarmed man.”

“This is what we are paid to do,” Fortisquo said aside to the woman without taking his eyes from Darkbow, “but if you feel so strongly about it, Adara, give the man your weapon.”

The woman took a step nearer the two, but did not offer her sword. “Are you insane? I’d never turn over my sword, especially to a man who is supposed to be my enemy.”

With the tip of his blade and his eyes remaining pointed at Darkbow, Fortisquo turned his head to the woman. “You said you wanted to be a fencer. Let this be another lesson.”

Adara fumed. She knew better than to hand her weapon to an opponent. She still had a main gauche sheathed on her back on her sword belt and a smaller dagger on her right hip, but those were defensive weapons. Her rapier, a sword special to her because it had been a present from her father, had been her savior on more than one occasion.

“Do as I say,” Fortisquo ordered with gritted teeth.

Adara looked to Kron and held the sword up so the narrow blade was between her eyes and pointed to the stars. “If this weapon does not return to me, I will spend every waking second of my life hunting you down.”

The man in black smirked. “Aren’t you already doing that?”

Adara sneered and tossed the weapon.

Kron caught the fancy-hilted pommel with one hand and wrapped his forefinger around the quillon. He studied the blade with his eyes and hand, noting the near perfect balance. “Not my traditional weapon, but it will do.”

Fortisquo backed several steps and went into a fencing stance, his left arm out to his side and his right hand holding his rapier low with the blade tilted up slightly to aim at Darkbow’s eyes.

“On your guard,” the fencing instructor said.

“On yours.” With great speed Kron dipped the end of Adara’s sword to the roof’s edge and caught his small grappling hook on the end of the weapon. Flicking the blade at Fortisquo, he launched the hook and its trailing cord at the sword master.

Fortisquo had not expected the move, but he sidestepped the miniature missile with ease. Another thing he had not expected was a full charge from Kron Darkbow.

The sword master brought up his blade to impale his attacker, but Kron knocked his opponent’s weapon aside with Adara’s rapier.

The men would have tumbled into one another if Fortisquo had not spun away on the balls of his feet, his weapon held over his head with the point always aimed at Kron.

The fencer came to a stop shaking with rage. “That was overly dramatic and foolish.”

“If you didn’t like that, you’ll loathe this.” Kron flung Adara’s weapon at the sword master.

The woman screamed. She held little regard for Fortisquo’s well being, knowing the swordsman could take care of himself and a thrown sword was not much of a true threat. What worried her was the flying sword.

The rapier spun end over end as it tumbled through the air.

Kron paid no more attention to his enemies. Now that he was near the grappling hook, he snagged it from the ground and took off at a full run for the outside edge of the roof.

“Adara, after him!” Fortisquo smacked her sword aside with his own weapon.

The woman’s rapier clattered to the hard rooftop with new scratches.

For a second Adara was focused on her fallen sword. Then her combat instincts kicked in and

she spun toward the running man, the small dagger pulled from her belt.

She flung the knife in an arch, over her head.

Kron tossed his grappling hook to the roof's edge again, and without halting his run he pulled on the rope until the hook latched onto the parapet. He jumped over the edge without thinking of what lay below.

He was in mid-air, his booted feet having just left the rooftop, when the thrown dagger sliced into the back of his left leg and caught in his boot straps. He winced and tumbled, but had enough of his mind to hold onto the cord connected to the roof.

Adara and Fortisquo ran to the edge and looked down to watch Kron's clumsy descent of the rope. He slid down as fast as he could, kicking off the side of the building twice, but his movements lacked the acrobatics he had shown earlier.

"Guards!" Adara yelled in hopes of gaining the attention of Belgad's men.

Fortisquo's anger had drained. "Let him go. He deserves better than to be caught by some idiot wearing a kettle on his head."

They watched Kron land on one leg and wince again. He jerked the silk rope so the hook jumped off the edge of the roof and fell into his waiting hands. The man in black spent a second to glare upward at the two, then was gone, mixing in with the crowd still discharging from Belgad's mansion.

Fortisquo pushed away from the parapet and wiped sweat from his brow. "Don't worry. We will meet this man again."

The woman agreed with Fortisquo's thinking, and she looked forward to meeting Kron Darkbow once more. The man knew how to improvise a melee situation like no other she had seen before. Despite the fact Darkbow had nearly ruined her sword, it had been a smart distraction to toss the weapon.

Yes, Adara Corvus was positive she would meet Kron Darkbow again.

It took a while to work his way through the masses, but Markwood finally found himself outside the front entrance of the mansion. He was glad to have room to breathe again without being trampled. The rush to escape the dining room had been maddening and dangerous.

The wizard looked through the crowd. He had lost Randall before the figure in black calling himself Kron Darkbow had appeared, and he was concerned for the young healer's safety. Randall was not a large man, nor was he sturdy, so there was no telling what could have happened to him in the rush of the maddened crowd.

After frantic minutes of running to and fro, Markwood spotted his friend.

The wizard rushed up to the young healer. "Where were you?"

Randall paused to catch his breath. "I saw a patient of mine and wanted to check on him."

"I was scared to death something had happened to you," the wizard said, taking Randall by an arm. "Let's get to the carriage. I'll feel better knowing you're out of this mess."

They struggled through the remaining crowd as best they could, sometimes being knocked around by one person or another, but they managed to find their way to their coach outside.

"Did you see him?" Randall asked as Markwood helped him climb into his seat.

"Who?"

"Kron Darkbow."

Markwood then climbed into his own spot next to the healer. "Yes, I saw him," he said with a frown as the carriage driver snapped the reins and got them under way.

It had taken a while to get through the crowd, but Lucius found his way back to his post. "You were gone long enough," another guard said with a scowl. "Did you find that boy?"

Lucius shook his head. "He slipped away from me, but I did see some of the goings on inside."

The guard stretched to stare past Lucius at the last of the stragglers making their way out of the mansion. "It sounded like a nuthouse in there, what with all the breaking glass and the screams. From what folks have been saying, a demon itself attacked Belgad in his own home."

Lucius grinned as he leaned against the gate. "There was definitely a show."

What was left of the black smoke drifted out through the smashed window, soon rising and dissipating to nothingness upon the breeze about the manor. Seeing an opportunity for freedom, the three swans dove toward the opening and were quickly through the window and headed for the night sky.

Belgad's gaze was dark as he watched the birds escape. "There goes breakfast."

The master of the house stood in the center of his raised wooden dais. His monstrous sword hung by a few fingers from his left hand, the blade dragging the ground. His face was a vacuum of numbness. Belgad the Liar had never had his home, his own personal space, invaded before that night.

The big man realized he had let down his guard. He had become accustomed to the ways of these weak, smooth-talking westerners, and now someone had come along to show him how feeble he had become.

"Master?" a voice said from the bottom of the platform.

Belgad's eyes slowly made their way to Lalo the Finder, a black cloth in the man's hands. "Yes?"

"Most of the guests have departed." Lalo held up the black cloak. "This was found on the front lawn."

"Of course. The man wasn't a fool."

Lalo nodded in agreement. "Do you have any orders for me, my lord, or should I have the men begin a search of the grounds?"

"Don't waste their time." Kron Darkbow was probably miles away.

"As you wish."

"Yes, as I wish. And right now, I wish to call a council." The Dartague's pale brows lowered over his eyes.

"Whom do you wish present?"

"I saw Sergeant Gris here earlier. Begin with him. Then, make damn sure Fortisquo and his hussy are present. Any word from them yet?"

The Finder nodded. "They have come down from the roof. I believe they have retired to their room for refreshing."

"Hell with that. Tell them I want to meet now, tonight."

A creaking noise from behind Belgad's throne caused him to turn, raising his sword in two strong fists.

Stilp stood there in the middle of a small door hidden from the rest of the room by Belgad's gigantic chair. His eyes danced around the room as one hand buttoned his trousers. "Where did everybody go?"

"You," Belgad said, pointing at the man, "you should be there."

Fear appeared on Stilp's face. "Be where?"

"To the meeting I am calling."

"Oh. Okay."

“And where in the hell have you been?”

Stilp pointed behind himself with a thumb. “The privy. When a man has to go, he has to go.”

Chapter Fifteen

“That was your plan?” There was anger in Belgad’s voice as he perched behind the desk of his library.

“It worked,” Fortisquo said, reclining in a chair on the other side of the desk. “He showed where and when expected. Now we know of what he is capable. We will be better prepared next time.”

“Next time?” Belgad glared. “Do you think I’m going to pay you after this travesty?”

Fortisquo nodded solemnly as if understanding and in agreement. “You pay me for a service, not an event, and that service has not been fulfilled as of yet.”

“I’m not sure I should be hearing this conversation.” Sergeant Gris was seated next to the darkened fireplace. It was early morning, the sun bluing the sky through the windows, but the sergeant still wore his clothes from the night before.

All of them did.

“There is nothing being said of which you can not be aware, sergeant,” Lalo said, standing near one of the exits.

The sergeant wore knitted brows. “Assassination is not legal.”

Fortisquo waved a hand in the air. “We are not talking about assassination. We are talking about executing a wanted criminal, a wanted murderer.”

Belgad smacked a hand on the top of his desk. “I don’t care what you call it. From my perspective, last night was a disaster.”

“The only thing lost was a glass window you can easily afford,” Fortisquo shot back with a flip of a hand.

“But I can’t afford to lose the confidence of those in attendance,” Belgad pointed out.

“What did they see?” Fortisquo sat up in his chair. “A man bashed out a window, then ran away through some smoke. No one was killed and nothing was taken. There will be talk for three or four days, but this will be forgotten soon enough.”

Belgad did not appear convinced. “Not by me it won’t.”

“Fortisquo has a point.” Gris sat up, playing the role of investigator. “What did anyone really see? Did anyone take notice of his face?”

“I didn’t see nothing.” Stilp sat on the floor with his legs crossed. A jug of wine sloshed in his hands.

The lord of the mansion glared down at his drunken employee. “Of course you didn’t, you imbecile. You were busy on the toilet all night.”

Gris pointed at Fortisquo and Adara, in a chair next to her teacher. “You two were the closest to the man. Did you see his face?”

Adara shrugged. “It was dark on the roof. I could make out little.”

The sword master leaned forward in his chair, staring into nothingness as if recalling the night before. “He’s relatively young. I’d be surprised if he’s thirty. He’s pale skinned, has dark hair. He’s got muscles, but nothing the size of our benefactor here.”

“I have to agree with Fortisquo’s assessment,” Belgad said with a glance to the sergeant, “but I’m not sure I could pick him out of a group of men. There was too much going on, and that hood of his covered an abundance.”

Gris sat back. “So we know very little about him.”

“We know he has been exceptionally trained.” Fortisquo looked up as he eased back in his seat once more. “Only one man in a million could have performed those acrobatics. And he knows how to fight.”

“And how to improvise,” Adara added.

Fortisquo went on. “He’s also familiar with weapons and alchemy. That smoke was caused by no spell. And he had no trouble using that little grappling hook as a weapon. No city guard or militia soldier this one.”

Adara plucked up as she remembered something. “He might wear a limp. I hit him with a dagger in the leg.”

“What of his clothing?” Gris asked.

Fortisquo waved a hand in the air. “All black. Nothing unusual about that for someone who does his type of work.”

“But it was more than that.” Adara’s face screwed up, she now looking into the past.

“What do you mean?” Gris had not seen the man of whom they were speaking. The sergeant had been in the front hall when the attack had occurred, and the rushing crowd had kept him from the main room until the subject of their conversation had fled.

“It wasn’t only his clothes,” Adara explained. “Everything he had on was black. The buckles on his boot had been stained. The grapple hook he used, and the rope attached to it, they were black.”

“She’s right.” Fortisquo nodded in agreement. “I hadn’t thought of it until now, but Darkbow was black from head to toe.”

“Who?” The sergeant’s eyes suddenly went wide.

Fortisquo looked to the sergeant. “Kron Darkbow. The man we are talking about. The man responsible for this mess.”

Gris’s face went pale. “How do you know his name?”

“He announced it to the whole damn room,” Belgad thundered, slamming a hand on the desktop again.

Gris eased back in his chair, unease clearly visible on his face.

Fortisquo eyes would not leave the sergeant. “You know the name.”

Gris gave a short nod, but he would not look at any of the others. “When I was a warden in the Prisonlands, there was a man there who went by the name Darkbow.”

Lalo stepped forward to stand directly behind his boss. “What do you know of him?”

“He was half Lycinian and half Dartague,” Gris said, telling only part of what he knew.

Belgad snorted. “Must be coincidence. I have had no ties with my homeland in twenty years.”

Fortisquo turned in his seat to face Gris. “Darkbow sounds like a northern name, though.”

“We’ve been over this business about the name,” Belgad said. “I discussed it with one of the tower healers who is Kobalan.”

Fortisquo’s head snapped to look at Belgad. “There’s a Kobalan in Bond? And the man’s a healer?”

Belgad nodded. “I thought it odd, too, at first, but he seems a top mage. He’s caring for my client Trelvigor.”

“Randall Tendbones,” Gris offered.

Belgad nodded. “That would be him.”

Fortisquo’s eyes became questioning. “Could this healer mean you harm?”

“I know of no reason for him to wish me ill,” Belgad said, glancing about the top of his desk as if suddenly missing something. “Besides, I doubt the man has it in him.”

“That’s Randall, all right,” Stilp added from the floor. “I don’t think he could hurt anyone.”

Fortisquo leaned forward again, his voice lowered. “But he’s Kobalan?”

Belgad’s eyes roamed the top of the desk. “He claims to be, and I’ve no reason to believe otherwise.”

“Your foe, Kron Darkbow, gives off a Kobalan flair.” Concern grew in Fortisquo’s voice. “It’s not uncommon for an assassin to dress in black, but Darkbow’s physical description doesn’t match with someone in that line of work. He’s a sizable man, not some little thief. He strikes me as Kobalan, and

his name sounds northern.”

“You yourself have said it might not be his real name,” Belgad pointed out.

“True,” Fortisquo said, easing off somewhat from any conviction, “but he gives off an aura that strikes of Kobalos, and then I find out we have a Kobalan in our midst.”

“Have you seen Randall?” Stilp asked with sloshed words.

Fortisquo shook his head.

“If you did, then you’d know he could never be this Darkbow.” Stilp took a chug of his wine. “Randall is a little guy.”

Fortisquo turned his attention back to Belgad. “He’s a healer, though? A wizard?”

Belgad nodded as he scanned his desk once more.

“And if he’s Kobalan, there’s no telling what dark magics he knows, or what alchemy.” The concern had reappeared in Fortisquo’s features. “Perhaps he can change himself into a strong fighter? Maybe he summons Darkbow to do his bidding?”

Belgad sat back and glanced beneath his desk, almost ignoring the conversation. “Get to your point.”

“My point is that this Randall Tendbones could be Kron Darkbow, or maybe knows something about him,” Fortisquo said.

“I have spoken with Randall about Kobalos and Darkbow.” Belgad looked up, for the moment taking the sword master serious again. “He did not seem to mind talking of his homeland.”

“And he persuaded you into believing Darkbow was probably not Kobalan, didn’t he?” Fortisquo asked.

Belgad nodded again.

Fortisquo sat back once more. “Maybe he is more deceptive than you believe.”

Belgad sighed. He had called the meeting to find some answers, but he was already growing bored. He longed for the days when he could heft an ax and ride out to hack his enemy’s limbs from his body. And then ... there was something wrong about his desk. Something was missing from it, he just did not know what.

“You have no idea what you are talking about.” The northerner gave Fortisquo a stern look. “It is not possible the healer is Kron Darkbow.”

“At least have the man watched. It couldn’t hurt.”

For the hundredth time that day, Belgad wondered if meetings weren’t more trouble than they were worth. He turned to face Lalo. “Put a man on it, but make sure it is done without drawing attention. No reason to alarm poor Randall.”

“As you wish, master.” Lalo spun on a heel out of the room.

“Where do we go from here?” Gris asked.

Fortisquo turned to the sergeant. “I need some time, a day or two, to formulate a new plan.”

“I hope it’s better than your last one,” Belgad said with a grimace.

Fortisquo grinned. “It will be. Since we know nothing of this Kron Darkbow, I need to figure another way to draw him out. I suppose another party is out of the question?”

Belgad’s glower was enough of an answer.

Stilp gulped down the last of his wine and used the edge of Belgad’s desk to pull himself to standing. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to find the privy again.”

Belgad smacked his hands together and stood “With that, I’ll call this gathering to an end.”

Stilp strolled out through one of the doors as the rest stood from their chairs.

Belgad moved next to Gris. “Sergeant, I’d like a private word with you.”

The city guard sergeant lagged behind as Adara and Fortisquo made their way out of the room.

Belgad crossed his library and closed the door.

The northerner turned on the sergeant. “You know something.”

“What do you mean, my lord?”

Belgad eased his way back to his desk and sat on its front edge facing the city officer. “Your face went white as soon as Darkbow’s name was mentioned.”

“It was merely that I recognized the name, my lord.”

Belgad’s pale eyebrows grew together. “Do not play games with me. If you know something, then spit it out.”

Gris stammered as he did not know what to say.

The Dartague’s gaze darkened. “You know this Kron Darkbow, don’t you?”

“My lord, there are a few other former wardens within the city. Allow me to speak with them, and then I will make a full report to you. The name Darkbow is familiar to me, but I would like to be sure of my facts before passing along information.”

Belgad’s face continued to not be a happy one. “Why can you not tell me your thoughts now?”

Gris had to think fast. Though not stupid, he was not a man of wit and wisdom. “I believe Darkbow is dead,” he said, fabricating each word as he went along, “but he might have relatives. Perhaps I can discover their names. Maybe one of them is this Kron, though I have no idea why he would wish ill upon your lordship.”

Belgad’s look told that he was skeptical, but Gris always had been dependable. Belgad had no reason not to trust the man. “Do what you need, but I want an answer soon.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“You may go now,” Belgad said, waving a hand at the door.

Gris bowed his head and exited.

Belgad closed his eyes and shook his head. He knew he should be thankful to this Kron Darkbow. For years Belgad had been bored with meetings upon meetings with bankers and politicians and their ilk. Now he had a challenge, an opponent who was not easy to capture or kill and who seemed to hold little interest in simple monetary matters. Still, Darkbow was the worst kind of foe in many ways. He was elusive, always in the shadows and difficult to reach. Belgad wanted an enemy he could walk up to and wail on with a big, heavy weapon.

The unknighly lord’s eyes opened again to focus on the wooden jug Stilp had left on his desk.

He glanced around the desk again, his eyes searching.

“Where is my silver mug?”

Chapter Sixteen

A rapping at the door stirred Lucius from his slumber. He rolled over in bed, still wearing his Asylum uniform from the night before.

“Go away,” he said, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

There was a distinctive clicking noise, then the door eased open. A small head peered into the darkened room.

“You need some light in here.” The voice was youthful.

Lucius pushed himself to sitting in his bed and pointed at the shuttered window. “How did you get in?”

Wyck closed the door behind him and crossed the room to pull back the shutters. The light revealed a bulge in the front of the boy’s shirt and two tiny tools, metal rods with hooks on their ends, in one of his hands.

The lad ignored the question. “You should be ashamed. It’s already past the midday meal.”

Lucius squinted as the sun assaulted his eyes. “I had a late night,” he said, noticing the tools that had been used to open his door.

“As did we all. I heard this Darkbow character showed at Belgad’s.”

Lucius held up a hand to fend off the light, allowing his eyes time to adjust. “He was there, but no one was seriously hurt.”

“Except maybe Belgad’s reputation. There’s talk all over town. Maybe someone new is trying to take over business on the street.”

Lucius reached for a bowl of water on a table. “I think Belgad’s more powerful than you give him credit.”

Wyck nodded. “He runs a lot of rackets.”

Lucius wet the ends of his fingers and rubbed the water into his eyes. “I was going to seek you out today. I lost you last night and wanted to make sure no harm had come to you.”

“I’m fine. In fact, I’m better than fine.”

The man’s eyes finally felt able to take the light, and he opened them to see the boy standing at the foot of the bed. On the youth’s face was a huge smirk. In his hands a metallic goblet glistened from the sunlight.

Lucius squinted at the object. “What do you have?”

The boy tossed the goblet.

Lucius caught it and turned the silvered mug over in his hands. He stopped when the word “Belgad” appeared engraved on its curved side.

His head shot up to glare at the boy. “Wyck, you didn’t?”

The smile widened on the lad’s lips. “Yep, I did. I had to come out of there with some sort of profit.”

“How did you get it here without it being seen?”

Wyck tugged at the front of his shirt. “Just cradled it like a baby.”

Lucius set the tankard on the table next to his bed. “That mug could get you killed. You’re lucky you didn’t caught last night.”

“The guards were busy. But I’ve still got a big problem. I can’t sell that thing on the street.”

Now Lucius smirked. “I suppose as soon as someone saw Belgad’s name on the side of it, your goose would be cooked. So, why bring it to me?”

“I can’t take the thing to someone who could melt it down because they might take it from me because I’m just a kid, and I don’t know how to smelt it myself.”

“You want me to fence it for you.” Lucius was not asking a question.

The boy’s face brightened. “Or maybe buy it from me.”

“Why would I need a mug from Belgad?”

“You said you needed money,” Wyck said, pointing at the tankard. “I’d guess that thing’s worth at least a couple of gold.”

Lucius eyed the piece. It was a fine mug, silvered with elaborate lettering, but it was still a mug. Belgad’s name on its side might make it worth more to some collectors, but such a person would be difficult to discover. “One gold, maybe.”

“One gold, then.” Wyck’s smile faltered. “That would still put me up for a good while.”

“You want me to pay you one gold for a silver mug I will have as hard a time selling as you?”

“I thought you might know how to melt it down. Surely the silver alone is worth one gold.”

Lucius glanced at the mug again. It might be worth a gold coin, or it might not. The tankard might also provide some other way to make coin. Perhaps Belgad would want it back? Lucius doubted that. Belgad did not seem to be the sentimental sort.

Lucius waved a hand toward the room’s exit. “Get my belt from the back of the door.”

Wyck looked behind himself to find a hide belt hanging from a hook. He handed the belt to Lucius.

The man pulled back a small flap on the inside of the leather strap and took out a gold coin, holding it up for the boy to see. “One gold and no more.”

Wyck nodded agreement.

Lucius flipped him the coin. The boy caught it in the air.

“Hang this back up.” Lucius held out the belt.

Wyck took the strap and returned it to its hook. The gold coin he slipped inside his shirt.

“Don’t lose that,” Lucius said, meaning the coin, as he leaned back in his bed.

“Don’t you have work to do today?”

Lucius closed his eyes. “I had a day of leave approved when I took last night’s job.”

“I guess you’re going to sleep all day.”

Lucius opened one eye and stared at the boy. “Only if you’ll allow me to.”

Another knock came at the door.

“May I enter?” It was a man’s speaking.

“Sure,” Wyck said, turning to the entrance.

One of Lucius’s hands reached out and grabbed the silver tankard, stuffing it beneath the pillow upon which his head rested.

Wyck opened the door to find Sergeant Gris standing in the hall.

Gris glanced down at the boy, then inside the room to Lucius. “Is this a bad time?”

Lucius eyed the sergeant. “The boy was leaving. Weren’t you, Wyck?”

Wyck squeezed past the sergeant. “I know when I’m not wanted, but I’ll see you soon, Lucius.”

With that, the boy was gone down the hall.

“Interesting guest,” Gris said, closing the door behind him. He glanced around the room, spotted a chair, and pulled it nearer the bed. “Mind if I sit?”

Lucius motioned for the man to do as he pleased.

Gris sat. Lucius noticed the sergeant’s hand never strayed too far from the hilt of the sword sheathed on his hip. Lucius also noted the sergeant still had on the same uniform he had worn the night before.

“A late night?”

The sergeant appeared haggard with dark spots beneath his eyes. “I have not yet found my bed, but I see you have.”

Lucius sat up in his bed again. “We were not dismissed until nearly sunrise.”

Gris glanced around the room as if searching for something. “Been in bed since?”

Lucius's eyes followed wherever Gris looked. "Except for breakfast, yes. The boy woke me only minutes before you arrived."

Gris glanced back at the door as if he expected to see Wyck still standing there, then turned back to Lucius. "What was the boy doing here?"

"Is this an interrogation?"

The question was a simple one, but it seemed to chill the air in the room.

The sergeant was quiet for a moment, allowing a beat to pass as if he were unsure how to continue. Then, "I spoke with some of the other guards from last night. They told me you left your station for some little while. They said you were chasing a young boy into the mansion."

"I told you as much last night, and they have no reason to lie."

"Do *you*?"

Lucius did not answer. His face turned hard as stone.

"Lucius, we have been friends a long time," Gris said, appearing genuinely concerned, "and I want you to know you are free to say anything to me. It is possible I will be able to help you."

"I have nothing to tell you."

"Darkbow."

Lucius's eyes flared. "What did you say?"

"You heard me."

"You said Darkbow."

"That's right. It's a name you should recognize since it was yours in the Lands, and it belonged to your mother before she married your father."

Wardens never used their real names in the Lands. It protected them and their families.

Lucius nodded to his friend. "And you were called Griffon."

"That's right, after that big bird I caught my first week on the job."

Lucius suddenly appeared perturbed. "What does this have to do with your questioning me?"

"The man tormenting Lord Belgad is calling himself Kron Darkbow."

"Coincidence."

"Is it coincidence Darkbow first appeared in the city the same week as you?"

"Am I under arrest?" Lucius saw no reason not to be blunt.

Gris's hand drew closer to his sword. "I have nothing to charge you with, and I do not have any plans of having you arrested. But I need to know the truth. It's the only way I can protect you."

"What makes you think I'm your man? It has to be more than just the name."

Gris nodded. "You are right. I've heard what this man Darkbow is capable of. Only someone of your background could have his skill."

"You mean a border warden?"

"No. A thousand wardens couldn't do all of that, but you, you grew up in the Lands. You had teachers, men from all parts of the world and skilled in all manners of combat, to educate you. You're unique. To my knowledge, no other man but you has been raised from youth to be a Prisonlands warden."

Lucius had nothing to say to that. Gris was correct. Lucius had spent more than half his life within arrow shot of the Prisonlands. During those years, Lucius had learned sword fighting, climbing, stealth and anything anyone would teach him. His uncle Kuthius had been his first teacher, showing Lucius how to track man or animal, and how to ride a horse and use a bow. Many of the border wardens, and not too few of the exiles, were from far lands and had skills unknown to Ursians. Lucius's schooling had come from all of these men. He had even studied alchemy and foreign styles of combat. He had learned numerous languages and studied books from the captain's personal library.

"Lucius, if you are Darkbow, I only want to help," Gris went on. "If Belgad gets to you first, he will make sure you are killed. I could at least help you flee the country."

Lucius remained silent, as if weighing his options. Finally he spoke. "If I am your man, do you

think I would let it drop after things have gone so far?"

Gris shook his head. "Probably not. I remember you could be stubborn, and impatient."

"I most definitely can be."

"Just like your uncle."

Both men smiled.

Then Gris's smile died. "This is a serious matter, Lucius. Men have been killed. Because of the public nature of this situation, I am obligated to arrest this Darkbow if my men catch him. Before things get that far, are you sure there isn't anything you want to tell me?"

"I have nothing to say on the matter."

Gris stood, shaking his head from resignation. "I'm weary and need sleep. I apologize, old friend, if I have caused you stress."

"Nothing with which I can not cope. I just hope you continue to trust me."

Gris turned toward the exit. "I don't know who to trust anymore. It was simpler in the Lands. At least there you knew who your opponents were."

"I'm no opponent to you."

Gris opened the door and turned to face Lucius again. "There's one other thing. I noticed you have not been out of bed since I've been in your room. Why is that?"

Lucius's face remained calm. "I told you I was awakened only moments before you arrived."

"Very well, but I don't suppose you'd mind standing for me?"

Lucius showed no signs of moving. "I'm going back to sleep, Gris, which is something you should consider."

The sergeant did not move for a moment. He thought of pushing the point further, but then realized it did not make a difference. If Lucius were Kron Darkbow, then he was not going to admit it and nothing Gris could say or do was likely to change that fact.

"Take care of yourself, Darkbow," Gris said, stepping out of the room.

"And you, Griffon." Lucius watched the closing door.

Chapter Seventeen

Trelvigor looked almost human again. Most of the flesh had grown back over his body, though Randall could see some scarring would be permanent, especially the tissue on the face and arms.

Randall continued to lay hands on the unconscious mage, slowly tracing the contours of the body and seeping his magic into the flesh. The healer's eyes remained closed, but his mind was so in tune with Trelvigor's body he could almost feel every pain the wizard felt and every ounce of relief Randall's own magic was bringing to him.

Feeling the pain, and how much less it was now than it had been just days before, Randall realized Trelvigor would be fully healed in a week or less. It was even possible Randall could wake the wizard from his herb-induced sleep in another day or two. Trelvigor's wounds had been so horrendous when he had first been brought to the healing tower that he had been in a state of oblivious numbness, but for the last several days it had been a mixture of Randall's brewing that had kept the wizard from waking. Randall didn't want his patient up and around before the body had been fully healed.

The healer squinted his eyes tighter from the strain of expending his own life force. His own soul was like water dripping slowly from the lip of a well pump, forever splashing into nothingness.

Randall forced himself away from the wizard. He had done enough for the day and mustn't tire himself further.

The young man plopped into a cushioned chair, closing his eyes. He would rest a few minutes to catch his breath and build his strength, then retire to his own quarters.

A knock came at the door.

It seemed Randall would never get any rest. "Enter." His voice was soft.

With eyes still closed, the healer heard the door to Trelvigor's room creak open.

"You about finished with him?" It was Stilp's voice.

Randall stared up at Belgad's man. "A few more days. Then he should be nearly as good as before."

"He wasn't much good before," Stilp said, leaning against the door's frame.

"Then perhaps my healing will bring about an improvement. Is there anything in particular I can do for you today?"

Stilp's eyes wandered to the sleeping mage. "The boss sent me to check on his wizardliness." He pointed with his chin at Trelvigor. "He's looking better."

"That is a practical judgment for a layman. Trelvigor should be aware of himself within a few days, and he might be able to move within a week of that."

"When can he talk?"

"A week, maybe less," Randall said with shifting, restless shoulders, "but we must be careful. His body has been through a terrible trauma, and he has been in a coma for several weeks. There is no telling how he will react upon regaining his senses. Likely he will be stupefied, and it will take him a day or two to become coherent."

"A week, then?"

"Possibly."

"Hell, that won't do. Belgad'll want a definite answer."

"I'm sorry I cannot provide one for him, but matters of restoration are often delicate and imprecise."

"Hell," Stilp repeated.

"Is there anything else with which I may help you?" Randall asked, trying not to sound too impatient. He could feel the fatigue in his muscles and bones and spirits. He needed rest.

Stilp rubbed at his thigh. "That leg of mine is bothering me again."

"I'm tired, Stilp. I've spent myself on Trelvigor." The healer waved a hand at the unconscious wizard. "Why don't you ask one of the other healers?"

"Because I know you're the best healer in town." Stilp grinned. "I'm not expecting you to work any magic. The leg's been cramping a little. I just want you to take a look at it."

Randall sighed. Some days were like this for a healer, with no rest in sight. What was it his father had told him when he was young? *The good are at a disadvantage because they are so often taken advantage of.* Randall felt it was true today.

"Let me see the leg."

Stilp began to roll up his trousers.

Spider didn't mind sneaking around the grounds of the healing tower in the middle of the day; he was dressed to fit in with nearly any crowd in Bond, a fleece shirt over simple breeches. Spider also didn't mind waiting in the hall outside Randall's personal quarters, waiting for the hall to empty so he could get to work. Blending in was nothing new to Spider, and came easy to him with his small frame and forgettable drab gray hair. What Spider *didn't* like was using a minor spell to unlock the door to Randall's room. He couldn't take out locksmithing tools in the middle of the hall in case someone should wander by, but using magic on the door of a known mage, even a healer, wasn't a smart idea. The consequences could quite literally be alarming, even severe.

Finally seeing he was alone, Spider closed his eyes as he crossed the hall to the door. He placed a hand against the lock and said two words in an ancient language which he did not understand, though he had said them dozens of times in his life.

There was a small flash of light in the palm of his hand, followed by the click of the lock.

Spider waited a second before opening his eyes, then did so with a grin. It had been too easy. Spider figured this Randall Tendbones must be one unsuspecting fellow. He had half-expected to be covered in a sheet of flames or jumped upon by a demon appearing out of the wall. Nothing like that had happened, however, and the short, thin man called Spider found himself feeling somewhat disappointed.

He had a job to do, though, so he brushed his disappointment aside and stepped through the door, making sure to pull it closed behind him. Inside he found the circular room of the healer's quarters, the desk to the right with its chair and a couple of other chairs to the left. Scattered on top of the desk were papers Spider ignored and a feathered quill sticking out of a glass inkwell.

Spider's first impression of the room told him little other than he was in an office. He knew he had the right room, though, because Stilp had pointed it out to him.

Knowing he had only as long as Stilp could keep Randall busy in another part of the tower, Spider crossed the room to the back of the desk and pulled open the top drawer. Inside were ground, dark herbs. He sniffed the leaves but didn't recognize them.

Spider glanced further back in the drawer, saw nothing of interest, and closed it. Another drawer was quickly opened. As he rummaged, it dawned on Spider he didn't know what to be looking for. Lalo and Stilp had told him to be on the watch for any evidence that could link Randall Tendbones with Kron Darkbow.

Spider grinned. He couldn't imagine what kind of man would be brave enough to intentionally frustrate Belgad.

Finding nothing in the drawer, Spider closed it and yanked open another. He paused upon discovering a pale silk cloth, something small but bulky wrapped inside. Ever so gently, Spider lifted an edge of the white cloth to see a heavy gold ring with a large, flat facing. Engraved into the facing was a black fist with spikes between the knuckles. The image seemed vaguely familiar, but Spider

couldn't place where he had seen it.

He went back and forth in his mind about whether he should take the ring. It looked like it could be just what Belgad wanted, but on the other hand it looked like something the healer would soon notice missing.

The ring appeared heavy and expensive, as if made of real gold. The only way Spider would be able to tell for sure would be to weigh the item in his hands, and maybe cast a little detection spell.

He reached for the ring. He at least wanted to feel its weight before making a decision on whether to take it.

The tips of his fingers grazed the black fist.

Randall was knocked to his knees. A tightness so overpowering it felt as if a spear had struck him stabbed its way into the center of his chest, forcing him to cry out in pain. With his head swimming, the healer didn't know what was happening. He had never had a heart attack, though he had dealt with many patients who had. The pain those patients had described was what he imagined he was feeling as he gasped for breath.

Stilp stood in shock, his one pant leg still higher than the other. One second the healer had been poking at the back of Stilp's leg, then without warning Randall had dropped.

"Tendbones!" Stilp knelt beside the healer, putting an arm around the younger man.

Randall's pain was gone as quickly as it had assaulted him. He opened his eyes to find he could barely see from the tears. He shook his head to clear the waters.

Stilp jumped to his feet and turned toward the door. "I'll get help."

"Stop," Randall managed with a croaky voice.

Belgad's employee halted and turned back to the young man. Randall was still on his knees but whatever had come over him seemed to have released its grip.

Randall's eyes were strained as he looked up. "Get me to my room."

Stilp knelt beside the healer again and place his hands beneath Randall's arms, lifting him to his feet. "You need help."

"Just get me to my room."

Not knowing what to do, Stilp grabbed one of Randall's elbows and helped him through the door, then down the hall. By the time they reached the door to Randall's personal quarters, the healer was walking on his own again.

The Kobalan didn't pause to use a key. He said a couple of ancient words and pulled open the door.

Randall stepped into the room, his eyes darting around. Finding nothing out of the ordinary, he went to his desk and pulled open one of the drawers.

Inside was the silk cloth. On top of it lay the ring.

Randall lifted the gold band and stared at it. "What have you been up to?" His voice was barely above a whisper.

"Is everything all right?" Stilp had remained in the doorway.

Randall wrapped the ring in its cloth and shoved it into a pocket of his healer's robes. "Everything is fine. I am just overworked."

Stilp glanced around the room as if expecting to see something or someone, then looked back to Randall. "Are you sure I can't find you some help?"

"That will be all, Stilp," Randall said, motioning at the entrance. "If you would, close the door behind you. Your leg is fine. I suggest eating less salt to avoid the cramps."

Stilp and Spider had agreed upon a meeting place. Neither had known what Spider would find in the healer's room, but they had wanted to make sure they were not followed from the tower.

Stilp found the other at the bar in the back of the Stone Pony tavern. The smoke and dim light at first obscured Spider's face, but a candle revealed black soot around the edges of the small man's jaws.

Stilp settled onto a hard stool. "What in hell happened?"

Spider's hands shook as he brought a mug of ale to his lips. "There's something not right about that healer."

Stilp paused long enough to order a drink of his own from the gruff fellow behind the bar. Seconds later he had a mug of ale in his hands and turned his attention back to his compatriot. "What are you talking about? You better not report to Belgad all shook up like this, or he's likely to skin you from impatience."

"Did you see the ring?"

Ring? Stilp thought back. *No, he had not seen a ring, but Randall had taken something from his desk and placed it in a pocket.* "Didn't see anything."

Spider took another sip of ale to calm his nerves. "It was in the desk. I picked it up to see if it was real gold."

Stilp nodded for his companion to continue his tale.

"But the second I touched it," Spider went on, "it was like ... I don't know ... something tearing at my soul. I felt myself being pulled into the ring, drawn into it."

Stilp patted Spider on the shoulder. "Calm yourself, and keep your voice down. We don't need no attention."

Spider gulped at his drink, his eyes filled with terror. "It was sheer luck I got away from that ring. It was heavy and I'd barely touched it. It just fell off the edge of my fingers back into the desk. I didn't wait to see if anything else was going to happen. I ran out of there as fast as I could."

"Did anyone see you?"

"I don't think so."

Stilp took a swig. "Good."

"That ring was full of low magic."

Stilp's face wore confusion. "What the hell is low magic?"

"It's evil. And that ring, it had a black fist carved on it. I know I've seen that somewhere."

"You mean like a crest?"

Spider turned to his partner and pointed a finger at him. "That's it. It's some sort of crest. I just don't know what country, or if maybe it's some noble's."

Stilp drank and pondered what Spider had revealed. A heavy gold ring bearing a black fist had been found in the desk of Randall Tendbones, and it wasn't likely a patient had used the ring as payment. Healers at the tower didn't take payment, though they did accept donations. A ring like Spider described would be too expensive to have been a donation. Stilp was also positive the ring had something to do with the odd attack upon Randall. Perhaps the magic in the ring was tied to the healer?

Stilp set down his drink. "I think you've stumbled onto something, Spider. Belgad will want to know."

"One more drink?" Spider asked, holding up his empty mug. "Before we face the boss?"

"Sure enough." Stilp grinned and ordered another round. "I mean, why not? Belgad's footing the bill, right?"

Chapter Eighteen

“Maslin, I need to speak with you.”

The voice was Randall’s. It popped into Markwood’s head as he strolled the main hall of the college of magic. As soon as the old wizard recognized the speaker, he knew something was wrong. Sending mental messages from one mage to another was not a common practice because one never knew, without taking precautions, who else or *what* else could be listening.

“Where?” Markwood whispered as he marched up a flight of stairs to his office.

“The Twelve Chairs,” was the mental reply.

Markwood reached his office and shut the door behind him.

“I’ll be there in an hour,” he said out loud.

There was no reply. None was needed. The meeting had been set.

The Twelve Chairs pub was a common gathering spot of wizards for two reasons. First, the pub was along Mages Way, a major road running from the west through the north side of Bond and ending in the east at the University of Ursia. Many of the town’s wealthier mages, most professors at the university, lived along Mages Way, which was how the road had gotten its name. The second reason so many mages enjoyed the hospitality of the Twelve Chairs was because a permanent spell of protection had been placed over the establishment. This spell blocked nearly all forms of magical spying. Only the most powerful of wizards would be able to break through the spell over the pub.

The Twelve Chairs was a jovial place, small but often full of students and the occasional professor. The place had its name from the twelve padded stools that fronted its long polished counter, those stools apparently having some secret history about which no one knew anything, the secret lost to time. There were no other seats in the establishment. Several tall tables were scattered about the main room, but there were no other places to sit except at the bar.

At four bells in the afternoon, Markwood rushed through the front door of the Twelve Chairs, his robe flying about him. In the dim room he could make out a pair of students whispering together over a pint of beer at the nearest end of the bar, but at the far end sat a lone young man who appeared to have much on his mind.

“Randall,” Markwood said as he approached.

“Maslin.” The healer helped the wizard to a seat next to him.

The Chairs’ bartender approached.

“White wine,” Markwood said quickly to get the man away from them.

Randall nodded. “The same.”

The bartender moved away.

Markwood turned slightly on his stool to better see his friend. “What has happened?”

“Someone found the ring.”

Markwood’s eyes widened. “Do you still have it?”

Randall patted a pocket of his white robes. He had not taken the time to change out of his healing garb.

The old wizard glanced from the pocket back up to the healer. “Who was it?”

“I don’t know, but I’m sure they got the shock of their life.”

“What happened?”

“The ring has an alarm ward cast upon it,” Randall said with a tired sigh, “a rather nasty alarm

ward which my father cast. It induces pain in the rightful owner. At first I thought I was having a heart attack, then the person must have released the ring. As soon as I had my wind back, I realized what had happened. I rushed back to my room and found the ring where I had left it in my desk.”

The bartender suddenly appeared in front of them with two glasses of white wine. The two mages were quiet while their drinks were placed before them, but then the bartender was gone. He was a smart bartender, knowing when he wasn’t needed or wanted.

Markwood paused only long enough to lift a glass. “Where were you when struck by the pain?”

“I was in a recovery room, casting on Trelvigor.” Randall blinked, thinking. “No, wait ... I was with Trelvigor, but I had finished for the day. Belgad’s man Stilp came into the room and asked me about the wizard, then he wanted me to take a look at a bad leg of his.”

“Is that when it happened?”

The healer nodded. “I was down on one knee checking the leg when the attack came. Stilp wanted to find me another healer, but I had to get to my room as soon as possible.”

“And no one was there.”

“I got there as fast as I could, but I was still shaken from the warding spell. Anyone in the room easily could have fled before I arrived.”

Markwood took a sip of wine. “It’s odd they didn’t take the ring.”

“They might have tried,” Randall said with a slight grin, “but they probably received quite a surprise. The ring can protect itself.”

Markwood took another sip then set his glass on the counter. His face grew serious. “You have to assume Belgad will know about the ring.”

Randall had not touched his own wine, and now moved his glass aside. “What makes you say that?”

“Stilp being there when you had your attack. It’s too much of a coincidence.”

“Will Belgad know what the ring means?” Randall asked. Then he shook his head. “Of course he will. The man’s from Dartague.”

“He won’t know how you obtained the ring. He has nothing of which to suspect you. What he will do, however, is try to use the ring to his benefit, financially or otherwise.”

Randall nodded. “I could have much to fear from this man.”

“Not immediately,” Markwood said, sliding his glass off to one side. “Belgad has no ties to Kobalos of which I know, and I don’t believe he’s foolish enough to try and build such ties with Verkain. It will take him a while to decide what to do.”

Randall turned a pained gaze upon his friend. “Is it time for me to leave Bond?”

Markwood stared at his glass of wine. There were too many uncertainties. He didn’t know for sure if an agent of Belgad was the one who found the ring, but what he did know made him suspect as much. Regardless of who had seen the golden band, what could they do with the information?

“I think you are safe for the moment,” the wizard finally said. “I see no manner of profit for Belgad in trying to use whatever information he can surmise about you and the ring. He is not going to contact Kobalos, and if he told someone here it would not matter, at least not locally. A number of local officials would likely welcome you.”

Randall grasped the glass before him and sucked down a good gulp of wine. The alcohol was refreshing as it rushed down his throat. He was still drained, and his nerves were at their end. The drink helped, but Randall knew he couldn’t afford to let his senses get away from him.

He returned the nearly empty glass to the bar. “What if it wasn’t Belgad?”

“If Verkain knew you were here, we would not be having this conversation.”

Randall nodded again. The old wizard was right.

“Come back with me to my office,” Markwood suggested. “I’ll place wards around you. You should be safe from any magical eyes and the wards will help keep you safe from physical dangers.”

The offer did not improve the healer’s mood. “It wouldn’t be enough against Verkain. It would

never be enough. But I'll humor you."

As he finished the last of his wine, Markwood was thankful Randall wasn't going to argue with him about the protective wards. It was true the spells might not be effective against someone as powerful as Lord Verkain of Kobalos, but someone like Belgad could be hampered quite a bit by such magics.

Before leaving the Twelve Chairs, Markwood made up his mind he would do some spying of his own. If he should find out Belgad was the one involved in finding Randall's ring, then he would deal with the Dartague personally. It was safer for Randall if the young healer were not involved. The less contact he had with Belgad the better.

Belgad watched as Stilp and Spider retreated from his library, then turned his attention to the only other person remaining in the room. "What do you make of this development?"

Lalo stood in his usual spot by the door nearest his master. "There are two possibilities. Either Randall Tendbones has stolen the ring, or he is a member of the Kobalan royal family."

"None of this tells me if he is Kron Darkbow." Belgad grimaced. "It only confirms the healer is Kobalan. However he came upon this ring is irrelevant."

Lalo raised an eyebrow. "Even if he is Kobalan royalty?"

Belgad paused, staring at his servant. A Kobalan royal in Bond would be unexpected, mainly because there were so few living Kobalan royals. If Randall were truly royalty, why was he a lowly healer and not living the life of a diplomat or a traveling prince?

Years of Belgad's time had been consumed with running his own empire within Bond. The lives of a royal family far away had held little import to the Dartague. He mentally cursed himself for not being more aware of foreign events. "What is the current situation with Kobalos?"

"Verkain continues to rule as overlord," Lalo explained. Even if the lord of the manor did not remain aware of current news, it was part of the Finder's position to be abreast of such matters.

Belgad's gaze turned thoughtful as he pondered his own past. "The man had an iron grip on his nation even when I was a boy."

"Longer. Historians record Lord Verkain as ruling Kobalos for nearly two hundred years. Some suggest the name Verkain is merely a title that has been passed from generation to generation. Other writers believe Lord Verkain is a powerful mage who keeps his youth through dark magics."

The northerner's gaze darted to his employee. "What of his family?"

"His last wife allegedly died giving birth to a son about twenty years ago. They had two sons. Both princes were reportedly killed by their father during a rebellion several years ago."

"So there is no royal family?"

"None of whom anyone is aware."

Kobalans were rare outside their own nation, Belgad knew, but that was because they were not allowed to leave their homeland. Verkain gave permission for his nation's citizens to remove themselves from the homeland only when they were on a military campaign, of which there had been few in recent years. The East Ursians and the Prisonlands to the south of Kobalos kept that nation in check, which was one reason the Prisonlands had been created in the first place sixty years earlier.

Belgad focused on what he knew of Randall Tendbones. The healer claimed to be Kobalan, and now there was evidence to that. Also, Randall had arrived in Bond roughly three years earlier. Could Randall be a refugee from the rebellion? Had he fled across the Prisonlands or west through Jorsica, then making his way south through Caballerus and into West Ursia, finally settling in Bond?

The Dartague slapped a hand on the desk. "Damn. Whatever this healer might be, we have no evidence he is Kron Darkbow."

"But he is still someone of interest."

Belgad nodded. "Of course. It could be unfortunate for the healer that he has fallen under my eye, but it is what it is. We must keep a watch on him, even if there is no connection to Darkbow."

"I'll put Stilp on it."

Belgad waved off the man. "No. Have Spider take care of this one. He knows enough about the healer to be wary, and Stilp is too well known to Randall."

"As you wish, my lord." Lalo turned to leave.

Upon rising from bed the next morning, Markwood had a breakfast of crushed oats with a mug of goat milk. It was not his usual hardy breakfast, but he did not want his stomach heavy for the early tasks he had planned.

After a warm bath heated by his own magic, he changed into the dark purple robes that were proper to his position as a professor in the University of Ursia's College of Magic. Then the old wizard made his usual morning walk from his home on Mages Way to his offices on campus. The first few minutes in his main office were spent taking care of minor paperwork and answering questions from the few students who arose before the morning bell tolled.

Once the wizard had taken care of his typical morning tasks, he sequestered himself in his private chamber and proceeded to use a piece of chalk to draw a circle on the stone floor. Markwood sank into the circle on crossed legs and closed his eyes. He meditated, blocking the outside world to his senses while opening the inner world of his mind.

It took only a matter of minutes to find the face he was looking for. It was the face of a man in his early thirties. He was short and slim with a head of graying hair atop a rugged face.

"Spider." Markwood knew the man. Spider had been a student at the university a decade earlier.

The wizard allowed his mind to expand further, and eventually the image of a bald head with a squat nose above a white mustache appeared.

"Belgad."

Markwood opened his eyes.

"Master Markwood." Belgad extended a hand as he rose from behind his library desk. "It is not often I have the pleasure of such esteemed company."

The wizard took the sturdy hand and shook. "Thank you for seeing me, Master Belgad."

The northerner returned to his seat and motioned for Markwood to take one of the chairs facing him.

The wizard sat, but turned slightly in the chair so he could still see Lalo the Finder standing near the door.

Belgad placed his elbows on his desk and steepled his hands beneath his chin. "My servant informed me you wished this meeting today."

Markwood nodded. "I apologize for taking time from your schedule. I realize we have never been formally introduced."

"We have both often attended the same public functions." Belgad offered a polite smile, which almost looked out of place beneath his short, crooked nose and steady gaze. "In fact, I believe you were at my festivities several days ago."

"Yes. It was an ... entertaining affair."

Belgad's face hardened. His grin remained, but it was now faked.

The wizard sat forward in his chair. "You are a busy man, Lord Belgad, and one rumored to waste little time on foolish endeavors, so I will get straight to the point. Randall Tendbones means you

no ill will, and I would be disturbed to hear if harm should befall him.”

Belgad’s eyes flashed to Lalo’s, both men’s minds suddenly filled with a thousand questions.

After a moment, the lord of the house regained his composure. “Why would I have interest in the healer, other than his ministering to my clients?”

“One of your clients, a former student of mine, only yesterday entered the private quarters of Randall Tendbones at the healing tower in the Swamps,” the old wizard said, his face remaining impassive. “Inside those quarters your client came upon a ring. I am guessing you have much interest in this ring, and possibly in Randall himself.”

Belgad’s lips smiled again beneath his mustache and his eyes shifted to Lalo once more. This time the look on his face was one of mirth.

Belgad looked back to the wizard. “I wish I could hire you on my staff, but I doubt I could afford a man of your scruples.”

The old mage gave a grin of his own beneath his gray mustache. “My interests lie elsewhere, but the offer is appreciated.”

Belgad chuckled. “You know about Spider and the ring, but what else do you know?”

“I suspect you have Stilp and Spider spying on Randall because you believe him of being Kron Darkbow.”

Now it was Belgad’s turn to nod. “Very astute, but in truth I don’t believe Randall is Darkbow. The surveillance was merely a precaution. Randall admits to being Kobalan, after all.”

“And Darkbow wears black. Very Kobalan.”

“True,” Belgad said, lowering his hands so there were flat on the desk, “but I promise you I have no plans to harm or harass the healer.”

The wizard sniffed. “That is all well and good, but you have uncovered this matter of the ring.”

“I’m sure it is worth a small fortune, but I have no need of another’s gold.”

Markwood frowned. “Don’t play me a fool. You know exactly what that ring signifies.”

Belgad sat back in his chair and stared out a window to the front lawn beyond and the edges of the Swamps beyond that. He knew what the ring meant, but he did not know what it meant for *him*. He had seen no easy, subtle way to turn a profit from the ring, and the healer Tendbones did not appear to be any threat.

“Your friend is a conundrum,” Belgad said, keeping his eyes facing the window and the view outside. “He claims to be Kobalan, even has this ring, yet he’s a healer in our city. None of that makes sense. What is he doing here? And why in the name of the ancients is he a healer? A Kobalan healer. It’s like a crude joke you’d hear in a tavern.”

“Nevertheless it’s true.”

Belgad swiveled to face the wizard again. “Master Markwood, I do not know what you want of me. I have told you my reasons for watching Randall and I have told you I mean him no mistreatment. What else need I say or do to ease your mind?”

The wizard’s face showed he was not appeased. “I want to know what you plan to do now that you know of the ring. That is more important to me than your business with Kron Darkbow.”

Belgad held out his hands as if making a peace offering. “I have no plans.”

“Don’t give me that,” Markwood said, his voice grating. “You might not have anything in the works, but a man of your reputation would not allow something like this to pass.”

Belgad sighed. His reputation, fairly earned as it was, always preceded him. “I cannot claim to know any actions I will take in the future,” he said slowly so the words would be fair and would sink in well, “but I give you my word as a knight of the Western Church that I have no plans to harm Randall Tendbones.”

“You expect me to take the word of a man known as ‘the Liar?’”

Lalo gasped.

Belgad raised an eyebrow. He did not detest the appellation he had earned in the fighting pits of

Bond, but he did not appreciate its use in front of him. Belgad had found rare reason to lie in his life. The truth was often more harmful.

Belgad gritted his teeth, then exhaled. "I have nothing else to give but my word. Further promises will profit you nothing."

Markwood knew what he was doing. He was pushing this northerner. He *wanted* to push this northerner. He had to make Belgad realize he was serious. "You know my feelings on Randall, then?"

Belgad nodded.

"And you know who I am," Markwood added. "You know I can bring hell's fire down upon you if I should wish."

The Dartague appeared surprised. "You stoop to threats?"

"Not a threat, not even a warning. I am simply making you aware that I have considerable power at my disposal. I am not just some feeble-minded professor."

Belgad sat stunned for a moment. Then he half turned so he was staring out the window again. "I believe we understand one another." He waved a hand at the door.

"Thank you for your time." Markwood stood. He lost no time in exiting the room.

After the wizard was gone, Lalo approached his master's desk. "I can't believe he would speak to you in that manner, Lord Belgad."

Belgad sat back and rubbed his chin. "I still wish I had him on staff. The man could tell me a thousand things in a day. I need to find myself a proper wizard. Trelvigor might be looking for another job very soon."

Chapter Nineteen

Kron had been following them for hours, since they had left the Rusty Scabbard together shortly before the ringing of the night's ninth bell. It had been dark on Belgad's roof several nights earlier, but Kron had no difficulty recognizing them tonight. The man was the tallest Kron had ever seen, looming at nearly seven feet, and his long arms and thin waist only added to his towering stance that would have been outlandish on anyone else; tonight the man was dressed more like a woman than was his female companion, with a pale pink silk shirt above dark britches that were cut off at the knee above lanky boots. The woman wore a tan jacket, a silky white shirt beneath and dark boots that rose to the knees of her black pants. Both of them wore rapiers on the left of their sword belts and each had a large dagger sheathed on their back.

Upon leaving the Scabbard, the man and woman had roamed the streets, aimlessly wandering while chatting. They almost appeared to be lovers, and Kron was convinced they were intimate, but the way they did not hold hands or remain near one another showed there was no real love involved. Whatever held them together was beyond the man in black who walked the rooftops. He was following them tonight because he deemed them the most powerful weapons in Belgad's arsenal.

After an hour of strolling north into the Swamps and along its myriad paths, the couple linked arms and entered another tavern, the Stone Pony.

Kron waited patiently from a roof across the street. Finding the man and woman had been a simple task. He had seen them before at the Rusty Scabbard and guessed correctly they had a room there. Keeping up with the couple was another matter. The wound to Kron's leg had healed nicely because he had kept it wrapped in a catnip paste since the fight on Belgad's roof, but Kron still could not sprint for long, and he was dependent upon his arms for climbing. He was fortunate the sword fighter and the woman had taken their time traveling from one tavern to another, otherwise Kron would have lost them early in the night. As it was, he had managed to follow, staying on the roofs whenever possible.

After a half hour of waiting with little to see other than the occasional drunk wandering in from the street or out from the Pony, Kron went over a mental list of the weapons he carried for the night, a common practice of him. It kept his mind from wandering. He had decided against the bow for the night, not planning to need it, but he had one special weapon. The woman's dagger was stuffed into the top of his left boot. He planned to return it to her.

Another ten minutes passed and Kron began to lose patience. He counted his weapons again. Still, the man and woman did not show.

Ten minutes further and Kron decided he had had enough. From the roof he should have been able to tell if they had left by either the front or back exits, but they had not. He would wait no longer.

A silk cord attached to a grappling hook appeared in his hands from the shadows of his cloak, and within seconds Kron was down the side of the building. He landed in a dark alley as quietly as he could on his good leg and whipped the cord so it and the hook returned to his hands.

He limped to the edge of the alleyway and peered into the street. The night was late, but not too late for a few stragglers still roaming the street. They were no matter. What could a drunk see of him in the night other than a cloaked figure?

Kron made his way across the dusty road and up the rickety steps to the Stone Pony entrance. Windows to the side of the doors were so dirty they gave only a vague impression of a few low lights inside.

As Kron tugged on the door's handle, he heard a familiar voice. "I promise you a shopping trip tomorrow, Adara." It was too late to keep the door from opening.

Kron found himself face to face with Fortisquo.

“You!” the sword master cried out, yanking his sword and slashing.

Kron’s instincts told him to jump back and roll away from the flashing blade, but his injury did not cooperate. He took one step and his leg gave way, sending him tumbling backward. He grunted but continued to roll away from the Stone Pony.

Fortisquo sprang from the top of the steps and landed in the road, the light of the street lamps glinting off the rapier blade that mimicked its owner in its length and width. He stabbed at the rolling dark figure but managed only to snag the edge of Darkbow’s cloak.

Kron rolled around to face his attacker and forced himself up on his good leg while drawing his heavy bastard sword from its scabbard on his back.

“Adara, around him,” Fortisquo ordered, motioning to his left with an empty hand as the woman drew her sword.

Kron’s eyes locked on the woman for a moment. She had neither the reach nor quite the skill of her companion, but she made up for it in speed. She circled to Kron’s right, attempting to flank him.

“I believe this is yours.” A black glove flashed out, shooting forth the woman’s dagger.

The thrown blade sunk into the dirt at her feet but had the desired result in jarring her, causing her to cease her forward momentum.

Fortisquo took Kron’s moment of distraction and darted forward.

The man in black’s big sword was too cumbersome in one hand to parry the coming blow, but Kron gripped his weapon like a staff, one hand on the hilt and the other on the far end of the blade, and brought it up just in time to ward off the assassin’s thrust.

Fortisquo stepped back for a powerful lunge, giving Kron a second to take in his surroundings. The woman called Adara was to his right but was cautious now, keeping pace with the fight but not approaching. An alley lay behind Kron and he knew it was his only hope. Eventually the woman would regain her bearing and would swoop in from the side, but if he could get his back into the alley at least he would only have to deal with them one at a time. Plus, he would be closer to his ally, the darkness.

Fortisquo dashed forward. Kron raised his weapon in two hands again and blocked, taking a step back as he did so.

Fortisquo’s eyes flashed over Darkbow’s head and spotted the alley. He knew what his foe was attempting. He would have none of it. Fortisquo darted in with another attack, and another.

Kron swung up his heavy sword as fast as he could, knocking aside each blow and taking a step back with each new attack.

Fortisquo sliced, hitting only air. “Damn it, Adara, get behind him!”

The woman did as she was told, slinking further around Darkbow’s right.

Fortisquo knew he had to keep his enemy’s attention on him and stabbed out again. Kron swiveled on his good leg to avoid the blow, spinning to his right; he came around swinging his sword at Fortisquo’s head.

The sword master had not expected the offensive move, but he was skilled enough to slink back, putting space between himself and the heavy blade.

Kron saw he had some space and dared to take advantage of it. He hopped back several feet on his good leg in the direction of the alley. He was near the shadows when Fortisquo screamed again and charged forward.

The sword master’s renewed attack was furious, like a tornado full of razors jabbing at the man in black. Kron did everything he could to ward off the blows, blocking as many stabs as he could with his heavier sword. A few of Fortisquo’s attacks got past his defenses, but managed only nips or scratches through the cloak flowing around Darkbow’s body.

“You cannot evade me forever!” Fortisquo shouted through his assault.

Kron could sense Adara moving in at his side. He had little time left to save himself.

With his long arm, Fortisquo thrust his blade at Kron’s face.

Everything seemed to slow down for Kron. He saw the tip of the lengthy steel driving forward, right for his face. He felt the weapon brush his eye lashes.

With a hand Kron knocked aside the weapon, tearing a gash in his left glove.

Fortisquo saw his chance. His foe had been forced to let go of one end of his sword to knock away the last attack. There was no way Kron Darkbow could be fast enough to grasp his weapon and raise it again before Fortisquo could drive home another attack.

Fortisquo lunged at the full length of his arms.

Having no other choice, Kron turned on his bad leg, hoping to spin away from the assault.

Fortisquo's blade crashed into the brick wall beside Kron's head, missing by inches.

Kron screamed in pain as his bad leg gave out beneath him and he plummeted to the ground.

Seeing his opponent was finished, Fortisquo drew back his rapier for a final stab.

Tangled in his cloak, Kron managed to roll to face the man it appeared fate had deemed to kill him. *This would be a stupid death*, Kron told himself, *impaled by a man in pink finery*.

Fortisquo thrust his blade.

Adara's sword lashed out, blocking the sword master's attack.

"What in hell?" A surprised Fortisquo shot a look to the woman.

Kron wasted no time. Adara had given him his chance, for whatever reason. He slid three tiny throwing darts from the back of a glove. He launched them.

Fortisquo was too befuddled by his companion to see the attack coming. The first dart jabbed into the back of his sword hand, causing him to yelp and drop his weapon. The second dart snagged the hanging shirt sleeve below his other arm. The final tiny javelin caught him in his right eye.

The tall assassin screamed, dropping to his knees as blood and gore trickled down the sides of his nose and across his cheeks.

The agonized look on Fortisquo's face forced Adara to step back and lower her weapon.

Kron needed no more incentive. He cracked a grenade on the ground where he lay, immediately filling the area with black smoke, and leaped to his feet.

Fortisquo bent over as the blood and screams continued to emit from him. He thrashed his head from left to right in pain and dislodged the small black bolt that had been imbedded in his eyeball. The sword master's shrieks did not diminish as the dart landed in his own blood at his feet.

Paying no more attention to Darkbow, Adara rushed to her lover and wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

Kron limped back toward the alley, keeping an eye on the man and woman.

Adara looked up into Darkbow's face. She would recognize that hard look for as long as she lived, but mixed within the harsh eyes was a minute spark of pity. The man in black regretted, at least a little, what he had done to her teacher.

A late crowd was beginning to gather, mostly tavern carousers who had heard the commotion.

Adara spun to face the nearest man. "Get a healer, now!"

The man turned and ran. Adara was thankful to see he did not appear to be too drunk.

Fortisquo's screams quieted then, turning into rough sobs as his exhausted body lapsed into a coma.

"I am so sorry," Adara said, squeezing the man's shoulders. But she knew in her heart she was not sorry. She could not have let Fortisquo kill Kron Darkbow. The dark man deserved a better death than to die in a street brawl. She only hoped Fortisquo wouldn't kill her once he had recovered his senses, whether or not he ever would recover his eye.

Around the kneeling woman and man swirled the smoke left behind by Darkbow. Adara peered through the dark haze, but saw no sign of the man in black.

Chapter Twenty

Fortisquo lay on his back in a near stupor while blood pooled in the empty socket of his injured eye.

Randall leaned over the cot where the sword master lay and gently pressed a damp cloth to the hole. Fortisquo winced but did not scream out; the potion of mixed herbs Randall had given him had dulled most of the senses.

The healer withdrew the cloth and glanced at his patient to see the socket was already filling with a mixture of red and other, darker fluids.

Randall dropped the bloody cloth into a bowl on a table. "This is not good."

"What can you do for him?" Belgad's voice came from across the room where the big man stood between two of his personal guards.

Randall swiveled in his seat and looked to the northerner. "It's fortunate I'm near finished with Trelvigor. I'll need as much strength as I can muster to replace the eye."

"No." The croaking voice sounded from Fortisquo's throat.

All gazes turned to the bleeding man.

"Leave the eye." Fortisquo gripped Randall by the arm. "I shall wear the wound as a badge of honor, and to remember."

With that the exhausted sword master slipped into unconsciousness and his hand fell limp.

The healer cast a questioning glance at Belgad.

"Do as he wishes."

Randall shrugged and reached for a clean cloth. He continued to sop the blood from Fortisquo's socket until the mess was no longer pouring out. By then Randall had a pile of scarlet-stained rags falling off the side of the small table he used for such operations.

Belgad moved closer to look down upon the assassin. "How long until he is of use to me again?"

Randall continued to work, wiping away sweat from Fortisquo's brow. "Three days." He looked up at Belgad. "What of the girl that was with him?"

"Adara is fine. She is at my home, beside herself with grief. She blames herself for what happened and is too distraught to say much."

"Darkbow?"

Belgad gestured for his guards to leave and they promptly exited, closing the door to Randall's chambers behind them.

The Dartague towered over the healer. "I've been meaning to speak with you in private."

"Yes?" Randall folded a heavy towel and placed it beneath Fortisquo's head.

"I want you to know I wish you no ill will, and I apologize if I have caused you any grievance of late. It was not my intention."

"You are talking about the ring," Randall said, continuing his work.

"Yes." Belgad stepped back, realizing his physical presence was possibly overly threatening. "Its discovery was an accident. With this Darkbow running loose, I was merely checking all possibilities. I do not, however, believe you are Kron Darkbow."

Randall smiled while mixing a paste with mortar and pestle.

"And as far as the ring is concerned, I will not cause you any grief," Belgad went on. "You have served faithfully these last few weeks. At this rate, I am sure I will have need of your services again in the future."

The healer finished mixing the paste and used a small wooden spoon to drop a dollop of it in the

hole where Fortisquo's eye had once rested. The sword fighter's body shivered, but the man did not wake.

Randall kept his focus upon his patient, but he did not ignore the northerner's words. "That is good to hear, for I do not wish to make an enemy. Why do you tell me all this?"

"Markwood came to see me. I do not wish to make of him an enemy, nor you. I have enough problems without a powerful mage haunting me."

Randall smiled again. Markwood could be feisty at times, and he could only imagine what the old mage had said to Belgad the Liar. Fortunately for Belgad, he was smart enough to realize Markwood could back up his words.

The healer allowed the smile to simmer away. "I apologize for Master Markwood's intrusion. I did not know he would speak with you."

"No harm was done." Belgad decided it was time to change this uncomfortable conversation. "In fact, he reminded me in his own way of what an excellent healer you are. How soon until Trelvigor can be woken?"

Randall paused long enough to tear a light cloth into strips. "I plan to wake him tomorrow."

"Has it been three weeks?"

"Just shy a day or two. His body has healed faster than I would have thought, considering the damage he underwent."

"Very well, then. I will return tomorrow to see Trelvigor rise again."

Belgad turned to exit.

The rains oft dreaded by the residents of the Swamps began the morning Randall planned to wake Trelvigor from his three-week slumber. By the time the sun was high, engineers had been called forth from the College of Mechanics to turn the giant screws that shut the iron gates of the flood walls, closing off all bridges that connected the Swamps to Uptown and Southtown. The only travel routes out of the Swamps became the North and South rivers, which collided east of the Swamps to become the Ursian River; to the west was swampland infested with disease and hungry beasts. The Swamps was shut off, thus earning its name once again while the rains tumbled. The center of the region was higher and furthest from the river, providing some protection from flooding, but the waters would continue to rise and the roads and alleys would become torrents of mud.

An hour before noon, Belgad's carriage was nearly mired in the dirt roads that were quickly turning to muck. Strong horses and the crack of a whip were all that allowed the Dartague and two guards to arrive at the healing tower.

Belgad and his companions found Randall in his usual white robes inside the recovery room that had been Trelvigor's home for almost three weeks. The wizard was still and quiet and appeared at peace as he lay on a down-filled mattress on a bed to one side of the room.

Leaving his two men near the door, Belgad approached Trelvigor gingerly, as if he was afraid he could wake the man early and harm him somehow. The wizard was nude except for a thin, folded blanket from his waist to his knees. His skin was mostly a pale pink like that of a newborn, but there were a few red splotches here and there.

The Dartague stared down at his employee. "What do we do now?"

Randall placed his hands flat on Trelvigor's chest, which raised and lowered slowly of its own will. "I begin the process to wake him. It shouldn't take long, a few minutes at most."

"What should I do?"

Randall pointed at the two guards. "Stand with them. I don't know what Trelvigor's reaction will be upon waking. His last conscious thoughts were of extreme pain, so he might react drastically."

Belgad frowned. "What do you mean?"

“He might jerk around, possibly even drool,” Randall explained. “I have healed him as well as I can, but his body has been inert for some while. His muscles will need time to build their strength. He might not have full control of his body for a day or two, but if he remains here I can see to his bodily functions and help him regain the use of his arms and legs.”

Belgad nodded, apparently satisfied, then crossed the room to stand between his two guards.

Seeing he could continue, Randall leaned over the wizard and pressed slightly with the palms of his hands. Trelvigor’s chest felt warm, a good sign.

The Kobalan closed his eyes and allowed his mind to travel along his fingers and into the body of the magician. Randall felt the tingles of itching that continued to prick at the wizard’s flesh; the healer was glad to feel those pains because it told him Trelvigor was near the end of the healing process.

“Awake.” Randall’s word was spoken softly, his lips barely moving.

Belgad and the others watched with held breath. None of them had ever seen a healer raise someone from such a long, deep trance.

Randall’s mind continued to race throughout Trelvigor’s body, knowing everything the wizard felt. Trelvigor’s breathing quickened and his eyes fluttered. The healer began to worry he had kept the mage unconscious too long. It was often difficult for a mind that had been in a coma to return to the waking world.

“Trelvigor, wake,” Randall said, his eyes still closed. “You are healed and it is time to return to the world of the living.”

The wizard’s eyes fluttered faster.

Randall huffed, opened his eyes and backed away from the wizard while keeping his hands planted on the man’s chest.

Belgad took a step forward. “What is wrong?”

Randall ignored the question. He would have to expend a little more magic on Trelvigor, more than just the empathetic ability he had been using, and that would require concentration.

The healer opened his eyes wide and stared into the wizard’s face. “Wake.”

Trelvigor’s eyes snapped open, full of red and hate.

“Die!” The wizard raged and lashed out with a fist.

The blow sent Randall flying over a table.

One of Belgad’s guards rushed forward in an attempt to grapple the madman. Trelvigor saw the man in chain coming from across the room and pointed at his face. “Burn!”

A shaft of golden light shot forth and impaled the charging man’s eyes. The guard screamed and dropped to his knees, all the while clawing at the red-hot helmet that covered his features.

Trelvigor roared as he pushed himself off the bed, but his weak legs dropped out from beneath him, sending the wizard to the floor and earning him a busted nose.

Seeing the crazed man was down and injured, Belgad wasted no time bounding across the room and hammering a fist into his jaw.

Trelvigor crashed to the ground like a marionette with its strings cut.

Belgad took a step back, his fist still raised in case the mage moved further. “Holy Ashal.”

Randall, holding the bruised side of his face, used a table to push himself to standing. He stared at the destruction caused to the room and its occupants.

The guard still standing by the door sheathed his sword.

The man who had suffered the ray of light from the mage’s finger no longer moved. He lay on the cold floor, his helmet removed and his eyes clawed out of his face. Blood trickled from the empty sockets into rivulets that ran along the cracks in the floor.

Belgad lowered his fist and spun on the healer. “You never said his reaction would be this.”

Randall stood his ground, massaging his swollen jaw. “I never imagined he would be in condition to harm anyone.”

Belgad spat and stared around the room from the disturbed furniture to the unconscious wizard to his dead and bleeding guard. “What do we do now? Put him out of his misery? He’s no longer of use to me, especially if he’s going to attack everyone he sees.”

“It might only be a temporary derangement,” Randall said, studying the unconscious wizard. “He might be fine after further rest. But he needs to be awake. His mind needs time to adjust just like his body will have to do. His mind has been tortured from everything his body has had to endure.”

Belgad grimaced. “I’m sure as hell not taking him back to my home, and he no longer has one of his own. Can he remain here?”

Randall shook his head. “I can’t have him in the tower. It would be too dangerous to the other patients, as well as to myself and the other healers.”

“Then there’s only one place.”

“Yes. The Asylum.”

Chapter Twenty One

The rains continued throughout the night, filling the streets with brown muck and raising the rivers' levels above the quays in the Docks district. Crews and captains of tied ships began to pull on their shorings, attempting to float away on the growing strength of the North and South rivers. The citizens of the Swamps who had not managed to escape the day before when the flood gates had still been open found themselves moving to higher ground. The inns and taverns in the most central region of the Swamps were quickly burdened with many guests, most covered in dreck.

The dark, roiling sky over the city of Bond did not appear to be going anywhere. More rains were expected, and that brought fear. When the Swamps became a giant mud pit, it was not untold for hundreds or even thousands to perish from the mess and the disease that followed.

Bond had two healing towers, both offering their services for free and open at all times, but the tower in the Swamps was always the busiest. The rising waters did not slow the tide of injured and ill who were driven to the place, but only increased those numbers.

Randall found himself busy that morning, healing those he could and helping others to find places to sleep within the grounds or in the tower proper. Swamps dwellers were flooding the place in seek of aid and shelter. By mid-morning, Randall's white robes were splattered with the mud of the streets and his body and mind were tired from casting healing spells. He even allowed a family of five to take his personal quarters; he knew he would not be sleeping that day.

Randall had placed a sleeping Fortisquo in a resting chamber with Adara hovering over the sword master, but there was still the matter of Trelvigor. The wizard had to be moved to the Asylum, and Belgad had insisted that move happen today, rains or no rains.

"Is he ready?" Belgad stood with fists on hips in the open doorway to Trelvigor's recovery room. Water glistened on the bald man's head and dripped from the edges of his white mustache and the wolf pelt pulled around his shoulders.

Randall looked up from the wizard he had kept unconscious since the attack the day before. "He's resting, but it's not a deep sleep. I didn't dare use strong magics this morning, what with the crowds coming in."

Belgad glanced behind himself, into the curving hall that ran around the central rooms of the tower. Past four of Belgad's chain-clad guards were townsfolk shuffling to and fro, most of them with mud caked on their legs.

The Dartague looked across the room and past Randall to the sleeping mage. "Will he sleep through this mess?"

Randall shrugged. "Provided he is not jarred too much."

Belgad sighed and gestured for his guards to enter behind him. "Then let's be finished with it."

The trip was easier ordered than done. Two of Belgad's men lifted the cot upon which Trelvigor had been placed. Belgad, Randall and the other guards followed. Their going was easy through the healing tower despite the growing crowd, no one daring to interfere with Belgad the Liar, but the rain and mud hampered travel once outside. The short trip to a waiting carriage was uneventful, but the horses kept slipping in the mud and the wheels could hardly find traction. The path from the tower to the Asylum was a short one, only a little more than a mile, but it took nearly an hour of slogging through muck and whipping the horses. By the time they reached the Asylum, all were caked in mud from head to toe except Belgad and Trelvigor, both of whom had remained inside the carriage the entire trip. Even Randall, who had started the journey in the carriage, had been called out to use his healing magics on one of the guards who had fallen in the sludge and cracked an ankle.

The Asylum itself was in little better condition than much of the rest of the Swamps. The high

outer wall enclosing the grounds had its back to the North River, while the main building sat on a hill. The rising river waters lapped at the back of the surrounding wall, but could not work through to the building. Still, the area inside the walls was a mess of brown into which a man's feet would sink.

The gates to the outer wall were open as the carriage slid through the mud and onto the grounds. The day before Randall had arranged for delivery of Trelvigor to the chief guard. The Asylum's top sentry had not liked the idea of taking in a wizard, especially one who had been described as potentially dangerous, but there was no place else for Trelvigor. It also helped that Trelvigor was in the employ of Belgad; no one would not give Belgad permission to use the Asylum.

The bulky form of Chief Guard Shaltros waited with water dripping from his bulbous nose and the sleeves of his gray jacket in front of the Asylum as Belgad's carriage slid to a sloppy halt. With Shaltros stood the old guard Vitman and three other men in the dark garb of Asylum guards.

Belgad climbed out of the carriage, his boots plopping in the growing muck, and surveyed the guards before him. He was glad to see the front door was already open.

Randall walked toward Shaltros with an extended hand, which was accepted though the chief guard's eyes remained locked on the carriage behind the healer.

Shaltros nodded to the wheeled conveyance. "What is his condition?"

Randall looked over his shoulder to see Belgad's four guards removing Trelvigor's still form from the carriage. "He's in a stupor. Just a weak concoction. It should make him stable, but it won't keep him unconscious."

Shaltros gripped Randall by the shoulder and turned the younger man to face him. "Why isn't he knocked out? You said he was dangerous. I don't need a lunatic casting spells in the Asylum."

Randall shook off the hand. "I did the best I could under the circumstances. The tower is swamped with people rushing in to avoid the floods. I had to spend a good portion of magic healing those people. A wizard with a cracked mind was the least of my concerns as long as he remained in a coma."

Shaltros nodded again. "My apologies, but like you, I have duties to perform and patients to attend."

"Understandable," Randall said, turning back to Belgad and his burdened guards.

The four men in chain armor carried their load as best they could, but their booted feet slid in the mud and more than once they almost dropped the wizard. As they proceeded toward the Asylum's entrance, Randall held the edges of his robe over Trelvigor's upturned face to shield his blinking eyes from the falling rain.

Belgad followed at a slow pace, the dull and dreary day doing nothing to better his mood. Seeing he was not likely to find information from Trelvigor, information that possibly could have pertained to Kron Darkbow, the Dartague wanted the business at hand finished as soon as possible. As Trelvigor's patron, he felt obliged to see the wizard had the best possible care, but the matter ended at the door to the Asylum as far as Belgad was concerned. He did not have hope Trelvigor's mind would return. In Belgad's experience, the insane remained insane.

Soon enough, all in the party were through the front door and sheltered from the wet.

Randall watched the old guard Vitman shut the door behind them then draw closed various bolts and iron bars that secured the exit.

Belgad stared through the giant iron cage that surrounded them and took in the dark chamber that made up the center of the Asylum. Tired guards filed by dragging gray inmates in dirty rags. The haunting stillness of the place was occasionally cut short by distant screams or cackles. The Dartague's gaze turned to find barred cells that rose on three levels of walkways.

Belgad's frown deepened. "Cheery place."

"It serves its purpose," Shaltros said as Vitman handed him a heavy key. The chief guard turned to a gate in the giant cage around them and inserted the key into a lock.

"Should we be concerned about our safety?" Randall asked as he stared into one of the cells on

the second tier and watched a man use his ragged fingernails to peel skin from the side of his jaw.

The bolt in the lock clanked, releasing the gate. “No sudden movements and don’t approach the patients,” Shaltros said, pocketing the key and pushing the heavy gate open. “Otherwise you should be safe. Don’t allow your hands to stray too far from your body. And nothing too flashy or bright.”

A thin smile formed on Belgad’s lips. “Is that all?”

Shaltros looked over his shoulder at the large man. “That should be enough for your brief stay.” He pointed left toward a hallway lit by torches. “We’ll be going that way. Have your men carry the wizard behind me.”

Belgad nodded to his four guards and they eased through the cage’s gate with their burden while the others in their party followed close behind.

Once through the gate, Shaltros retrieved the large key from his jacket pocket and handed it to one of his guards remaining inside the cage. “Stay here and lock it behind us.”

Shaltros pointed at another guard. “Come with us.”

The two guards did as ordered.

Shaltros moved to the front of the group and motioned for the Asylum guard next to him to walk ahead. “We’ll be going down to one of the special cells.”

The guard went forward to the edge of the tunnel-like hallway and pulled a torch from a sconce on the wall. “This way, gentlemen,” he said, pointing into the hall.

“Who was that?” It was an unusual, croaky voice that spoke.

Everyone glanced at one another, then looked down.

Trelvigor’s eyes were wide.

One of Belgad’s men nodded down. “Did he speak?”

Randall stepped forward, hoping to avert any actions of the wizard.

“I asked a question,” Trelvigor said with a weak voice.

The wizard’s eyes were open, but they appeared dazed. Randall was glad to see his potion had not completely worn away. “We’ll answer your questions once we get you in a proper bed.”

Trelvigor’s eyes opened wider, showing a menace in their bottomlessness. “I want to know who was speaking.” His voice sounded stronger.

Randall was suddenly concerned. Perhaps his potion *was* wearing off. “Give us a moment to --”

“No!” Trelvigor shouted. “I want to know who was speaking a moment ago!”

Randall recoiled at the fierceness of the yelling, raising his hands as if to cast a spell.

Belgad reached between his men and grabbed the wizard by the collar of his nightshirt. “None of that or you’ll get another thrashing.” He held up his other fist.

Trelvigor’s eyes crossed for a moment, then focused on the mustachioed face before him. “Belgad?”

“That’s right, Trelvigor, and you know I won’t stand for foolishness.”

The wizard blinked several times, then his vision seemed to clear as his eyes locked on his employer. “I heard his voice.”

Belgad’s eyes narrowed. “Who? What voice?”

“The voice that caused me pain, the voice that ruined all my fine belongings.”

Belgad’s head snapped around to the guard holding the torch.

Trelvigor’s eyes followed his patron’s glance.

Then the wizard went truly mad. He thrashed and strained at cords holding him tight. “It’s him! I know it’s him!”

Lucius Tallerus did not move for one of the longest seconds in his life. Everyone around him, the inmates and the guards and all those of Belgad’s party, appeared to move slowly, as if they were pushing their way through water. Even the sounds were dull and hollow, as if Lucius were listening through a tunnel.

But Lucius was not a man who panicked. He always planned ahead, as did Kron Darkbow. He

had known he might be noticed by Trelvigor the wizard, but he had not thought it would happen so soon. When that time had come, he had thought to knife the magician in the night and blame it on one of the inmates, if worse came to worse.

Belgad's voice was steel. "Don't move."

Lucius dropped the torch and darted for the hallway.

"After him!" Belgad bellowed.

Lucius shot down the hall, charging through a heavy door.

Chaos erupted. Without thinking of what they were doing, Belgad's men dropped Trelvigor's cot, spilling the mage onto the stone floor. The Dartague and his guards rushed toward the hall at the same time, knocking into one another and spilling Shaltros onto the ground. Belgad pushed aside his men and kept after Lucius while Randall touched Trelvigor on the shoulder, sending soothing waves of magic that would dull any pain the wizard felt from his tumble.

"He'll try the back exit," Vitman said of Lucius. The old man had a smile on his face, as if he was amused with all the excitement. "Though I suppose he might try the downstairs hall to the river."

Shaltros got to his feet, a stunned expression on his face. "It would flood the ground floor and everything below it."

In another part of the building, Lucius rounded a corner to find several Asylum guards lounging near the back entrance.

Belgad and his men weren't far behind. Their booted feet thunked on the stone floor as they charged forward in their heavy armor.

"There!" Belgad shouted at Lucius's back as he saw the man dodge down a flight of steps.

As Lucius's feet carried him swiftly into the depths of the Asylum, he was thankful he had taken time to memorize the place. It helped him outmaneuver his pursuers. By the time the Liar and his men reached the bottom of the steps, Lucius had turned into the narrow and dark tunnel leading to the river shore.

Belgad paused, bringing his men up short. "Listen." The word was little more than a whisper.

The five men stood quiet, a hall lit by torches to their left and a blackened tunnel to their right.

The pattering of booted feet slapping stone could be heard in the distance.

"This way." Belgad rushing into the dark hall, his four warriors following.

Lucius kept a hand on the left wall as he ran. Twice before he had brought a torch and followed the tunnel to the river shore. He had not actually opened the exit door, but he had wanted to make sure it was there in case Kron Darkbow should need it. Now he was thankful for those trips because his familiarity with his surroundings allowed him to travel fast in the dark; Belgad and his companions would have to travel much slower, or they would have to waste precious seconds grabbing a torch.

A few more steps and Lucius bumped into the door, nearly knocking himself off his feet. In the distance he could hear Belgad and his gang rushing toward him. Lucius had only seconds. He reached out, trying to find the handle that would give him freedom. Once outside, Lucius was certain he could escape. He would simply drop his hat and jacket and become Kron Darkbow once again; it wasn't night, the hours when Kron was at his best, but the rainstorm had clouded the sky.

Lucius's fingers found the door's bar and he pulled. Nothing happened at first, then a dull creaking of metal on metal screeched through the air and Lucius knew he was almost free. The yellings and noises of the running men behind him were no longer a concern.

"Don't kill him!" It was Belgad, closer than could be expected.

Lucius tugged on the bar and the door smashed inward, knocking him against the floor. Then a wall of water erupted over him and Lucius went reeling.

Belgad knew what was coming before it hit him. The sound of the door slamming open was

followed by the roar of river water barreling down the hall.

“Back!” the northerner yelled, but it was too late.

The waters overcame him, knocking the Dartague off his feet and sending him rolling head over heels. He managed to gulp a last breath of air before being slammed against one of his men. Belgad’s world became a swirling, churning eruption of water. There was no way he could survive, he told himself in the darkness, but his last thoughts would not be of those he had loved. His last thoughts would be of Kron Darkbow. He wondered how Darkbow, or the guard he had believed was Darkbow, had managed to bring the river down upon him. Belgad supposed he would never know, dying in black wetness beneath the Asylum. He told himself it was a stupid death. He should have died on a battlefield far from the city of Bond, perhaps back in his homeland. But it was too late for that now. Death was here and it was not honorable.

The rumbling and shaking told those on the Asylum’s ground floor that something terribly wrong was going on beneath their feet. A few of the weaker inmates fell to the floor of their cells from the quaking. Several of the guards had panicked looks in their eyes. Even Shaltros, generally the sturdiest of men, began to fear.

Vitman no longer grinned. “He opened the river door.”

Randall was kneeling over Trelvigor again, making sure the wizard was asleep. At the old man’s words he stood and grabbed the chief guard by the front of his jacket. “How much time do we have?”

Shaltros shook his head as if unsure. “It could be minutes before this level is flooded. There’ll be hundreds killed. All the guards and prisoners on the lower level ... and likely some up here.”

Randall’s mind raced. There had to be something he could do, some way to save as many lives as possible. Randall Tendbones, the healer from Kobalos, had not fled the evil of his homeland only to allow further death wherever he may roam.

Randall reached inside his white cloak and his fingers grazed the gold ring he had kept in his pocket since its discovery by Belgad. Randall did not have the power to hold back the tide of water he could hear rumbling through the tunnels below, but the ring did. The danger was that the ring might kill as many as it would save. The healer didn’t know the limits or drawbacks of the ring because he had rarely used it, and then only in emergencies. The ring drew its strength from the life force of those near it, and it could use that power to its own ends if the mage wielding it were not strong enough to control it. It was possible many might die by Randall’s use of the ring, and then there was the fact that using the ring alerted Lord Verkain of the ring’s whereabouts; the Kobalan tyrant would then find it an easy task to track down the ring’s wearer. Randall did not like that notion. He also didn’t like that hundreds of people would be dead unless someone took action, and he seemed to be the only someone with the power to do so.

The healer slipped the ring onto a finger.

The ground shook harder. A few of the guards, including old Vitman, panicked and ran for the iron cage in front of the exit.

“Open the gate and the door,” Shaltros ordered the guards inside the cage.

Randall stepped away from Trelvigor to face the hallway Belgad and his guards had run down only minutes before. He raised his hands flat to the air, as if he were pushing on an invisible wall.

“I call upon the power of Kobalos within this ring to do my bidding.” Randall’s words came deep from within his narrow chest, but the roar of the water and the growing disquiet among the guards and inmates drowned out anyone’s chances of hearing him speak.

At first nothing happened. Randall closed his eyes and focused his thoughts on the people surrounding him and the others he had seen in the Asylum. It was the darkest of magics he was attempting, magics that normally turned his stomach, but he would dare to use them in hope of saving

as many lives as possible.

The ground began to shake again.

Vitman shrieked. "The water's not causing that!"

Shaltros pulled the gate to the cage open and stared with fear at the old man. "By Ashal, the floor's giving way."

With the chief guard's words, the panic in the guards and inmates exploded. Nearly everyone not locked in a cell charged toward the open cage.

"Get that door open!" Shaltros shouted as he pushed past a guard and lunged for the front exit.

Randall stood his ground as the building around him trembled, the stone floor and walls creaking and growling in protest of the pressures being placed upon them. The young healer knew the stress on the structure did not all come from the roiling waters below his feet; he was responsible, with the aid of the magic of his homeland.

A guard managed to unlock the front door and Shaltros shoved it open, spilling himself into the mud outside. A second later he was trampled by a guard running out the exit. Shaltros pushed up on his hands, but was shoved down by the next guard rushing out to freedom. The chief guard was forced onto his face in the mud. As a steady stream of Asylum inmates and guards stormed out of the building, the chief guard found he was not able to breath.

Shaltros was the first to die, suffocated by soggy earth that filled his nose and mouth.

While dust and pebbles from the ceiling peppered the floor, those still lurching for the freedom of the front door were jammed together and fighting for escape.

Randall's face showed his disgust at using the ring and the strain of reaching out with his mind to the souls of those around him. The ones fleeing were close enough to not escape the magical pull of the ring, though they would not know it until the workings of the magic were finished.

Randall mentally asked the spirits of his fathers for whatever aid they could send. Coming from a land where Lord Verkain was worshiped as a living god, Randall had never been a follower of the almighty Ashal, but his mind reached out to the god of Ursia in hopes it would do some good. The ring was doing something, Randall could tell, but so far he had not been able to make it do what he needed. The healer's faith in the magic of the golden band began to wane.

Without warning the floor in the center of the main room erupted in a fountain of water and flying stone. A giant geyser shot forth from the explosion, the huge ray of water bursting upward and crashing into the ceiling three stories above to shatter a monstrous hole through to the outside. Stones, timber and roof tiles plummeted to the ground, killing many before settling in the water spilling across the floor.

A falling brick knocked Randall aside. He landed on his hands and slid on the floor covered by several inches of water. He turned over and looked about the room at the destruction being wrought.

Death was everywhere. Screaming men continued to fight near the front door in desperate attempts at escape. The gigantic geyser continued to shoot forth from the basement, spraying the interior of the Asylum. Many of those still in the building lost their footing and fell into the growing waters to drown or to tumble into the pit created by the eruption. Debris from the ceiling continued to rain down, killing some and injuring others so they were unable to save themselves.

Vitman lay motionless near the open gate of the cage. His gray hair flowed around his face, blood from a gash to his forehead spilling out to join the waters. Randall hadn't seen the man die. The healer wondered if anyone would care about the old man's death, if the guard had had any family or friends. Who was there to tell?

Trelvigor too appeared dead. The wizard lay where the guards had spilled him onto the floor, his gray patient's robe billowing in the waters. A board of lumber nearly as long as the wizard was tall protruded from his chest. Randall pondered Trelvigor's death. Would the wizard die without anyone caring?

Horror covered the healer's face. However much damage the flooding waters would have

caused, it should not have been this bad. The power of the ring had done this, calling upon the spiritual power of those around the Asylum to wreak its havoc. Tears sprang to Randall's eyes. He should have known better than to use the ring. It had only brought about more death.

The healer raised a hand and stared at the large gold band that rested on one of his fingers. Everything from Kobalos caused chaos. He promised himself he would never use it again.

Then something hit Randall from above and he was knocked into the rising water.

Chapter Twenty Two

“By Ashal.”

They were the only words Sergeant Gris could use to describe the scene before him. He could only imagine his god having the power to cause the destruction that lay before him at the Asylum. It was beyond his experience, beyond anything he could conceive. He lived in a world of magic and in a nation where magic was legal and sometimes on display, but nothing this extravagant had been known in the city of Bond in a generation, since the war with the East.

From inside the grounds' walls, the sergeant's eyes followed the huge stream of muddy water that blasted from the roof of the Asylum's main structure.

Chunks of the roof shot forth and rained down upon the growing number of gawkers on the street in front of the Asylum's front gate. Rain also continued to fall, making the ground more of a mess, but it did not deter the crowds. More and more citizens of the Swamps slunk out of their houses to see what was happening at the strange building. Those who had survived the flooding of the Asylum ran their mouths, spreading stories as soon as they were safe among others again.

Outside the wall enclosing the grounds, a line of survivors had been laid out in the mud. A few had been injured from falling debris or the powerful waters, but a large number had succumbed to fatigue, many having a difficult time breathing.

Surveying the damage, Gris did not know what to believe. He had been behind a desk when the first calls of alarm had come to the Swamps barracks. The sergeant had wasted no time rounding up a group of men, climbing aboard his horse and galloping to the Asylum. What he saw caused him stunned disbelief as he stared at the building from horseback.

“Where is he?” The concerned voice came from behind the sergeant.

Gris recognized the speaker. It was Stilp, one of Belgad's lieutenants. The sergeant of the guard turned in his saddle to stare at the gate of the Asylum's wall where Stilp stood with Spider, their clothes and hair drenched. A handful of city guards Gris had stationed at the gate kept out the curious lined up several yards back from the wall, stretching their necks to peer through the gate.

Gris pointed at Belgad's men and yelled to his men, “Let them through!”

A guard nodded, then waved for Stilp and Spider to enter the Asylum's grounds.

Belgad's two employees scurried and slid across the muddy ground to the sergeant.

Stilp's gaze remained stuck upon the mass of water shooting from atop the building. “What in hell happened?”

Gris spun around his horse to face the scene again. “I don't know. I just arrived myself.”

Spider, his face filled with awe and shock, moved to one side of the sergeant's horse. “Is anyone alive?”

Gris nodded outside the walls to the survivors on the ground. “There were some guards and a handful of inmates who escaped.”

“Is Belgad alive?” Stilp's voice held genuine concern.

“Was he *here*?” Gris pointed at the Asylum.

Stilp glanced up at the sergeant, his eyes wet, though it was impossible to tell if tears were flowing or if the waters were caused by the drizzling rain. “They brought Trelvigor.”

Gris stood in his stirrups, as if it would allow him a better site of the Asylum's main building. “My apologies, but I have seen no sign of your master.”

“Damn it,” Stilp said, kicking at the ground and spraying mud. “Lalo should be here. He'd know what to do.”

The sergeant sat once more and looked down from his saddle. “Where is he?”

Spider slid around in the mud to stand next to Stilp again. "He sent us, saying Belgad would want him to remain at the mansion."

Gris nodded and stared back at the Asylum. "The Finder's probably right."

Stilp looked up to the sergeant. "Aren't you going to do anything?"

"I've sent message to the College of Magic, but my men aren't going in there. At least not until this ... water tower ... is done away with. It's too dangerous."

Stilp grabbed the reins of Gris's horse. "You've got to do something. You're a sergeant of the city guard. You have to make sure Belgad is alright."

Gris did not like Stilp, and might have slapped the man at another time, but the little man's face told where his concerns lay. Stilp was worried about his master. "I'm sorry, but we'll have to wait for a mage."

"Then it's a good thing I'm here." It was another familiar voice.

Gris turned in his saddle again, this time to see the wizard Markwood marching toward him.

The sergeant's shoulders visibly sagged from relief. "Thank Ashal you've arrived."

Wading through the mud with the bottom of his robes drenched and soiled, the old mage passed the three men and continued on his way up the hill. "Sergeant, I suggest you pull back to the gate."

Gris took the wizard's words seriously and turned his horse around. Belgad's two men did not move.

Stilp motioned toward the wizard. "What are you going to do?"

"What do you think?" Markwood did not look back, but kept on marching. "I'm going to clean up this mess."

The heavy front door of the Asylum swung on its hinges to greet Markwood as he approached. The old wizard nearly gagged from the sight of bodies strewn in the entrance, piled upon one another as men had made their final desperate bids for freedom. It had been years since Markwood had witnessed such death, since the great war between the East and West, but it never ceased to shake him mentally.

The wizard paused in front of the doorway next to a dead man wearing the clothes of an Asylum guard. The body was face down in the mud.

Markwood peered through the open door. The interior was dark since the torches had been drenched by the column of water shooting up from the floor. The immense tear in the ceiling provided some light, but the spraying water blocked out most of the gray sky.

The wizard took a step forward, into the giant entrance cage. He sensed no movement nor other signs of life. Even the prisoners on the upper levels, safe from the flooding, were unmoving in their cells. The only sound was the gush of the water tower.

The old mage advanced through the cage's open gate and found himself walking in several inches of water. He ignored the mild discomfort as his eyes moved from body to body. There were dead everywhere, some alone and some in piles. Many had been trampled in a rush to escape while some appeared to have been struck down by debris from the roof. Others did not appear wounded at all, but had fallen apparently uninjured. Markwood surmised the unwounded had been slain by the powerful magics he had sensed from the university; the emanation had been so strong he wouldn't be surprised if other mages would soon appear. Magic of the most powerful sorts had a tendency to draw attention.

"Maslin." It was a weak voice.

The old wizard scanned the bodies floating around him in the shallow water.

"Over here," the voice said.

Markwood turned in the direction of the words and spotted Randall on his back in the water. Across the healer and holding him to the ground was a long slab of lumber from the ceiling.

“How badly are you hurt?” The old wizard moved closer looked over his friend. Randall appeared weak and was only able to hold his head a few inches above the water, but otherwise seemed unharmed. The piece of wood held him, but did not look to have caused any major damage.

“Not seriously.” Randall gave a thin smile. “This board landed on top of me, but I don’t think anything’s broken.”

“Help me lift if you can.” Markwood leaned over the young man and tried to pull on the board.

At first the beam would not budge, but after a few seconds of heaving the two mages managed to roll the lumber off Randall.

Markwood gripped the healer by the shoulders and lifted him to his feet.

“I feared I would find you here,” Markwood said as steadied the healer. “What was worse, I feared I would find you dead.”

Randall no longer grinned. Markwood watched the young man stare at the bodies drifting throughout the waters filling the Asylum floor. The wizard could feel the lad’s shame, his inadequacy and smallness.

With eyes glazed, Randall stared at the water swirling around his feet. “The ring killed as many as the flood. It was the only thing I could think to do. One of the guards apparently opened a door in the basement and flooded the building. I was trying to save lives. I should have known better.”

The wizard’s brows knitted together. “The ring can’t be trusted, and now Verkain knows your whereabouts. He could be here any moment.”

Randall remained silent as Markwood watched the unbelief on the boy’s face. The amount of death dealt out by the ring was staggering. The wizard figured there had to be at least a hundred killed.

Tears formed at the corners of Randall’s eyes.

Markwood glanced around the large room, his eyes finally coming to rest on the huge water column continuing to shoot for the sky.

Randall followed the wizard’s gaze. “Can you end this?”

Markwood waved a finger at the rising waters and muttered ancient words.

The tower of wet crashed like a waterfall, causing a huge splash that sprayed throughout the chamber. The muddy fluid continued to roil in the large hole in the floor, but after a few moments all was quiet in the Asylum.

Randall fought back more tears with a snuffle. “I wish I could take it back.”

“There’s many a thing I wish I could undo,” Markwood said, wrapping a comforting arm around the younger man’s shoulders, “but dealing with life is a sign of maturity. You are not a boy any longer and you live in a dangerous world. It is time you started thinking about your options, about your future. We can’t have events like this in Bond, but I would worry too much if you should leave.”

“Verkain.” Randall spoke the word in a whisper.

“Yes, Verkain, and if I’m not mistaken, he’s likely got a wizard or two on their way here, if he’s not coming himself. At the least, he’ll be watching the city now.”

Randall looked into his friend’s face. “I’ll go into hiding.”

“And what if Verkain tears the city apart looking for you?” Markwood gently steered the young man toward the exit. He wanted to get Randall somewhere safe, and to make sure the healer was not at the Asylum if Verkain or one of his agents should make an appearance.

“If Verkain shows, I’ll surrender to him.” Randall could no longer fight back the tears. The water in his eyes turned to a stream rolling down his face. “There’s no reason more lives should be lost.”

Markwood hugged the man who was little more than a boy. He could imagine the guilt Randall felt at having killed so many through use of the ring, and he hoped a good crying would relieve some of the pain the healer was feeling. Something as tragic as this could break Randall, Markwood knew, but the young were often resolute at survival.

“What the hell is there to cry about?” It was a rough voice.

Randall and Markwood turned to the speaker.

Belgad the Liar, drenched and wearing more than a few bruises and scrapes, stood in the center of the hallway that led to the stairs and the lower level. Most of Belgad's clothing had been torn away, leaving him with only tattered rags around his waist. Otherwise, the huge man looked as if he were ready for battle.

Randall stopped crying and his eyes brightened. "You're alive."

Belgad threw his head back and laughed to the dark sky seen through the hole in the roof. "Of course I'm alive. It takes more than a little water to bring down Belgad Thunderclan."

Confusion rolled over Randall's features. "How?"

"I don't know." Belgad shrugged, smiling. "One moment I was chasing Darkbow, and the next the world was turned upside down and I'm swimming in darkness."

Markwood dropped his arm from the healer's shoulders and took a step nearer the Dartague. "Kron Darkbow?"

Belgad surveyed the room and spotted his dead mage. "Trelvigor pointed him out. Apparently Darkbow was a guard at the Asylum. A decent hiding place, I suppose, among the other lunatics."

Randall shivered as he too noticed the blank face of the dead Trelvigor. "One of the guards said something about a door in the basement that led to the river."

"Darkbow must have opened it thinking he would escape, but I suppose it sealed his fate."

Markwood gestured to the northerner. "How did you survive?"

Belgad chuckled again. "By pure luck, or the fortunes of Ashal. It was dark, but I remembered the general direction of the stairs. I reached out and got lucky, snagging the corner of a wall. I managed to pull myself up. Then that big geyser erupted and threw me to the top of the steps."

"It was a spell from Trelvigor that caused all this," Markwood lied, sparing Randall embarrassment or worse. "Apparently Trelvigor cast the spell after you ran into the basement. He was after Darkbow himself, it seems."

"Such is his fate," Belgad said, watching his dead wizard floating in shallow water.

Randall eased around Markwood to face the Liar. "What about Kron Darkbow?"

Belgad shrugged again. "Likely swept into the river. Probably dead, as I'd say are my guards."

Markwood put an arm around Randall's shoulders once more and began to move the young man toward the exit again. "There'll be time to talk more on this later. For now, we had better get the two of you looked over by a healer."

As they exited the Asylum, Markwood could still see the heartache Randall was suffering. The wizard knew the youth couldn't fully comprehend that he had killed so many, and all through efforts of trying to do what he thought was right. Markwood feared Randall would not remain in Bond much longer. Lord Verkain would be looking for the young healer, and Verkain would only bring more death to the city. The wizard knew Randall would never allow himself to be a part of that.

Chapter Twenty Three

The man who rose from the murky waters would never again think of himself as Lucius Tallerus. He would be Kron Darkbow forever.

His survival had been as much luck as that of Belgad the Liar, but Kron also was an excellent swimmer. Having been taught by his late uncle Kuthius in the rivers of the Prisonlands, he had been trained to hold his breath for long periods of time under water. The initial rush of the river into the tunnel had knocked him against a wall, then sent him tumbling into one of Belgad's guards. Together the two men had been pushed further into the depths of the Asylum's basement. Death loomed, but a miracle had occurred. Just before Kron would have blacked out, the waters receded, rushing back toward the river and flowing into other parts of the Asylum. Kron did not know what had forced back the flow, but he had been grateful for the return of air to his lungs. He could not see in the dark basement, though he knew he was entangled with the bodies of other men. Kron had thought himself safe for the moment, but that had proved an illusion. The waters soon rushed back in upon him, this time dragging him and the bodies along. Then had followed a cold, swirling darkness that Kron was sure meant his doom. A last gulp of air before being pulled under was all that saved him.

When he saw light again, it was above him through a tawny haze. Still fighting churning water, he pushed for the light as strong as his legs would kick. His rising seemed forever, but eventually he burst through to the surface of the North River. In the distance stood the back of the Asylum's wall beneath a dark, stormy sky. Above the Asylum a giant fountain of water had sprung forth, spraying the top of the building and the grounds.

From that point it had merely been a choice, to die wet and tired in the river or to push toward shore. He chose the shore. After what felt an eternity of swimming, his legs almost cramping on him several times, he climbed into the cold mud.

Kron collapsed in a soggy brambles, thorns cutting the skin of his hands and arms. He sank to the ground, covering half his face with mud, but it did not matter. What mattered was that he was alive. He was Kron Darkbow and he lived, ready to strike at Belgad again.

He tried to push himself up with his hands and winced at sharp pains that shot through his ribs. He plopped down in the mud again to rest. He knew he had probably broken several ribs because he could feel them grinding together beneath his skin.

His eyes closed against his will. His body had been abused and he needed the sleep. It would be long hours before he woke, and then his body would be stiff and sore. Until then, however, he rested in the muck.

By late afternoon Belgad had returned home. Despite his exhilaration at the events of the day, he was still businessman enough to know there were serious questions needing answered. To this end, he called Lalo, Stilp, Adara and Spider to his library on the second floor of his mansion.

Stilp and Spider were readily available as they had been witness to their employer walking out of the ruined Asylum with his arms stretched to the sky while yelling, exhilarated at being alive.

On the other hand, Adara did not want to leave the side of Fortisquo, who was still unconscious. Normally Randall or another healer of the tower would have woken the slumbering sword master after healing, but the wet day had been a busy one for the healers and Markwood had insisted Randall was too fatigued to attempt any magic. Stilp had pleaded with Adara, his argument being she was one of the few people who had actually fought Kron Darkbow and thus was needed for Belgad's parley. The

woman had eventually gone grudgingly, mostly because there was little she could do for Fortisquo.

“Darkbow is likely dead,” Belgad said to begin the gathering, “but in case he has survived, we need to be prepared.”

Adara sat next to the burning fireplace, her features hidden by shadow. “What makes you think he lives?”

Belgad grunted. “If I survived, *he* could survive.”

Stilp and Spider nodded agreement as they sat next to one another in chairs in front of Belgad’s desk. Lalo watched quietly from his usual spot near one of the two library exits.

“Possible, but not likely.” Adara leaned into the firelight, revealing her troubled features. “You and the healer were the only two to walk out of the Asylum alive.”

“Some guards and a handful of inmates escaped, but there was something more going on in that place than just the water geyser. I felt some kind of magic. It was like a tugging at the heart, at the soul. I saw plenty of bodies in the Asylum, and not all of them had drowned.”

Stilp sat up. “Why would you be spared?”

Belgad shrugged. “Strength of will, perhaps? I know little of magic other than it sometimes doesn’t work well on the strong of mind.”

Spider nodded agreement. “But what does all this destruction mean?”

“Nothing.” Adara eased into shadow again. “It was merely a happenstance of Trelvigor’s conjuring.”

Belgad placed his hands flat on his desk. “Perhaps, but that was powerful magery, something I think beyond our poor Trelvigor.”

“He was mad in the end,” Adara pointed out. “His madness might have given him strength.”

“Another option would be the healer.” Lalo the Finder spoke for the first time since the group had gathered.

All eyes turned to him.

“As a healer, he is a mage,” Lalo went on, “and we know that ring of his has unknown properties.”

Belgad glanced to the Finder. “According to Markwood, it was Trelvigor, and I have no reason to doubt his word.”

Lalo stared back unblinking, as if to make a point. “He is a friend of the healer. Friendship can make one do much worse than lie.”

Belgad nodded his agreement. “True, but it seems unimportant,” he said, attempting to get the conversation back on his track. “The source of the magical fiasco today is not at question, unless it was magic Darkbow somehow produced, but there has been no evidence the man was a mage.”

“So, your only concern here is Kron Darkbow?” The voice from the dark was Adara’s.

“Not necessarily, but he is my main concern.” Belgad turned to face Stilp. “Did you have a chance to speak with other survivors?”

“Yes, sir. They told me the guard Trelvigor pointed out as Kron Darkbow went by the name Lucius Tallerus, and Sergeant Gris helped him get his job at the Asylum.”

“Tallerus?” Belgad said, more to himself than the others in the room. He recognized the name. It sounded Lycinian, or possibly Truscan. That Gris had helped this Tallerus was also a bit of a surprise.

“Spider, I want you to find Sergeant Gris,” Belgad ordered. “Ask him here tonight for dinner.”

“Yes, master.”

“Now.” Belgad motioned for the small man to leave.

Once Spider was gone, the Dartague turned his attention back to the matter at hand. “The name Tallerus rings a bell with me. Does anyone recognize it?”

Lalo coughed. Again, all eyes turned to him.

The Finder moved nearer the desk. “Kuthius Tallerus was a Prisonlands border warden when you were released.”

Belgad's eyes widened in recollection. "I remember him. He spoke with the Chief Councilor, trying to have my knighthood nullified. Good gods, that's been years. I had nearly forgotten."

"But the Chief Councilor would not rule against the church," Lalo continued for his benefactor.

"Yes. Correct." Belgad nodded. "Then Kuthius tried the Western pope."

The northerner's face grew dark and Lalo knew there was no need to further the story of Kuthius Tallerus. Kuthius and a handful of other wardens had tried to halt Belgad's release from the Lands. In a bid to drive fear into the wardens, Belgad had sent Trelvigor to threaten Tallerus's family, Kuthius's brother with wife and child. Trelvigor had turned a simple robbery into a massacre, killing the merchant named Marcus and his wife Aurelia. The couple's young son had gone missing, thought dead on the streets of Bond.

Belgad's eyes went wide. "He's their son. Marcus and Aurelia's son."

Lalo nodded.

Adara leaned into the light once more. "Who are they? And who is this son?"

"They were an example I made a long time ago during my bloodier days," Belgad explained without details. "It would seem their son is Kron Darkbow, and he has sought revenge against me fifteen years later. Trelvigor should have made sure the pup was dead."

Stilp appeared confused. "Where in hell could he have learned all those skills?"

Belgad's fingers drummed on his desk's surface. "His uncle was a Prisonlands warden. Plenty of soldiers from across the continents are stationed there as part of the treaty with the East. They have a tendency to share their skills. It seems Darkbow learned much."

Adara sat forward further, on the edge of her seat as if ready to leave. "What do you want of me? I've sat here and listened to your little story about this Tallerus fellow who might or might not have been Kron Darkbow, but so far you've not given me anything to do."

"It should be quite obvious, my dear," Belgad said with a grin. "After I speak with the good sergeant, I want you to use your vast skills to make sure Kron Darkbow is dead. Do you think you can handle that?"

Adara did not know what to say.

Kron woke to more darkness. For a moment he thought he was still under water or even dead, sentenced to a hell of eternal blackness. Then the muscles of his face formed into a grin. He had no reason to fear the darkness. The darkness was his friend, an ally against his enemies.

After a few moments, his eyes adjusted and he could see stars overhead. Night had fallen while he had slept.

He tried to push up on his hands again, and found the pain swimming in his ribs was nearly more than he could bear. Yes, he had broken something, probably several ribs. He managed to roll over on his side then sit up gently. He winced at the pain that ran through his body, but he knew he had to do something. He was lucky Belgad or some other official person had not ordered a search for survivors along the river because he would have been found. His luck had held out, and now it was time for action. However, he knew he wasn't ready to jump back into his personal war. To get to that point he would have to heal.

Kron Darkbow needed help. But that presented a problem. He had never allowed anyone to know his secret, that Lucius Tallerus was Kron Darkbow and that Kron had sworn revenge against Belgad the Liar for the murder of his parents. Trelvigor had been the original target, but Kron had shifted his rage after hearing Trelvigor's words that Belgad had been behind the assassination. Kron did not know why the Tallerus family had been murdered, but he knew he could set things as right as they could be after so many years. Dreams of his parents, both struck down by flying bolts from crossbows, had haunted him for fifteen years. He could still hear their cries of pain and then see the lifelessness of

their unblinking eyes.

Kron pulled his legs beneath his body and forced himself to stand. It was all he could do not to scream. After tears of anguish cleared from his eyes, he could tell in the moonlight that his ribs were not his only injuries. Cuts and bruises covered his body and a long gash ran the length of his right leg.

He could barely walk. It hurt to move. He was barely even dressed, most of his guard's garb having been torn away by the swirling river.

There was only one person who might be willing to help him, but it could cost him some coin. And any wealth he had was at his room in the Rusty Scabbard.

Kron did not think he should try to make it to his room at the tavern. Belgad or Gris could have guards stationed in the inn. They probably believed him dead, but Belgad was smart enough not to make many mistakes. If Belgad had survived in the Asylum's basement, right now he would be finding out as much as he could about Lucius Tallerus.

No, Kron could not risk the Rusty Scabbard. There would have to be someplace else. He needed to make his way to the Frog's Bottom brothel, but he did not know how he would manage it. First, he would have to find something to hide his features and obvious wounds. A cloak would do. Covered with a cloak he was not likely to draw attention.

Having a plan of action, Kron took his first step toward the Swamps and away from the North River. Pain shot through his body, but pain he could cope with for some while. A second step followed, then a third and a fourth. Within a minute he was walking as fast as his injured, limping body could carry him. As he trudged through the mud that spread bugs and brambles between his toes, he was glad the river had gone down. At least he did not have to swim to The Frog's Bottom.

Chapter Twenty Four

After the incident at the Asylum, a long day had just begun for Sergeant Gris. First there were the survivors to see to and to make sure they received proper care, which was helped by several healers and local clergy making an appearance once word spread. Then Gris had to interview survivors to find out what had happened, his conclusion from talks with Lord Belgad and Maslin Markwood being that Trelvigor the wizard had spotted an Asylum guard he thought responsible for burning his home, a man Belgad believed to be the mysterious Kron Darkbow. Then Trelvigor had cast a spell causing the eruption of water that had decimated parts of the Asylum and played a part in killing an unknown number of guards and inmates. The few survivors could not offer any evidence that differed from that of Belgad and Markwood.

Throughout all the questionings, Gris had one person on his mind. He had searched throughout the Asylum and its grounds for Lucius, but there was no sign of the man. Gris feared finding his friend alive almost as much as he feared finding him dead. The sergeant had had his own suspicions about Kron Darkbow, but he had never acted upon them other than questioning Lucius the one time, and the man had denied knowing anything about the mysterious figure in black. Gris corrected himself. Thinking back on their conversation, he realized Lucius had never denied being Darkbow, but he had not owned up to it either. It was all a moot point, because Lucius's body had not been found at the Asylum. Gris ordered a search near the river, but put it off until morning because his men were exhausted by late afternoon. Besides, it was not likely they would find anyone alive.

The final surprise of the day was near dark when one of Belgad's men, a small fellow Gris knew as Spider, approached the sergeant of the guard and invited him to dinner with Lord Belgad. Standing in the mud with thinning rain still falling around him, Gris had been taken back by the offer. He was tired, mentally and physically, and he yearned to rush to Lucius's quarters at the Rusty Scabbard. Now that would have to wait. When Belgad called, one went. Gris could guess Belgad wanted to question him about Kron Darkbow, but the sergeant had no answers. If Lucius had been Darkbow, it was a secret he had taken to the grave.

Soon after the sun went down Gris found himself trudging through the muddy streets of the Swamps on his way to Belgad's mansion. The rains had nearly let up, but Gris had another guard return his horse to the barracks. The poor animal had been in the heavy rains most of the day and needed a good warming.

The horse had been the furthest thing from Gris's mind while he had questioned Spider about Belgad's invitation, but the graying little man in dark clothes had no answers.

Approaching the wall surrounding Belgad's property, the sergeant briefly took in the spacious grounds through the iron entrance gate. There were four guards on the other side of the gate, and Gris could make out half a dozen more near the main building. There was no telling how many protectors were hidden among shrubbery or on the roof. The place reminded the sergeant of the Asylum, and he wondered if it was sometimes a prison for its master.

As Gris neared, two guards pulled back the locking bar and pushed the gate open. They said nothing, obviously expecting him so Gris said nothing in return. He walked up the gravel path leading to the main house as if he had done so a thousand times.

At the house the door opened for him as he reached the top step. Lalo the Finder motioned for Gris to enter and the sergeant spared little time making his way inside.

"Why does your master need to see me?" Gris asked as Lalo took his soaked cloak and hung it on a wall peg.

The Finder offered a friendly smile but his eyes told a different tale. "You will have to ask Lord

Belgad, sergeant.”

“I’d wager you know more about your master’s business than he does.”

Lalo’s smile grew wider. “Please follow me.” Then he was off, up a winding staircase.

Gris huffed but followed. Exhaustion was beginning to set in his limbs. Wearing a chain shirt all day in the pouring rain wore on one’s shoulders. He hoped Belgad would be brief, but he doubted it. The underworld boss had invited him for dinner, which meant there was likely to be a lengthy discussion.

Minutes later Lalo opened a door to the personal library and allowed the sergeant to enter. Gris found the lord of the house seated by his desk while chewing what looked to be a strip of jerked beef.

Belgad swallowed and dropped the stick of meat onto his desk, waving Gris to a chair. “Please come in and seat yourself, sergeant.”

Lalo the Finder entered behind Gris and closed the door, taking his usual position standing just inside the door.

Gris sat where Belgad had pointed, noting a large block of white cheese and several buttered rolls placed alongside strips of dried meat on a small slab of marble in the center of the desk. Beside the piece of marble was a bronze ewer full of red wine. An empty wooden mug sat in front of Gris while its twin was full and next to Belgad’s right hand.

“Please forgive my simple fare.” Belgad retrieved a cloth napkin from his lap and wiped his lips.

Gris wondered what else the Dartague had hidden beneath his desk. Perhaps a weapon?

“It’s a habit from my brigandeeing days,” Belgad said, waving a hand over the food. “Please, by all means, help yourself.”

Gris eyed the food with hesitation. He was hungry, having not eaten since late morning, but he did not trust Belgad. He could think of no reason why the man would wish him harm, but Gris knew the Dartague was up to something. As Gris reached for a slice of the cheese, he was glad he still wore his sword.

“It’s Jorsican.” Belgad watched Gris bite into the cheese. “I have it shipped around the coast. The wine, unfortunately, is only Ursian. My little party last week has depleted my supplies. The bread is also Ursian, but that can’t be helped if one wants it fresh.”

Gris chewed the cheese and nodded as if food were the most important thing they would speak of that night. He did have to admit the fare was excellent, stiff and sharp.

Belgad planted his elbows on his desk and formed his hands into a triangle beneath his chin. “I suppose you are wondering why I’ve asked you here,.”

Despite the formalities of the simple meal, Gris knew the man before him was not one to meander around a conversation. The sergeant nodded, keeping his right hand across his waist and near the pommel of his sword while his left hand reached for a strip of meat.

Belgad’s gaze was flat. “It is, as you can likely guess, concerning today’s incident at the Asylum.”

The large northerner waited for a response, but none came. Gris was smart enough to keep his mouth shut until he knew what the other man wanted.

Belgad eased back in his cushioned chair, dropping the pretense of eating. “You have interviewed myself and others this day, so you know the basic story, that Trelvigor pointed out Kron Darkbow, and then the poor, mad wizard lost the last of his sanity, literally bringing the roof down with his magic.”

Gris swallowed his food. “That is what I was told, but there was no proof the guard was Kron Darkbow. For that matter, there also is no evidence Darkbow started the fire at Trelvigor’s home.”

The Dartague appeared unconvinced. “Are you suggesting the burning of Trelvigor’s home and the timely appearance of Darkbow are coincidence?”

Gris knew he was treading on dangerous ground. One did not tell one of the most powerful men

in the city that he was wrong.

"I am not saying Darkbow was not responsible for the fire," Gris said, weighing each word carefully, "but there is no clear evidence I can use in an official capacity."

Belgad's white eyebrows furrowed above his steel gaze. "It was my understanding you personally knew the Asylum guard in question."

The sergeant's eyes locked onto those of Belgad. The Dartague knew much. After a brief hesitation, Gris decided it was not in his best interest to lie. Lucius was dead. There was no need to hide what little he knew.

He gave a short nod. "I knew the man."

Belgad traded a glance with Lalo that told Gris much. Whatever Belgad knew, or thought he knew, had been proven by Gris's admission.

The big man looked back to the sergeant. "How did you know him?"

"We were border wardens in the Prisonlands," Gris explained. "I hadn't seen Lucius in several years, since I left the service. He appeared in town about a month ago. He asked me to help him find work, so I put in a word at the Asylum."

"What do you know about him?"

Gris thought back on his days in the Lands. He was nearly a decade older than Lucius, and the younger man had been little more than a boy most of the days they had spent together. Still, Gris supposed he knew quite a lot about Lucius Tallerus.

"He hailed from here in Bond originally, but was raised by his uncle near the Lands. He was practically raised to be a border warden, and he was one of the best."

Lalo stepped around to face the sergeant. "In what manner?"

Gris did not turn his head to speak directly to the Finder, but kept his gaze on Belgad. "He was one of the most talented wardens. He spent most of his days studying with whomever would give him their time. The wardens hail from all nations, because that was part of the original treaty. Lucius picked up skills from all lands, all peoples. He could climb, track, fight. He even studied different languages and picked up some alchemical and healing skills."

Belgad leaned forward once more. "You said he was raised by his uncle. Why not his parents?"

"They died when he was young."

"That's all you know of them?"

"I don't know the circumstances of their deaths, if that's what you mean. I just know Lucius's father was brother to the uncle who raised him."

Lalo moved around beside his employer so both faced the sergeant. "Was the uncle's name Kuthius?"

Gris's face grew pale. He nodded in the affirmative.

Belgad planted his elbows again and leaned his chin onto his fistful hands. "Was this Asylum guard's full name Lucius Tallerus?"

"Yes."

Belgad's gaze narrowed. "Do you know where he was residing before this morning?"

"He had a room at the Rusty Scabbard."

The Dartague looked up at Lalo and snapped a finger. The Finder strode past the seated sergeant. Gris could hear the door squeak open behind him and the patter of Lalo exiting.

The tension in the room was building, and Gris needed to calm that feeling, to assuage his own fears. "If you don't mind my asking, sir, what is the meaning of these questions? Usually I'm the one doing the interrogating."

Belgad's eyes fell upon the guard sergeant and they did not look pleased. "Whatever you might believe about your friend, I strongly suspect he was Kron Darkbow. It's time for you to tell me more."

The sergeant gulped, feeling a need for air. "I'm not sure I know any more, sir."

"I'm sure you can come up with something."

Finding a cloak was a simpler matter than Kron would have thought. Not far from the North River he found a pair of bodies, one a guard from the Asylum and the other one of Belgad's men. The Asylum guard must have been preparing to leave for home when the basement had flooded because a dark green cloak was still clasped around his neck.

Kron gave the bodies a nod, all he could spare for last rites, then slung the soggy cloak over his shoulders and pulled the hood up to cover his face.

Winding his way around the Asylum, Kron noted he was not far from Belgad's mansion. He grinned at the thought of the northerner lounging on a couch with his head on silk pillows, believing Kron Darkbow was dead.

Kron eased between an empty storage building and a closed bakery while working his way into the depths of the Swamps. He knew he was lucky the flooding had not been worse or he would be swimming instead of walking right now.

Soon he found himself in another alley next to an apothecary shop. Kron worked his way to the end of the alley and glanced up and down the street in front of him. The weather was working to his advantage. There was no one on the street and the torches were dark from the wet.

Across from the alley was the three-story house with a hanging sign out front proclaiming it The Frog's Bottom.

Kron knelt, grimacing at the pain the movement caused his ribs, and waited. He couldn't risk going inside the brothel in case he was recognized, so he would have to be patient.

Soon the front door of the Bottom opened to reveal dim light from inside. Kron could see a man and woman silhouetted in the open doorway, the man leaning toward the woman for a kiss before tromping out into the wet road. The woman stood in the doorway watching the man wander down the street.

Kron saw a chance and jumped to his feet, again wincing. He hobbled across the road as fast as his tired, bruised legs would carry him, all the while keeping the hood of his cloak close to his face. His natural impatience had gotten the best of him, and he did not think he was well enough to wait all night for the boy.

The woman in the doorway turned as if to go back inside.

"M'lady!" Kron blurted, still limping toward her.

Beneath the street lamps, Kron could not make out her face, but he could tell she paused and turned in his direction.

She did not sound happy. "You look like a drowned rat."

Kron stopped near the bottom of wooden stairs leading up to the woman. "I apologize for my attire, but the rains have drenched me."

"Why don't you come inside, then?" Happy or not, she was a working girl. "I'll find you a room with a nice, warm fire."

"My apologies, good lady, but I have no coin available for your services tonight."

The woman grunted and Kron could imagine the look of disgust on her face.

"Be off with you, then." She turned back to the door.

"I'm looking for the boy Wyck."

The woman hesitated, watching him over her shoulder. "He don't do those kind of services, you filth. Now get out of here before I call the guard on you."

"I'm his uncle." Kron hoped he sounded reassuring. "And yes, I'm down on my luck. I was hoping the boy might be able to help me."

The woman chuckled. "Didn't know the runt had family."

"If you would be so kind to tell him his uncle Lucius is waiting for him," Kron said, holding his

sore side.

The woman snickered again. "I'll tell him, but good luck getting any coin out of him. He's a tight-fisted one, that boy."

With that the woman was gone, the closed door announcing her departure.

Kron stood in the rain as the pains of his body nearly overcame him. He would have to sit soon, probably lie down, but first he needed a safe place to do so.

As silent, wet seconds swept passed, Kron wondered if he had convinced the woman to find Wyck. He guessed the boy would be at The Frog's Bottom this late at night, especially with the streets full of mud and the rain still coming down.

He was positive the woman did not know him, though he supposed Wyck might have mentioned him by name to some of the Bottom's whores. If so, Kron only hoped none of them linked his name to what had happened that day at the Asylum. Word spread fast in the Swamps, and Kron was sure news of what had transpired would have already reached the Bottom and Wyck.

The front door swung open again. A short, thin figure in rags was revealed by the weak light from inside.

"Wyck?"

The boy came running down the stairs, stopping in front of Kron as the rain mixed with tears on his cheeks. Wyck looked up, beneath the hood of Kron's cloak, and smiled.

"It is you."

Kron nodded.

The boy sprang forward and hugged the man around the waist. "Ashal, I thought you were dead."

"I nearly am," Kron said, drawing back in pain but wrapping one arm around the boy. "I need a place to stay."

"Follow me." Wyck stepped into the street.

Kron waved for the boy to go on.

Wyck ran away from The Frog's Bottom down the muddy street.

Kron sighed. He would not be able to keep up with the lad and hoped Wyck would not lose him in the dark, wet night.

Belgad raised a mug of wine to his lips and sipped, all the while his eyes locked on those of Sergeant Gris.

The sergeant did not care for that stare, but there was little he could do about it. "I don't know what more I could tell you, my lord."

"Can we agree magic was involved at the Asylum today?"

"Yes, sir." Gris was nervous about the continuing questions, especially since Lalo had left the room. The sergeant did not like being alone with Belgad, and Gris was not a man who was easily worried or frightened.

"Good. Then we can also surmise there must have been a wizard present."

Gris did not know where the man was going. "Of course, sir. Trelvigor was there."

A sharp smile grew across Belgad's lips. "But there was another wizard."

Gris was stunned for a moment. Who could Belgad have meant? Markwood was known to be a powerful wizard, one of twelve who had fought against the East years ago in the last war, but plenty of witnesses had stated the professor had shown at the Asylum only after the water geyser had exploded.

"The healer, Randall Tendbones," Belgad finally said to end the sergeant's questioning look.

"Randall? I know the young man only by reputation, and I know Fortisquo suggested him as a possible candidate for Kron Darkbow, but I find it unlikely he is powerful enough to cause what

happened today. He's a healer. My understanding is they do not perform destructive magics."

"I told you a while back that Randall was Kobalan, but what you do not know is that the man has access to a ring bearing the official seal of the Kobalan royal family."

Gris's eyes grew wide.

"I'm not saying he is a royal," Belgad went on, "but somehow he has acquired this ring. A ring like that, especially one belonging to Lord Verkain, would have much power. Used by a mage, the ring could have the power to cause the destruction at the Asylum."

Gris did not know what to say. A member of a royal family from another nation hiding in Bond would create a diplomatic situation beyond the bounds of the sergeant's authority and experience. Like Belgad, he could not know for sure if Randall was royalty, but otherwise the healer must have acquired the ring in a dubious manner. Either way, Lord Verkain of Kobalos would presumably like to know about the ring. Gris did not know what to do. He did not know Randall Tendbones, but had heard good things about him and did not want to cause the young man any grief. On the other hand, Gris did not know what Randall was doing in Bond, other than fulfilling the role of a healer. The sergeant would have to talk to Markwood, the healer's friend. First he would have to discover what Belgad wanted from all of this, as the Dartague showed no signs of letting the matter drop.

Belgad lifted his goblet. "I still don't believe the healer is Kron Darkbow, but that's in large part due to the discovery of Lucius Tallerus. Still, the ring could have been responsible for the Asylum mishap."

Gris so no reason not to be direct. "What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing." Belgad took a sip of wine. "That's not why you are here."

"Then why?"

"To answer questions about Kron Darkbow."

"I've done that. Am I free to go, sir?"

Belgad's slammed his wine cup onto the table. "No, you may not leave. I have further questions."

"Then ask them." The sergeant feared Belgad, but he was growing weary of their conversation. He had other things to do, including writing a final report for the day's events and checking Lucius's room at the Rusty Scabbard. Perhaps, by some miracle, his friend had survived the Asylum; Belgad had lived through the waters, after all.

The northerner composed himself, sliding his drink out of the way and leaning forward to hover over his desk. "I noticed at the Asylum there were a good number of dead who would not have been affected by the water geyser."

Gris said nothing, not knowing where the man was going.

"There were some guards and a good number of inmates on higher levels of the building who would not have been drowned and who were relatively safe from the geyser. This strikes of low magic, the most powerful of low magics."

Gris blinked. "I'm not familiar with the intricacies of magedom."

"I am no practitioner, myself, but I have picked up some rudimentary knowledge. There are basically two types of magic, low and high. High magic is the most common, practiced by nearly every mage; high magics utilize the power of the caster's own soul. Low magic uses the souls of others. Low magic is extremely rare, outlawed even in lands where magic is legal, such as our West Ursia."

Gris frowned. "None of this means anything to me."

"Low magic was used today at the Asylum, and while that ring of Randall's might use low magic, I still find it curious Kron Darkbow had such a Kobalan ... flair ... about him."

"Lucius was no mage."

"Possibly true, but it still doesn't explain why he used a northern name and why he dressed in black."

"Lucius was an expert at stealth," Gris explained to a man he was quickly growing to hate. "It

was simple necessity that would have made him dress in black. If memory serves, Kron Darkbow only struck at night.”

“That is true, but what about the name? Kron Darkbow. That definitely has a northern ring to it, but too dark for Jorsica or possibly even my homeland. It stinks of Kobalos.”

Gris did not like where this was going. “We used code names as wardens in the Lands. The practice was adopted after ... after your release, sir, to be direct. It was to protect our families and ourselves when we should retire. Darkbow was Lucius’s code name, adopted from his mother’s family. Where the name Kron came from, I do not know. Perhaps Lucius simply liked it, or thought it fit well with the last name.”

“Now we are getting nearer my point.”

“Which is?”

“That you know quite a bit about Lucius Tallerus and Kron Darkbow. As soon as you heard the name Darkbow, you must have known it was your friend from the Prisonlands.”

Gris gulped again. “I had my suspicions.”

“Yet you did nothing about them.”

Gris hesitated. The conversation had turned dark for him. He still did not know where it was going, but he didn’t like it.

Belgad leaned forward further, seeming to loom across his desk and over the sergeant. “You did nothing, didn’t you?”

“I confronted Lucius about this Darkbow business. He did not admit to being your enemy, and I could find no evidence against him.”

“Or perhaps you wanted your friend to run wild against me, or worse, perhaps you were working with him. Maybe you and your precious Lucius and Randall were working together against me, Kobalan agents out to destroy me.”

As Kron squatted on the cold floor of the mausoleum, he had to admit Wyck knew how to choose a good hiding spot. He leaned back against a stone sarcophagus as moonlight beamed through the bars of a window in the large building’s single door, revealing half a dozen more sarcophagi. It was not likely anyone would think to look for him among the dead, and he had a place to stay, at least for a night or two. Now he needed food, warmth and healing.

“Can you build a fire?”

Wyck thought in silence for a moment before he shrugged. “I don’t have a flint or tinder, but I can get some. Maybe some twigs or paper, too.”

“Good lad, but I’ll need some other things, also. Some food would be a good start. And a healer.”

“That’ll cost money, and I don’t have enough.”

Kron closed his eyes as he leaned his head back against the stone and listened to the patter of the rain slapping on the stone roof. “Healers are free.”

“Not outside of the towers, especially if there are circumstances.”

Kron grinned. “I suppose this would qualify.”

“Yeah, it would. Even at the towers, they ask for donations.”

Kron’s grin faded. The boy could likely find fire-building material, but Wyck was right that coin would be needed for food and to fetch a healer during a rainy night. Especially with the Swamps soggy and flooded, food and a healer would be hard to find and costly. Kron had some coin at his apartment in the Rusty Scabbard, but he didn’t dare send the boy there. Or did he? Wyck had already dared much and proven himself resourceful.

Kron opened his eyes to stare at the lad. “There’s some coin in my room at the Scabbard.”

"I'll get it," the boy said, turning to leave.

"Not so fast."

Wyck turned back to the man.

Kron held up a hand as if there were something missing from it. "I have lost the key to my room."

A smile grew on Wyck's face. "I can get around that."

Kron would have smiled too if a sudden pain hadn't shot through his ribs. He grimaced before being able to speak again. "Can you do it without getting caught?"

"Who's going to catch me?"

"The city guard, or maybe Belgad. They might have some men watching my room. Or maybe they will be going through my belongings."

"It's true, then? All the stuff I heard today about the Asylum? You're Kron Darkbow?"

Kron nodded. He need not say more. The less Wyck knew, the safer he would be.

"Damn." The boy grinned. "Did you have me fooled?"

"No cursing."

The lad smirked. "You've got to be kidding, especially after the stunts you've pulled since coming to town. But you being Darkbow explains why you let me into Belgad's the night of the party."

"I apologize for using you. I needed a distraction."

"You've paid me good coin and treated me well, so I have no complaints. But how would you have gotten into Belgad's if I hadn't come along?"

"I would have found some other way into the party. There were plenty of distractions that night with the crowd."

"Well, I've no reason to distrust you, but I think you're crazy for taking on Belgad."

"I have my reasons for my hatred, but you are right. I might be insane." Kron's grin returned. "Why do you think I worked at the Asylum?"

"Yeah, that would prove you're crazy," Wyck said, himself smiling and happy to see a sign of cheer on his friend's face. "But, what do I call you? Are you Lucius or Kron?"

"Kron." The man's smile slid away. "Lucius Tallerus is dead. I am Kron Darkbow. There is no need for deception. Belgad knows who I am, if he can guess I'm alive."

Wyck nodded. "He's smart, so I'll have to be extra careful breaking into your room."

"I've a sack of silvers and coppers stuffed into my pillow, and beneath my bed is another purse with a couple of gold. There's also a bundle I want you to bring. It's under the bed as well, and wrapped in a black cloak, but be careful with it. My sword and other weapons are under the bed, but leave them. They will be too much for you to carry."

"What's in the bundle?" Wyck's natural curiosity was getting the best of him.

"Items difficult to replace."

"Like what? If I'm going fetch the stuff, I want to know what it is."

Kron did not look happy to answer, but realized he needed to instill in the lad a respect for what he would be carrying. "Grenados, for one."

Wyck's mouth puckered. "Where in the world did you get those?"

"I made them from powders I purchased when I came to town."

"How did you learn to make grenados?" Wyck's eyes were large. "I thought they were illegal."

"You ask too many questions."

The boy smirked. "Considering who you've turned out to be, I think I would have plenty of questions."

"I learned it from an old man I knew near the Prisonlands," Kron explained. "Anything else you want to know?"

"What else is in the bundle?"

"Some minor weapons that would be difficult to replace, and a few clothes. I'm going to need

something to wear.”

“You’re not going to have enough coin for food *and* a healer.”

“It will be a start.”

“What about that silver mug you bought from me?” Wyck smiled. “Do you still have it?”

“It’s in the bundle. I didn’t think it prudent to leave it sitting out in my room.”

“I’ll get the mug, too. You might be able to sell it, but I don’t know who would buy it in town.”

“I’ll find someone. And Wyck?”

“Yes, oh mighty Kron Darkbow?” the boy said with a huge grin.

Kron frowned. He did not care for the honorifics, as fanciful as they may be. It made him sound like some hero, or perhaps a monster.

“I want you to be careful,” the man said with a stern gaze. “And I mean that, Wyck. If there is someone in the room, I want you to leave. If you feel you are being watched, get out of there, even if it means you have to leave my belongings behind. You getting caught does no one any good.”

Wyck’s grin would not go away. “Don’t worry about me, Kron Darkbow. You’re the one who looks like he’s been beat up and dumped in a well. I can take care of myself. That’s why you love me, isn’t it?”

Kron wanted to smile again, but knew it would hurt.

“Yes, that’s why I love you, Wyck.”

Chapter Twenty Five

Adara Corvus did not enjoy being in the employ of Belgad the Liar. To be honest with herself, she did not enjoy working for anyone, but especially Belgad. The man was a tyrant, though he had good business sense. She recognized him as a man used to delivering orders and having them obeyed. Adara had two problems with Belgad. First, he was a man, and Adara did not have any great love for men despite her use of them to further her own ends. Second, Adara was not familiar with following orders; she was used to giving them. She had been born to nobility in East Ursia and despite her five years living in the West, she had never grown accustomed to not being the one giving orders.

It did not improve her mood that tonight she was stuck eating dinner in the main dining room of the Rusty Scabbard with Spider, a mousy little man in dark and tattered leathers with a small sword at his side. The man was not a rapirist, a true fencer, so Adara had no respect and no use for him.

The only reasons she continued to work for Belgad were because she felt obligated after Fortisquo had agreed to terms with the hulking northerner and because Fortisquo was still disabled in one of the healing towers. The healer Tendbones had been unable to personally tend to Fortisquo because he had had to use his magical skills for survivors of the Asylum and the floods. Adara understood this, but she was not happy about it. Other healers within the tower had done their best, but Adara recognized none of them were as good as Randall; from what Adara had witnessed, Randall was a more powerful healer than even those employed in the childhood manor run by her mother and father.

Fortunately for Adara, Fortisquo was expected to wake in another day and would be healed other than the lost eye he had not wanted replaced. She still could not explain to herself why she had blocked the assassin from finishing off Kron Darkbow, so she had no hope of explaining it properly to Fortisquo himself. She only hoped the dueling master would not try to kill her. Adara had no fear of Fortisquo, as she had no fear of any living man, but she was not sure she had learned all from him she wanted. Once Fortisquo had no more fencing knowledge to pass on, she would leave him.

Watching Spider spoon gray slop into his mouth pulled Adara out of her thoughts.

The woman dropped her own wooden spoon into the bowl in front of her.

“What?” Spider said with a spoon of gruel halfway to his mouth.

Adara ignored the man and glanced around the room, noting there were few others in the tavern area of the inn tonight. That was to be expected with the flood gates to the Swamps still closed. Adara and Spider had been forced to take a rowboat across the river to reach Southtown and the Rusty Scabbard. She nearly had hoped her companion would have fallen into the rushing waters during the crossing.

“I’m sorry if I’ve offended.” Spider wiped his lips with the sleeve of his dark leather jerkin.

Adara continued to ignore him.

“It’s not like I asked to be with you either.”

The woman’s cold eyes shifted to the little man. “What does that mean?”

Spider looked glum, but returned to silence

“Do you have something to say to me?” Adara’s voice pitched higher.

Spider gulped. “It’s bad weather and we are stuck together. Even if Darkbow was Tallerus, the inn keeper won’t tell us which room. Says he doesn’t want to get involved. And besides, I guess you’re still worried about Fortisquo.”

Adara’s right hand snapped across her waist to grip the handle of her rapier.

Spider scooted away from the table as if ready to flee. “No offense. I was just saying it’s a miserable night for both of us.”

“Look for your miserable night with the barkeep,” the woman said, pointing at the long wooden

counter to one side of the room.

Spider stood, his hands out before him, and backed toward the bar.

Neither of them noticed the small boy who slid through the Scabbard's front door and slunk upstairs.

Using the tools he always kept hidden on himself, Wyck was quickly able to pick the lock on the door. Once inside he was glad to find Lucius's room as he remembered it. The bed was shoved in the corner to the left directly across from the entrance. A shuttered window was to the right of the bed with a small table beneath it.

He scurried across the room and yanked the pillow off the bed, diving a fist inside. After a few seconds of rummaging he withdrew a small leather sack that clinked in his hands. Wyck grinned and stuffed the sack inside his shirt.

The boy then dropped to his knees and looked beneath the bed. He found another small sack, again clinking in his hands, and pocketed the bag that belonged to the man he still thought of as Lucius.

Wyck's fingers grazed the large sword and bow, but he left them where they were as he had been told. It was too bad. A big sword like that could bring a good amount of coin. Maybe he would come back for it later.

The boy's eyes fell on the black cloak tied into a bundle. This was the main item Lucius wanted. Wyck grabbed the package and pulled it to himself. He was curious to see the grenades and any other weapons Lucius might not have mentioned, but he was smart enough to know he was not in a safe place to let his curiosity get the best of him. Still, he wasn't sure he would find out more once he got the package back to Lucius. The man held onto his secrets.

After a few seconds of consideration, Wyck decided to open the black package. After all, he had to make sure the silver mug was still inside.

Quick fingers pried apart the tight knot holding the parcel together. The bundle unfolded revealing a black shirt, black pants, a small leather sack Wyck figured held the grenades, several small throwing darts, Belgad's silver mug, a miniature grappling hook with silk cord attached to it and a small, square leather package tied at both ends. Wyck's curiosity still had the best of him as he pried open the leather package. Inside were multiple tiny tools similar to the ones he had used twice now to unlock the door to Lucius's room. Wyck could tell right away these tools were of a craftsmanship beyond his experience. Lucius Tallerus was definitely turning out to be a man with secrets.

Remembering he needed to hurry, Wyck made sure all the items were still wrapped in the cloak as he held its ends together and tied them into another knot. The knot wasn't quite as good as the one Lucius had tied, but Wyck thought it would do.

The youngster slung the bundle over his shoulder like a backpack, got to his feet and glanced around the room. There was nothing else he could see that might be needed. He would get out of the building, take his load to Lucius, then try to find oil for a fire and some food. If it had been day, oil would have been easy to purchase, but the night limited Wyck's options. The boy mused that food would be easy enough to buy as there were a dozen or so places throughout the city that stayed open all night and served foodstuff. Wyck just hoped the small skiff he had used to cross the swollen river would still be tied to a pier where he had left it in the east side of Southtown.

As much as Adara generally despised men, and as unhappy as she thought Fortisquo would be with her once he came out of his healer-induced sleep, she was wishing he were sitting and drinking with her in the tavern room of The Rusty Scabbard inn. Spider was a bore. He wasn't crude or filthy, as

the lower classes tended to be, but he had no spark of playfulness about him that could keep Adara entertained during their monotonous wait for nothing. Spider just sat at the bar and sipped a watered-down ale that didn't taste much better than the mud clogging the streets in the Swamps.

It wasn't that Adara had to be constantly entertained. She was just bored and frustrated. She had a feeling her acquaintance with Fortisquo was coming to an end, and despite her lessening need for the sword master, she still enjoyed his company. She was not in love with the man. She had never loved a man other than her father, but Fortisquo was fun. The swordsman always drew a crowd in any tavern and he always had fantastic stories to tell, songs to sing or antics to perform. Adara had not cared to learn the man had been the leader of Bond's assassins' guild, but this business with Belgad and Kron Darkbow had kept her distracted from exploring her real feelings. She didn't need Fortisquo or even want him, but at least he would have been entertainment for the night.

A heavy clunking sound near the stairs to the apartments above drew her attention.

Adara's wine glass was almost to her lips as light from the room's hearth revealed a young boy with a dark package at his feet. The bundle had been ill tied and the boy was gathering various items that had scattered on the floor.

Adara sat not far from the boy, and to ease her boredom she rose from her seat and decided to help the lad. She placed her glass on a table and approached him.

Without looking up at the person casting the shadow over him, the youth continued to grab items from the floor. "Sorry, sir." He stuffed a small leather bag into the black bundle. "I'll have this cleaned up quick."

"I'm no sir," Adara said, her eyes noting other items that had spilled. She saw a black pair of gloves and a silver tankard.

She wondered what the boy was doing with all these items, and bent over to pick up the shiny mug.

"I'll get that!" A small hand darted for the mug.

Adara's hand fell on the silver vessel at the same moment as the boy's. Each tugged for a brief second, then Adara let him have it. As the boy stuffed the item into the bundle, the firelight revealed the word "Belgad" engraved into its side.

Adara's eyes glanced to the bundle again. It was black. The fallen gloves had been black. Everything that had fallen from the bundle other than the tankard had been black.

She straightened as the boy hurriedly tied the bundle again. "Where did you acquire that mug?"

Wyck had tried not to look the woman in the face because he was sure she would note guilt in his eyes, but he had seen enough to know she had a rapier slung from her hip. She wasn't wearing orange, so she wasn't a city guard. That left one likely option. Belgad. She worked for Belgad.

Wyck knew words would be a waste of time, so he did the only thing he could think to do. He dove forward, straight between the woman's legs, dragging along Lucius's bundle.

The woman was surprised by the move. A mixture of a noble's arrogance and her love for children had momentarily blinded her, causing her slow reaction.

Wyck slipped between her legs and was halfway to the door before Adara yelled, "Spider!"

The little man dropped his grog and nearly fell from his stool at the blaring of Adara's voice. He quickly got his footing and spun to see a boy with a pack over his back running away from the woman.

"Oh hell." Then Spider lunged forward, dancing around tables and chairs.

The boy charged out the door just as Spider reached it. Spider slowed long enough to see Adara was moving in his direction. After that, he was out the door and after the boy now running down the middle of the street as fast as his legs would carry him.

“Get him!” Adara yelled from behind.

Spider wasted no time in putting his leather soles to the cobbled streets. He didn’t know why he was after this boy, but something had tipped Adara that the lad was linked to Kron Darkbow. If that were true, Spider couldn’t afford to let the lad get away. Belgad would have Spider’s balls in a cup by morning if their only clue escaped.

After roughly fifty yards, the boy turned on his heels and shot down an alley.

Spider followed. Rushing footsteps to his rear told him Adara was not far away.

The small man suddenly became winded, but he had known the streets of Bond since he was a boy himself. The boy he was chasing might be younger, but he didn’t have Spider’s experience. Spider knew he would catch the youth.

At the end of the alley, Spider was proven wrong. He catapulted out of the alley and his heels skidded to a stop. Adara halted just short of running into him and they both scrutinized the street they were on. There was no alley or street across from them, so the boy would have had to have gone left or right down the middle of an open street between lines of two-story buildings, mostly businesses shuttered for the night. Rows of gas lamps illuminated the scene, but showed no signs of the boy. Adara and Spider also strained their hearing, but neither could pick up sounds of the boy running.

“Damn,” Spider said, still watching the street. “Belgad is going to flog us.”

“You maybe.”

As they began the long walk to their boat to take them back to the Swamps, the rains finally ended. Spider glanced up at the few stars that were making their first appearance of the night between gray clouds, and thought that the boy’s escape had not been a total loss. At least now they had evidence Darkbow might be alive. Spider only hoped that was enough to save him from a beating.

By the time Wyck rowed himself across the South River and was standing on the soggy shore of the Swamps, his breathing had slowed. Running through the back alleys of Southtown, especially with a pack on his back and two people carrying swords chasing him, had kept his heart thumping for a good long while. After he jumped out of the rickety rowboat, he felt like dropping on his knees to kiss the ground; only the wormy mud and the knowledge Lucius needed him kept him from doing so.

Fearing to be on the streets with the pack of Kron Darkbow on his back, Wyck decided not to make a straight line for the graveyard. The boy had escaped the man and woman from the Rusty Scabbard by using low rooftops and he did so again in the Swamps, which made him all the more joyful because he could avoid most of the mud.

Near Beggars Row he spotted a bakery open early for business. Wyck had not expected to be able to buy bread after all the rain of the day, but the waters had ceased falling and apparently the baker was a shrewd vendor who wanted to earn every copper piece he could. Wyck briefly stashed Lucius’s bundle on a roof and climbed down to purchase several loaves of bread and a small blackberry tart for himself. After stuffing down his treat he retrieved the package and added the bread to it. Continuing on his way, he stopped only once more to steal a lit torch hanging near the Stone Pony tavern.

When the lad entered the big mausoleum he found Kron where he had left him, sitting on the limestone floor and leaning back against a stone coffin. The man appeared asleep, his eyes closed and his breathing slow.

Wyck had been careful to make sure no one had been following him or his torch light since he

had entered the cemetery, but he felt more at ease inside the mausoleum and with Lucius again. The crypt had provided shelter many times in the past, giving Wyck a sense of protection about the place. And despite his injuries, Lucius was a capable man who had never shown Wyck a mean side. He felt as close to Lucius as he had anyone in a long time, and though he would never admit it, he admired the man as if he were an older brother returning from battle. Not just anyone could go toe-to-toe with Belgad the Liar and come out alive.

The boy placed the bundle on the ground next to Kron and glanced about the room for possible fuel for a fire. He found nothing useful, so he stored the torch in an iron scone on the back of the door. He turned to exit, thinking of searching outside for branches or dry grass to make a fire.

“Don’t waste your time.”

Wyck spun to look at the man who sat staring at him. A grin grew on the boy’s face. “I knew you weren’t really asleep.”

“Sure you did.” Kron pointed at the exit. “There’s no use looking for tinder outside. Everything will be wet. You might be able to pry open one of these coffins, though.”

Wyck’s smile dropped away and was replaced with a look of disgust. “Why would I open a coffin?”

“The clothes are old and dry. They’ll burn, as will the bones. Necessity has to overcome revulsion.”

“You say that knowing I’m the one who’ll have to overcome the revulsion.”

Kron grinned. “Right you are, but we need the fire. Get to it.”

Wyck looked disgusted again, but with hesitant steps he made his way to the nearest coffin. As small as he was, he had strength in his arms and had little trouble prying aside the stone lid. He jumped back as gray dust shot into the air from the opening, then put a hand over his nose and mouth as he leaned forward to stare inside at a dry skeleton covered by a musty, toga-like covering.

“I guess this will do,” Wyck said, reaching in with trembling fingers and snagging the cloth. As he tugged on it, the bones broke apart, most disintegrating into dust before his eyes.

“Tear it into shreds and make a pile. Then get some bones. Thick leg bones will burn best.”

Wyck wasn’t happy about it, but he did as he was told and soon there was a small fire burning in the center of the room.

The youth watched as Kron warmed his hands over the flames.

“There’s some bread in your bundle.” The boy pointed at the package next to Kron’s legs.

The former Asylun guard winced from the pain shooting through his body as he reached for the bundle and pulled it onto his lap. He had it open in seconds and his fingers plunged a loaf of rye into his mouth. He closed his eyes and chewed for several minutes, enjoying the flavor that was quickly knocking back the taste of the river still hanging in the back of his throat.

“I don’t suppose you brought anything to drink?” Kron asked after finishing the bread.

“I didn’t see a place open other than taverns, and I didn’t think you wanted that kind of drink. I could take Belgad’s mug outside and fill it with rain water.”

Kron waved the boy off. “No need just yet. I’m not dying of thirst, and I think I’ve had enough water for one day.

The man’s eyes went to the black bag on his legs. “You did well.”

“Nothing to it, but for a moment I thought I was going to be caught at the Scabbard.”

“Why?”

“I was so busy making your stupid fire I almost forgot to tell you. There was a man and woman at the Scabbard who chased after me.”

Kron’s eyes narrowed. “Describe them.”

Wyck did.

Kron nodded afterward. "The woman is Adara, but the man I do not know. He doesn't sound like her usual companion."

Wyck waved a hand at the black package. "I think I got everything you needed, but I'll have to get more coin before I can bring a healer, and they might not come in the middle of the night. I might not be able to get anyone until morning."

Kron slung one of the clinking bags to the boy, who caught it in the air. "That should be enough to interest them, but you might be right about the morning. I could use the sleep and I have some healing ointments here."

"Where?" Wyck looked at the open bag. "I searched the bundle and didn't see any herbs or powders."

Kron smiled again. He had expected the boy would be too curious not to pry into his bundle. "It's right in here," he said, pulling several small glass vials from inside a pocket of the cloak. He held the vials up so the boy could see them well in the firelight.

The youth frowned. "Didn't think to look for hidden pockets."

Kron's fingers pried a small cork stopper from the top of a vial. "That's why they're hidden." He sniffed at the small bottle's contents.

"What's in that one?" Wyck pointed at the vial Kron held to his nose.

"It's a narcotic. It will knock me out for several hours, allowing my body to heal. That's why I need you to stay here until the sun rises. Then you can wake me and retrieve a healer."

Wyck looked skeptical. "Are you sure you don't want me to try now?"

Kron shook his head. "We'll wait. Morning will be easier, and I need the sleep. I just wish I knew a good healer. I might have to send you to someone who can find a healer for us."

"Who?"

"Gris."

"You mean Sergeant Gris?" Wyck said the words as if he couldn't believe they had come from Lucius's mouth.

"The very man. He's an old friend, and he won't turn me over to Belgad."

"You hope," Wyck added.

Chapter Twenty Six

The morning was still some hours away when Sergeant Gris began to wonder if he would survive to see the sun again. His meeting with Belgad had turned dangerous quickly and had remained so. The man from Dartague had always seemed sanely stable to the sergeant, but he was angry about the Kron Darkbow affair and the day's events at the Asylum. The conversation had turned accusatory and paranoid with the sergeant facing the brunt of the northerner's anger.

Gris had never thought he would become an enemy of Belgad the Liar, but now he feared that was his future. Whatever had happened to Lucius Tallerus, the man had left behind a legacy as Kron Darkbow that was not to Gris's betterment. Belgad was nearing a breaking point, and Gris believed the larger man's physical wrath would fall upon him. At that point, weapons would be drawn and Gris would have no choice but to fight his way out of the mansion. He doubted he would survive, because Belgad himself was a formidable opponent and he had numerous guards, but there was still the future to think about. Gris would find no protection from city officials. Belgad's mighty hand reached too far. Gris would then know a life on the run, a life that would probably not be very long, especially since Belgad seemed to believe there was a link between the city guard sergeant and Kron Darkbow. None of the sergeant's answers to Belgad's questions had been suitable to the bald man. Belgad had gone on and on with more questions until the sergeant's tongue was dry and had to be wetted with wine.

For the moment, both men were silent. Belgad stewed with his own thoughts while Gris pondered his chances of survival and escape.

Adara Corvus intervened. One of the library's doors slammed open and the woman marched in with a nervous Spider and a stunned Lalo at her back.

The Finder was the most flustered of the lot. "Many pardons, my lord, but this woman would not listen to sense. She insists upon speaking with you immediately."

Belgad waved a hand for his servant to be quiet as Adara came to a stop in front of his desk.

She stared down at the seated Dartague. "Darkbow may be alive."

Wrinkles increased their depth on Belgad's forehead. "Go on."

"There was a boy at the Scabbard who had a black bag, possibly from one of the rooms. A silver tankard fell out, a silver tankard with your name on its side."

"The son of a bitch stole it from me. Where is this boy?"

"Vanished. We gave chase, but he evaded us." Adara sneered at the words, displeased at not only having to relay the message, but having been a part of the failure herself.

"So you've no idea where he went?"

"No," Adara and Spider said together.

Belgad smashed a fist onto the desk, sending sheets of parchment flying off the edge. Lalo moved forward quickly to return the papers to their proper place.

Belgad spun in his chair to face Gris. "You may leave, but by the ancients you had better have told me everything about your friend."

"Everything I know," Gris said, standing. "I'd thank you for your hospitality, but ..."

"Just leave." The Dartague growled.

The sergeant hurried out, straightening his orange tabard.

Adara nodded in the direction Gris had gone. "He might have been able to lead us to Darkbow."

Belgad shook his head. "I don't think so. I believe he told me all he knew. I pressured him, even making up some conspiracy nonsense to rattle him, but he didn't break. However he knew Tallerus, I don't believe he was aware the man was Kron Darkbow."

Adara neared a chair, as if ready to sit. "Where do we go from here?"

Belgad pointed a finger at Spider. "Have Lalo take you to Stilp, and I want the two of you to follow Sergeant Gris. He might be innocent in all of this, but Darkbow might try to contact him."

Spider bowed and exited the room behind the Finder.

Adara finally sat, tired from the night's excursion. "What about me?"

"You can go to the healing tower. Fortisquo will want to see your face when he wakes. If Darkbow is alive and we can discover what hole he has slunk into, then I want the two of you to dispatch him."

The morning sun was just spreading its fingertips across the rooftops of Bond as Sergeant Gris slogged his way down South Road in the direction of the city guards' main barracks. It had been a long night for him, one of several he had had of late. After dealing with Belgad and seeing to the reopening of several of the city's flood gates, the guard sergeant was too exhausted to travel to the Rusty Scabbard to look for Lucius. He needed rest, even if only a few hours, and then he would be on his friend's trail. Until he could get on the job himself, he planned to station several of his men at the Scabbard to keep an eye out for Lucius or anyone entering Lucius's room. Gris only hoped he would find his friend, if Lucius was alive, and would be able to help him before Belgad's goons found him.

The sergeant was walking up the steps leading to the entrance of the barracks when a waving arm caught the corner of his eye. Gris stopped to look in that direction.

A boy of little more than ten years stood behind a marble column to the side of the steps. He smiled and stopped flapping his arms once the sergeant's eyes fell on him.

It took a moment for Gris's tired mind to recognize the lad. He had seen him at Lucius's apartment the morning after Belgad's infamous party. Adara had said she and Spider had chased a young boy from the Scabbard the night before.

With hanging shoulders and bleary eyes, the sergeant tramped toward the boy. "What do you want?"

The youth glanced into the street to make sure no one else noticed him behind the pillar. "I've been sent to get your help."

"Lucius is alive." Gris closed his eyes in thanks to Ashal.

"He's breathing, but he's not in good shape. It looks like he's got some broken ribs, and there's a pretty nasty gash along one leg. Also, he calls himself Kron Darkbow now."

Gris opened his red eyes and rubbed them with the fingers of one hand. "It was you at the Scabbard last night, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, it was me." The youth grinned. "I bet they thought they had me for a minute there, but I gave them the slip. Learned it from the best there is himself."

"You mean Lucius?"

"Nothing like traveling by rooftop."

Gris swayed slightly on tired legs and put a hand against the marble pillar to hold himself up. Lucius, or Kron, must be in dire straits to risk sending the boy to him. How could Kron know Gris wouldn't arrest him on sight? "What does he want?"

"He needs a healer. Someone trustworthy but knows what they're doing."

Gris closed his eyes again to allow himself to clear his mind. There were a good number of healers in the city, several of whom Gris knew personally, but could he trust any of them? Healers were generally not men of means; they could be bought off by a gold or two.

A face popped into his mind and he opened his eyes. "Randall Tendbones."

"You mean Belgad's healer?" The boy wore disbelief on his face.

"He doesn't work for Belgad."

"I can't send him Tendbones. He'd never trust the man. He might even try to kill him for all I

know.”

Gris frowned. “It doesn’t sound like Lucius is in condition to harm anyone.”

“It’s Kron now,” the lad said as if he liked the sound of his friend’s new name.

“Whatever he’s calling himself, he needs healing, and Randall is said to be one of the best, and one of the most trustworthy. I don’t believe he would turn one of his patients over to Belgad. Besides, Randall has his own secrets.”

“Really?” The boy leaned forward in anticipation.

Gris waved the lad off. This was no time for spreading rumors. “Tell me where to meet you in three hours and I’ll be there with the healer. I’ll try Tendbones first, if he’s available. If not, I’ll bring the best I can.”

“The old graveyard in the Swamps.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Thanks.” The boy spied the street again. He saw only a few early pedestrians walking along the way, and none seemed to be paying attention to him and the sergeant.

The youth dashed down the steps and away from the barracks.

Gris leaned against the column for a moment to rest. “So much for sleep.”

Stilp swallowed the chunk of salted fish that was his breakfast and grimaced at its bitter taste as it slid down his throat. From the corner of the barracks building closest to South Road he had had a good view of Sergeant Gris talking with the boy. He had not been close enough to hear what was said, but he had seen enough to know something was in the works. The lad had acted too suspicious and had darted away too quickly to not be up to no good. The sergeant had merely appeared tired, but he also had appeared interested in whatever the boy had had to say.

“Keep on the sergeant,” Stilp said to Spider, also swallowing his breakfast of dry biscuit.

Spider grinned. “You think he knows something, don’t you?”

“I think there’s a good chance he can lead us to this Darkbow fellow, and that’s why I want you to stay on him.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going back to Lalo to let him know what we saw.” Stilp turned to leave. “Belgad might want us to make a move on the sergeant, but more than likely he’ll want us to watch the man and see if he leads us to Kron Darkbow.”

Chapter Twenty Seven

It was no easy task for Gris to talk Randall into going to the cemetery. The young healer was torn apart emotionally after what had happened at the Asylum the day before. Convincing Randall he was needed at the cemetery was difficult enough, but when he was told he would be administering to Kron Darkbow, the young man nearly lost his nerve. Randall still didn't know if Kron was an agent of Lord Verkain.

As quickly and softly as he could, the city sergeant assuaged some of Randall's fears by explaining what he knew Lucius Tallerus who was now called Kron Darkbow. Gris also explained the straits in which Kron had landed himself.

Randall didn't seem happy about the situation. "If Belgad finds out, this could get me killed."

Gris nodded agreement. "This could get us both killed."

"At least allow me to speak with Markwood, to let him know what is happening and where I'm going."

"Wouldn't it be the safer for him if he knew nothing, at least until it is finished?"

Randall had to agree. Once Darkbow was healed, Kron could be on his way with his war against Belgad. As a healer Randall was sworn to attend to the ill or wounded, but once he was finished with Darkbow there would no longer be a link between the two.

"I'll do it." The healer had finally agreed as he fingered the ring in the pocket of his robes. He had never trusted the ring, and most definitely did not trust it after its show of power at the Asylum, but he dare not leave it unprotected. He swore to himself he would never use the ring's power again, but he wanted it with him in case Kron did turn out to be Kobalan. Randall wasn't sure how he could use the ring to protect himself, but it was his best chance at escape.

He and Gris were soon on their way. The boy had not told Gris where exactly in the cemetery they would meet, but the sergeant figured the youth would find them.

Gris was proven correct.

"There you are." A young voice greeted the healer and the sergeant after they walked through an iron gate that opened onto a path of gravel leading into the large cemetery.

The boy appeared from behind a large gravestone.

Gris waved to him as they approached one another. "My apologies for being late."

"It was only a few minutes." The boy said, eyed the fellow in white robes next to the sergeant. "Who is this, then?"

"Randall Tendbones at your service." The healer gave a short bow of the head.

The boy's unhappy eyes returned to the sergeant. "Decided to stick with Belgad's boy, I see."

"I am no one's servant," Randall corrected. "I practice the healing arts for any in need."

"And lately that's been Belgad." The boy turned away and strolled through the maze of standing stones.

Randall looked to Gris, who shrugged, then both men followed the boy's winding path through the cemetery.

After several minutes the youth came to a stop in front of a large mausoleum with its iron-gated doors hanging open.

"Through there." The boy pointed into the crypt.

Gris glanced inside and saw a small fire burning on the floor in the center of the empty chamber. "There's no one in there."

"He's in there."

The sergeant stood in front of the open mausoleum for several silent seconds while searching

the inside of the stone building. The only hiding places he could see were any of a dozen stone sarcophagi. He couldn't imagine having to hide in one of those, among the musty bones of long-dead strangers.

"Lucius?" Gris asked of the room.

"The name is Kron." The voice echoed from within the crypt.

Randall squeezed past the sergeant to enter the stone building. "This would appear to be the correct place."

"Are you the healer?" The voice remained elusive, giving no clues as to Kron's hiding spot.

With Gris and the boy trailing, Randall stopped near the fire and allowed his eyes to become familiar with the shadows in the corners of the room. He could just make out a cloaked figure huddled on the floor in a corner, a black bundle next to him.

The healer nodded to the figure. "I am Randall Tendbones, and yes, I have come to soothe your wounds."

Kron's eyes flashed on Sergeant Gris. "The only healer you could find was one who works for Belgad?"

Randall straightened as if to assure Kron of his dignity. "I promise I will not reveal anything. I have no particular loyalty to Belgad."

Kron grimaced. "Then why work for such a man?"

"I offer my services to all. Politics, religion, none of that makes a difference to me."

"I don't care about the man's politics or religion," Kron said, wincing at the pain eating away at his gut. "I only care that he ruins people's lives."

"And I would be ruining lives if I refused my healing skills."

Gris stepped forward so his friend could see him, the sergeant's face showing no pleasure in the situation. "Lucius, you need help, so take it."

"The name is Kron," the man on the floor repeated. "Lucius Tallerus no longer exists."

"This is crazy." Gris looked to the healer. "Have you ever heard of an illness that makes a man think he is someone else?"

Randall nodded. "It's a form of insanity."

"I am not insane." Kron shifted on the floor to ease his pain. "I have merely chosen a path in which Lucius Tallerus is no longer of use."

The sergeant glared at the man in black. "Lucius Tallerus was my friend, and I don't intend to lose him just because he wants to play at revenge."

Despite his movement, Kron appeared to have received no relief from his anguish. "This is no game."

Randall ignored both men and approached the injured man. He cautiously kneeled next to him and stuck a hand out. "Will you allow me to heal you?"

Kron's stone eyes went from the healer to Gris then back again. "If you try anything, know I will kill you. And if you should reveal anything about me to Belgad the Liar, I will count you among my enemies."

"I suppose you would kill me then, too," Randall said, reaching between the folds of Kron's cloak to place a hand on the man's chest.

"Yes." Kron closed his eyes as the magic began to flow throughout his body.

Gris watched as Randall too closed his eyes and leaned into Kron. It seemed to the sergeant the healer's soul was reaching out to the man who had waged war against one of the most powerful figures in all West Ursia.

Seconds passed and Randall opened his eyes and leaned back as if weary.

Kron's eyes also opened, staring at the healer.

Randall glanced over the injured's man's body. "You've cracked several ribs. You're right leg has a fresh cut down one side and an older wound in the back. There are also numerous cuts and

bruises over your flesh.”

Kron allowed a weakened smile. “You bring good tidings.”

Gris and the boy chuckled.

“The same old Lucius,” the sergeant said.

Kron’s eyes hardened again as he glared at Gris.

The sergeant frowned, noting his wording. “My apologies. *Kron.*”

Randall ignored the brief tension and allowed a narrow grin. “What would have been a bad report?”

Kron looked to the healer. “Internal bleeding, or a major wound. I’ll live to fight again.”

“Yes, you will, but you need at least a week off your feet.”

Kron paid little mind to the suggestion. “How long will it take for your magics to work?”

“I can offer some treatment now, but I’ll have to return to the tower for potables and herbs. I did not know the full extent of your wounds, so I did not know what to bring.”

The answer did not satisfy the man in black. “You did not answer my question.”

“Considering the walk back to the tower, time to gather the needed items, the walk here and time to administer the proper care, I would assume it will take about three hours to have you on the road to recovery, but eventually, preferably before the sun falls again, we need to have you in a bed.”

“I’ll find some place,” Gris chimed in. “I’m not sure where yet, but I’ll find a place for you to rest.”

“It looks to me you’ve found the perfect place to rest.” The sturdy voice came from the entrance.

Gris, Randall and Wyck turned to see who had spoken.

It was Belgad. He stood in the entrance, behind him Spider and Stilp and several armed guards.

Kron used the side of a stone coffin to pull himself to standing. “I wondered when you would make an appearance.”

Belgad took a step into the large mausoleum. On his back hung a huge sword nearly as long as he was tall. “All the rats in one hole.” The large man pointed at Gris. “Your friends should learn to watch their trail. It could get you killed some day.”

Kron spat blood into a corner. “No day like the present.”

Randall moved between Kron and Belgad. “This man is in my care. I will not allow you to shed his blood.”

Belgad laughed. It was a good, long, hardy laugh. When he finished his eyes continued to smile. His lips did not. “How are you going to stop me?”

“Randall and Kron do not stand alone.” Gris drew his sword.

“Yeah,” Wyck said, pulling a small knife from inside his dirty shirt.

Belgad stepped to the side of the entrance, giving his men room to enter, and stared at his opponents with pity. “Give me Darkbow without a fuss and the rest of you will live.”

There was no chance to answer. Kron dove forward with a scream of rage, his fists swinging for the Dartague. Randall reached out to stop the larger man, but Kron bowled him aside with little trouble, sending the healer reeling across the room to slam against a wall and to fall into unconsciousness.

A grin slid across Belgad’s face as Kron crashed into the bulky northerner. Belgad took the brunt of the blow with only a step back, then stood his ground and wrapped a large hand around his attacker’s throat while the weakened Kron continued to swing and kick with little effect.

Gris blocked Belgad’s men from entering the crypt, planting himself in the doorway and knocking aside their swords.

Wyck jumped forward to save Kron, his rusty knife raised over his head before he brought it

down with all the might he could muster in his thin arms.

The boy's blade sank deep into the muscle of Belgad's thigh and the Dartague screamed, dropping his opponent. Kron collapsed, choking at the big man's feet.

"You will pay for that, little runt." Belgad swung an open hand, catching the boy in the face and sending him flying across the room to crash into the wall next to Randall.

"Enough of this." Belgad thrust a hand up and over his right shoulder, unslinging his monstrous sword.

Out of the corner of his eye Gris could see the hulking Dartague bringing around his weapon. The sergeant blocked another blow from one of the men in front of him then sprang backward. He was trapped in a hole with few options, but he knew he couldn't take on the two soldiers at his front with Belgad at his side. Unfortunately he had also given the two soldiers room to move inside the crypt, their companions close behind.

Wyck's knife protruding from his leg, Belgad the Liar turned to face the sergeant. "You were a good man, Gris. You could have been of use. I'm sorry to have to do this."

Belgad raised his sword over his head in both hands, then suddenly screamed. His weapon dropped from his hands with a loud clanging as he glared down to see Kron reaching up from the ground and twisting Wyck's knife.

The Dartague swung a fist. Darkbow tried to block with an arm, but he was too weak. The fist sent him rolling toward Randall and Wyck. Kron was still conscious after Belgad's blow, but just barely. His eyes fluttered, scarcely able to remain open.

Gris stood his ground, sword in front as a warning to any who would come closer.

"Finish this!" Belgad bellowed to his men as he yanked the knife from his leg, spraying blood.

The four guards moved in on Gris as Stilp and Spider entered behind them.

Spider's eyes went to Randall and the large ring on his hand. He moved around his compatriots and knelt next to the healer. "This one is mine."

"Lucius!" Gris yelled as he backed as far as he could from the advancing guards, his back to the cold, stone wall.

Spider drew a dagger from his belt.

Randall's eyes opened just as the edge of the knife touched his fingers. "No!" The healer yanked back the hand.

"Yes!" Spider flipped the dagger in his hand so the point aimed at Randall's heart.

The healer forced himself back, scraping against the cold wall. "I call upon my ancestors!"

A golden light sprang forth from the ring, spreading out from Randall like a mist.

Spider shielded his eyes with an arm. "Magic!"

Everyone awake in the room came to a halt and all eyes went to the glow emitting from Randall.

The healer rose to his knees as Spider and Stilp backed away. "I didn't want to do this," he said, extending his glowing ring hand toward them, "but you give me no option."

Spider and Stilp cringed while Belgad and his four guards stood in awe.

Gris had a momentary reprieve from death, but he would not charge out the door and leave his companions to their fates. He kept his sword in front of him and pointed it at Belgad.

A barely-cognizant Kron grabbed Wyck and pulled the unconscious boy to him, wrapping arms around the lad's head and shielding him from the ring's light.

The roof exploded.

Chunks of masonry flew through the air. A brick struck Gris in the chest and knocked him hard against the back wall of the crypt, the chain shirt beneath his tabard saving his life. The ground shook, rocking Belgad to one knee as he shielded his face with an arm. Stilp and Spider were knocked backward by shooting stones, both tumbling outside into mud. Belgad's guards did not fare well; two were killed instantly by bricks smashing their faces while the other two were slammed to the ground.

Randall, the yellow glow still spewing from his ring finger, was struck by a rain of stones and pebbles that forced him into a ball in which he covered his face with his arms.

The next second was forever burnt into Kron Darkbow's memory. While only a second, it lasted an eternity, a never-ending moment of pain and darkness and death he would play over and over in his mind, always questioning what he could have done differently. Kron's only thought was of Wyck cradled in his arms.

A chunk of the roof, as if launched from a crossbow, smashed into the twelve-year-old boy's forehead, denting his skull and splattering blood.

Kron sucked in air to scream, to deny the boy's fate, but he could not make a sound. His voice was lost in the pain telling him he had failed the lad. Kron Darkbow had not protected Wyck, just as he had not protected his own family.

As the moment passed, the falling pieces of ceiling no longer smashed the floor and walls of the crypt, allowing those still alive to watch gray dust float through the air and begin to settle on all that was not moving. A gigantic hole in the ceiling revealed the gray day and a dim sun.

Randall took his hands away from his eyes, the glow from his ring still spreading out slowly to encompass Darkbow and Wyck. "Kron?" He reached for the man.

Kron said nothing, only snuggling Wyck's body closer.

The healer could tell the boy was dead. It wasn't his experience or his magic abilities that told him the youth no longer breathed. It was the way Kron was holding Wyck, and the long stain of red that covered the ground near the boy's head.

A booming voice spoke from above. "Where is the ring bearer?"

"No." Randall looked to the hole in the roof. "Not now."

The heads of those still living turned upward.

"By Ashal, what is that?" Gris managed to say as he used the wall to stand.

"War demons." A shaking terror rang in Randall's voice.

There were three of the creatures. Each appeared like a man wrapped in heavy plate armor, spikes protruding from all joints of their bodies. They were tall, nearly ten feet, and almost as wide. Massive black, bat-like wings unfurled behind their backs, flapping to hold them in place in the air above the open crypt. Their eyes glowed red behind face slits in the helmets they wore, and the nearest demon clutched a monstrous sword in his taloned claws. The other two were floating higher in the air, their swords strapped to their backs.

The nearest war demon's wings flapped, spreading a heated breeze across the humans below. "I seek the ring bearer!"

Belgad pointed to Randall. "There is the mortal you seek, dark one."

Randall grasped Kron by his mud-splattered cloak.

"Turn the ring over to me now!" The lead demon's voice was like a roaring furnace, its wings beating again at the air and its huge feet covered in metal plates grazing the crumbling edge of the crypt's roof.

Kron struggled, trying to fight off the healer's touch. "What are you doing?"

"Aid me, masters of Kobalos." Randall closed his eyes.

The glow from the healer's ring erupted, spraying rays of gold throughout the mausoleum and shaking the building again. Belgad and Gris were knocked off their feet and the nearest war demon shielded its red eyes behind a spike-covered arm.

A moment later, all was still and the yellow glow was no more. Kron and Randall were gone, along with Wyck and Kron's belongings.

"The ring bearer must return! All will die otherwise!"

Belgad rolled to one knee and pointed a finger at Gris. “That one might be able to lead us to them, dark one.”

With a heavy thud that shook the floor, the first war demon landed in the center of the disrupted crypt. “Is this true?” Its scarlet eyes roamed from Belgad to the sergeant.

“I swear on the ancestors of my Dartague fathers.” Belgad bowed his head nearly to his knee. “This man is friend to a companion of the ring bearer. It is possible he knows much.”

The lead demon strode closer to Gris, each step rocking the ground. The creature halted to tower over the sergeant. “You will tell us all you know, or you will learn true suffering at the hands of the master of Kobalos.”

Chapter Twenty Eight

For what felt the longest time, everything was black for Kron. When he came around, he realized he must have been unconscious because his head felt heavy and his body was numb except for the pain tearing through his ribs and down one leg. He opened his eyes to find the darkness continued. Sensing no one near, he tried to open his mouth to speak, but his stomach reeled as if he were aboard a ship on a heavy sea.

Then the memory came back to him, the harshest pain of all. For the first of many times, he relived the boy's death, the stone crashing into Wyck's head and splattering his life upon the cold floor of the mausoleum. Then the black demons descended. Randall grabbed Kron and Wyck and then ... nothing, the darkness. Here.

A light sputtered, forming a rectangular glow around what Kron believed to be the outline of a door. A moment later the door swung inward, revealing Randall in his white robes, an oil lamp hanging from one of his hands.

The healer entered the chamber. "You're alive."

Kron tried to leap up from the floor, but his wounded leg gave out. He dropped back onto a pallet of coarse cloth and gritted through the pain inflaming his leg. For a moment his head swam, leaving him disoriented. They were no longer in the crypt, and Kron could not explain that to himself. He was in a simple, round room with beds against the walls. Beyond the open door was what appeared to be a small office, a desk near one wall and another door beyond.

Randall held the lamp higher, on his face a vision of inner anguish. "I am sorry I could not bring Sergeant Gris. He was out of my reach."

Kron could only speak through gritted teeth. "How did you bring me here?"

"I used the ring to shift us to the healing tower in Southtown. We should be safe enough here, at least for a few hours. Belgad won't think to look for us here."

"What ring?"

"It's a family heirloom."

With a wince, Kron sat up on the edge of the pallet. "Where is Wyck?"

Randall hesitated as if afraid to speak.

"Tell me."

"I'm sorry. There is nothing I could do for the boy."

Kron grimaced again, but it was from no physical ache. The stab to his heart was the image of Wyck's unmoving form next to him, the boy's head caked in blood. "Where is his body?"

"A few rooms down the hall outside this office. It is the best place for him. The orderlies will see he has the final rites and a proper burial."

It was done then. There was nothing Kron could do for the lad. He couldn't even offer a decent funeral and burial.

Kron tried to stand again, but once more his body's pains forced him to remain seated. "I have to get to Gris. I can do nothing for Wyck, but there may still be a chance to save Gris."

"If the war demons want to kill him, he's already dead, and there's nothing you or anyone else can do to stop them. You can't kill them. You can't subdue them. You can't even buy them off. War demons owe allegiance only to Lord Verkain."

"Verkain? Those demons were sent from Kobalos?"

Randall appeared unsettled, nearly unwilling to speak. "They were drawn to my ring's power."

"Why is Verkain looking for this ring?"

"I ... I am his son."

Kron shot off the ground onto his good leg. "I should kill you." He advanced, hopping with a limp, his anger allowing him to ignore the pain tearing through his body.

Randall backed out of the room into the office. "I didn't know Belgad was following. And I didn't summon the demons!"

Kron continued to advance, his dragging steps taking him to the doorway where he leaned against the frame to recover his wind and his senses. "Then who is to blame?"

"I don't blame anyone but myself," Randall said, keeping his distance. "And you."

"Me? I'm not the one who brought monsters down from the sky!"

"You were the one who started this war with Belgad!" Randall yelled back. "You were the one hiding in plain sight at the Asylum! If it hadn't been for you, none of this would have happened and we would all still be living our lives. I wouldn't have to go into hiding again and that boy would still be alive."

Kron took a step forward as if he was going to throw a punch, but his injured leg would not allow him to move. He glared at the healer, his eyes doing more damage to Randall's soul than fists could have done

Still, the younger man showed no further signs of backing down and held his own ground. "I was hiding from my father because he will kill me if he finds me. But you? I don't know what Belgad did to you, but it was petty, about revenge."

"It was more than revenge!"

"For *what*?"

Kron's voice lowered to a whisper. "It was about justice. He had Trelvigor slay my family when I was just a boy, Wyck's age."

Randall went quiet for a moment, staring off to one side in thought. "You killed the wizard. That's why you set his house aflame, to kill him for what he did to your parents. He must have been the one who told you of Belgad's involvement."

Kron remained silent.

Randall sneered and his voice was full of scorn. "You are no better than they."

"What are you talking about?"

"Have you forgotten all the dead? Belgad's men, the boy, others. Have you forgotten the Asylum?"

Now it was Kron who held his ground. "I played my role, true, but magic was involved in those deaths at the Asylum. I'm no mage."

Randall stared at the floor, his features suddenly flat.

Kron leaned forward, nearly bent over, looking up into the younger man's pale features. "It was you, wasn't it?"

Randall said nothing.

Kron leaned back once more, nodding. "You were there when the water burst through the floor. Your ring had the power to move us here, and it had the power to cause the destruction at the Asylum."

Randall still remained quiet.

Kron spat. "How dare you accuse me after what you've done."

Randall's voice was now weak. "I was trying to save people from the rising waters."

"Just like I was trying to save people from Belgad," Kron said. "The man deserves to die, and not just for what he did to my family. He deserves to die for everything he's ever stolen and everyone he's ever killed. The world will be better off once the man is gone. That was my job. That was what I set out to do. So don't compare me to Belgad. Like you, I tried to save lives."

For a long moment the healer was nonplussed. Finally he noticed Kron's wounded condition again. "You should sit. You need the rest."

"I need to get to Gris."

"You are in no condition for combat. Once I'm rested I can make sure you are healed."

Kron looked skeptical. "Why should I trust you? It's not as if we are friends, and you've admitted to being Kobalan royalty. That's even more reason not to trust you."

Randall gave forth a narrow smile. "For all I know, you could be Kobalan."

"Sorry. My father was Lycinian, my mother Ursian and Dartague. I have nothing to do with Kobalos, unlike you."

Randall sighed. "Your opinion of me is understandable, but I'm not cut from the same cloth as Verkain."

"What makes you different?"

"My birth name was Kerwin Verkain, but, like you I no longer claim my original name or title. A prince I might be by birth, but it is not something I would have wished upon myself, especially being a prince of Kobalos."

"I've heard of Verkain. I know what they say about his cruelty, and I've known Kobalans, mostly inmates in the Prisonlands."

Randall nodded. "Most everything you have heard is true. Verkain is more than two hundred years old. He has no qualms with stabbing a cook to death for bringing him the wrong dinner. He frequently has women dragged from the streets, and then rapes the poor things. He wields low magics like no other before him, which is why he's survived so long. But he is also insane."

"Why do you say that?"

The healer looked away as if he did not want to face the truth. "According to the Eastern church, the Book of Ashal says in the end times a mighty dark king from the north will slay all of his own, then wage war on the rest of world, conquering everything before him. My father thinks he is this northern king. I'm the last of my siblings alive. If I die, Verkain will launch an attack on the rest of the nations."

A perplexed look appeared in Kron's features. "Kobalos is only one country. It would be impossible for one nation to conquer the rest of the continent."

"It does not matter if you think it is possible. *Verkain* thinks it is possible. Even if he cannot fulfill his plans, he can still bring much suffering."

"It doesn't make sense."

Randall looked to the other man again. "I told you he was insane."

"It was Verkain who sent the demons," Kron said, more to himself than Randall.

"Yes."

The man in black blinked and his world changed. A decision was made in an instant. "Verkain must be dealt with. He is a danger to more than you."

"Are you out of your mind?" Now it was Randall who looked perplexed "You've no chance against Verkain."

"He needs killing."

"Maybe he does, but that is easier said than done. He has an army and demons and mages and only he knows what else. Verkain is a powerful wielder of magic himself. Markwood might stand a chance against him, and Markwood is a powerful wizard. You have just told me you are no mage. You would stand no chance against Verkain."

Kron's eyes locked on those of the healer. "I will hunt him alone if necessary, but the truth is your aid would prove invaluable."

"My aid?" Randall clutched his head and turned away. "Now I know you are insane, too. I'm never going back to Kobalos! Haven't you been listening?"

"I've listened, and it is time you stood up to your father."

"No, no, no."

Kron grasped the healer by a shoulder. "Wyck is dead because of this maniac. There will be more deaths on your hands if you don't deal with your father."

Randall's features were full of a sad anguish. "There will be deaths on my hands regardless."

"Perhaps, but at least you will know you did the right thing in trying to prevent all this."

Randall turned away from the man in black. He tried to think of the right words to make Kron understand. Growing up in Kobalos, especially as a member of the royal family, had not been something to take lightly. Kron didn't know about the hours upon hours of physical and mental torture. Kron didn't know the level of suffering caused to slaves and others unfortunate enough to fall into the hands of Verkain, suffering Randall had been forced to watch since he was a baby. That suffering had been why Randall had always wanted to be a healer, to ease pain and not bring it. That suffering was why Randall had fled Kobalos and had sworn to never return. Verkain was the worst, but he also had generals and servants who were more than willing to hand out his punishments.

Randall could describe the tortures, the crucifixions and the beheadings and worse, but he knew it would not stop Kron from his path. "I don't know what to say to you except this is madness."

Kron sighed. "You do not have to come with me."

"What about Belgad?" Randall asked, hoping he might be able to at least delay Kron. Trying to destroy Belgad was foolish enough, but not near as dangerous as taking on the lord of Kobalos. "You still have not dealt with him."

"I will deal with Belgad before we leave Bond."

Randall plopped into a chair behind a desk. "You don't understand. It is impossible to defeat Verkain."

"Again, your help would be invaluable."

Randall looked up at Kron, his face and voice pleading. "Go away from here. Live a normal life. Leave Belgad behind, and Verkain and all of it. There is nothing but death along that path."

"Yes ... death. Theirs."

Randall slumped. He had thought he was getting through to the man.

Flustered, Kron pressed on. "All I ask is that you heal me. I have coin. I can pay you. After that, we part ways. I'll do what has to be done, and you can run away, hiding from your father and your responsibility."

"Responsibility?"

"Your responsibility to the people of your country. If to no one else, you owe it to them to end your father's reign of horror."

"I don't even know who I am." Randall's voice was vacuous, ethereal.

"You are royalty. Act like it."

Was Kron right? Randall had been in hiding for three years. He was tired of it, but he had found some kind of life in Bond. Now that was shattered. He couldn't go back to being a healer, at least not in this city. He would have to move on, find another place to hide. Perhaps in a few years he could send a note to Maslin to tell him he was safe, but until then he would have to cut all ties with Bond and West Ursia. It would mean a life of hiding again, a life on the road searching for something never to be found. Verkain would always be after him, especially now that his father had been so close to capturing him. Randall knew it was only a matter of time before he was caught, returned to Kobalos and slain. Was he running for nothing? Was delaying the inevitable only bringing more pain and death to others?

For the first time in a long time, Randall felt as if he was back in Kobalos, wrapped in iron chains within his father's dungeon. Death was inevitable.

The healer stood. "By Ashal, I don't know what to do."

"Stop allowing things to happen to you and take action." Kron held out a hand. "Come with me."

Randall looked into Kron's eyes. "It's certain death."

"So is waiting for your father to find you. At least my way gives you a chance at survival."

"What would we do? Two men can't stand up to Verkain and his armies. And I'm not sure I'm capable of killing, especially not my father."

Kron's eyes shined with visions of future conflict. "We will deal with that when the time comes, but first we have to get to Kobalos."

Randall gave a blank stare to the room surrounding them. What Kron asked was pure lunacy. There was little chance they would survive, but Randall was coming around to believing the man in black. Randall had *no* chance to survive unless he did something about it.

“I’ll go with you.”

Kron gave an evil grin. “Can your ring get us to Kobalos the same way it brought us here?”

“It’s possible, but it would draw Verkain’s attention again.”

Kron shook his head. “No. We’re in no condition to take on those demons.”

“We’re never going to be in condition to take on even *one* war demon.” The healer was exasperated at the thought. “Get that out of your head right now.”

Kron’s grin grew wider. “Perhaps we will find out some day.”

Randall ignored the implication. “What about the sergeant?”

Kron’s smile vanished. “I’m in no condition to help Gris, but I know how to find out if he is alive.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Heal my wounds. We’ll wait until nightfall then seek help.

“Who in their right mind is going to help us?”

The smile returned to Kron’s face. “I know of one, but she might try to kill me before I can ask.”

Chapter Twenty Nine

Belgad was no fool. He did not trust the war demons, but he knew how to deal with them.

Every Dartague child knew the stories about Lord Verkain, the high chieftain of Kobalos who was hundreds of years old, and the demon monsters that did his bidding. Dartague mothers told the tales to make their children behave. Belgad remembered stories of war demons terrorizing villages and slaying entire clans.

It was only when Belgad was older, by the time he was a tribal chieftain, that he discovered the stories were true. Dartague's western mountain borders touched upon eastern Kobalos, and from time to time the lord of Kobalos would stretch forth his mighty hand and send his minions forth. The attacks were mere skirmishes, raiding parties sent to take what wealth could be found, but they were deadly assaults. Belgad had known more than one brave warrior who had lost an arm or leg in the border battles.

The Dartague also knew of tales of how to survive a war demon. The creatures had been known to spare those who showed the proper respect.

Today that knowledge had saved him.

Unfortunately for Sergeant Gris, it meant a lifetime of pain. A *short* lifetime of pain.

Belgad swung a fist and cracked the sergeant in the jaw, sending Gris sprawling across the main hall of the northerner's manor to crash onto a table, sending silverware flying.

A fist was raised once more as Belgad stalked toward the sergeant. "I'll ask you again, where have they gone?"

Gris slumped off the table's edge and landed on the floor. From bruised eyes he glared at his tormentor. A split lip spilled red down the front of his orange tabard.

Belgad stopped, overshadowing his prey. "Tell me or things will get much worse for you."

Gris spat a cracked, bloodied tooth onto the floor.

The Dartague drew back a fist as if to pummel the man again, then lowered his arm. This would take finesse, a delicate touch Belgad knew he did not have. For retrieving answers from someone as rugged as the sergeant, Belgad needed an expert.

The lord of the manor turned to Lalo standing at the far end of the hall between two sentries. "Bring me Percifidus."

For the first time in a long time, the Finder hesitated upon receiving an order from his master. He did not speak, but his eyes questioned.

Belgad flexed his fingers as if ready to throttle something. "Don't make me tell you again."

Lalo nodded, turned and exited the great hall.

The Dartague intertwined his fingers and cracked his knuckles. He did not enjoy this beating. There was no sport in it, no thrill. The northerner would gladly pound an armed man who could defend himself, but he took no joy harming the sergeant in this fashion. The reason he was doing it was because he had bargained with the war demons to save his own life, and possibly for leverage. Though Belgad had no love for Kobalos or Verkain, it never hurt to have a powerful ally.

According to the demons, the healer was Verkain's son who had been missing three years. The demons' story explained the ring.

In truth, Belgad did not care about Randall, other than that turning Randall over to Verkain could benefit him monetarily or politically. What Belgad did care about was Kron Darkbow. The Dartague still wanted that mysterious man in black to be punished for what he had done, which was why the northern knight was pounding on Gris.

That, and the fact the demons had said they would return in a few days for word of Randall's

whereabouts. Otherwise, they would not be pleased.

Belgad kicked out, connecting with Gris's head and sending the man flat on his back.

The sergeant did not move, but his chest continued to rise and fall sluggishly.

"Enjoy your rest," Belgad said, towering over the unconscious man. "It will end soon enough."

The bald lord eased his rear onto the edge of the table next to the downed sergeant. Belgad would rest, too. Night was drawing near and he had had little sleep. With Percifidus on his way, it was likely to be another long night.

Kron Darkbow was one with the night again. He jumped a narrow alley, from the roof of a baker's shop onto a three-story building of apartments, and continued running, smiling all the while. It had been some time since he had been able to roam the rooftops of Bond and he had missed it, the night breeze blowing against his face and the soft thud of his boots on rooftops. Now he was fully healed, thanks to Randall, and once more climbing and jumping and swinging, much as he had as a boy in the treetops of the forests around the Prisonlands.

Randall had been left exhausted from his healing, unable to go with Kron, which was fine with the man rapidly crossing rooftops. The healer likely would be unable to keep up with him above Bond's many streets. The young man had remained at the Southtown tower to rest while Kron had changed into the clothes Wyck had brought him. Then Kron had slunk forth into the night.

Springing across another alley, thoughts of Wyck forced a frown onto Kron's face. He would never forgive himself for Wyck's death. The boy had brought a level of childish joy to Kron's life he had not known since before the death of his parents. Growing up in the Prisonlands, Kron had known humor, but it had mostly been the rough and tumble humor of grown men who carried swords for a living.

Kron swore to himself, and not for the last time, that justice would be served and the man responsible for Wyck's death would pay dearly.

But before dealing with Verkain, Kron had to help Gris.

Still moving, he placed a gloved hand on the ledge of a two-story structure and spun his legs around to plummet from the building feet first. He landed on his boots and rolled over into a kneeling position. He stared outward, from between two buildings, and across a wide street to the Swamps' healing tower Randall had called home for almost three years.

It was early night and numerous people still paraded along the street, but Kron did not think he would be recognized with his cloak's hood pulled forward. Once inside, he did not fear recognition because he was not known in the tower. His face would draw attention only if one of Belgad's lackeys were present, and Kron was hoping one would be.

More suffering was ahead for Belgad, especially if Gris was dead.

Adara Corvus waited in Randall Tendbones' office. She sat in a chair with her feet propped upon the healer's desk next to a burning candle, her arms crossed over the sheathed rapier on her stomach. Her eyelids fluttered as her mind drifted. Her body sought rest while her mind raced. She had had a long day of doing nothing, which had been tedious to her, especially when she had heard about the business at the Asylum that morning and the action at the old cemetery.

Fortisquo lay asleep in the attached room. He had been scheduled to be woken earlier in the day, but the healers on hand had decided against it because they feared an infection in his empty eye socket.

Despite hearing from Stilp that Randall was an enemy, Adara wished the young man was

present. He was a good healer, one of the best Adara had known, and she wanted Fortisquo healed. It had been three days since her lover had lost his eye, and Adara wanted an ending. She did not believe she and the sword master would remain a couple once he woke, but she did not want to walk out on him without knowing if she still had a friend or if she had made an enemy. Either way, she had decided to leave him, even if he still wanted her. She had learned all she could from Fortisquo, and it was time to find another tutor.

A sudden, metallic sound gave Adara cause to open her eyes. She turned her head in the direction from which the noise had come, from the door that led to an outer hallway.

Ever so gently, Adara inched her right hand toward the hilt of her sword.

With a long creak the door swung inward to reveal darkness beyond.

Adara stared into the blackness as her hand gripped the rapier's hilt. There had been lit torches lining that hall the last time she had been out there. The healers who lived in the tower often had to perform their skills at night, and they always left torches or lamps burning.

"I have been looking for you." The eerie voice crooned from the darkness.

Adara shoved away from the chair and onto the balls of her feet, her hand drawing forth her sword and aiming it at the blackness beyond the doorway. "Who are you?"

"You know me." A chuckle followed.

Then the cloaked figure of Kron Darkbow crossed the threshold into the room, a black glove slipping out from the folds of the cloak to gently close the door behind him.

Adara stood her ground, the sword now pointing at the heart of the cloaked man. "You dare show yourself here?"

Kron stood straight, taller than Adara, while one of his gloved hands reached up and yanked back his hood, revealing his dark hair and bold features. He bowed without taking his eyes off the long blade in her hands. "I'd dare much to discover the condition of one dear to me."

"I heard of your antics today," Adara said, keeping her sword steady. "You are in better health than last you were seen by Belgad."

"I am not without aid, but tell me what became of Sergeant Gris. Does he still live?"

"The last I heard, he was breathing. He was taken to Belgad's for questioning."

"You mean interrogation."

Adara gave a brief nod. "They seek your whereabouts."

"Meaning Belgad and the demons?"

"The demon things have gone."

Kron took a step toward the woman.

Adara quickly retreated, raising the tip of her rapier to point at Kron's dark blue eyes. "Stay where you are."

"Are you going to try and capture me?"

A grin spread across Adara's face. "If I want to capture you, there will be no trying about it."

It was Kron's turn to grin. "It would be an interesting contest, but I have no time. I need one more piece of information before I take my leave. Why did you stop your man from killing me?"

He was talking about Fortisquo, Adara knew. Kron was curious about the night he had faced off with Fortisquo when he would have been slain had Adara not interceded, blocking the sword master's blow. Her actions had cost Fortisquo an eye, and Adara bore more than a little guilt.

She had no good answer to give, so she shrugged. "The night you fought Fortisquo, you threw my own dagger at me. You could have hit me, but you didn't."

"I missed."

"On purpose?"

Kron remained silent.

"The truth of the matter is, I don't know why I spared you." And it was the truth. The man was handsome, but Adara felt no love for him. From what she had witnessed, Kron was a good combatant

but he was no fencer. Adara could learn much from him, but her main interests had always been with the rapier. Kron did not wear a sword tonight, but he preferred a large, heavy blade from what she had been told.

The grin Kron wore grew wider. "I think I know why."

Silence now from Adara.

"It's the same reason you haven't raised an alarm tonight."

Adara twirled the tip of her sword slightly, playfully, before the man's face. "I still could. I could scream and healers would come running."

"And I would escape them as I've escaped everything Belgad has thrown at me. Besides, you would lose a new teacher."

Adara was stunned. How did he know what she had been considering? Was she transparent?

But she would not surrender so easily. "What makes you think I need a teacher?"

"Because you saved me once, and so far tonight you have done me no harm nor met me with ill will."

Adara lifted her weapon slightly. "Some would could consider *this* ill will."

"I need your help, and you could use mine. I need to get inside Belgad's mansion to free Gris. If the opportunity presents itself, I will kill Belgad. Then I will leave the city. I have business elsewhere. You could travel alongside me as my student."

Kron realized he was asking the woman to enter a dangerous partnership, though she did not know the full extent of the threat. She would not have a clue Kron and Randall were planning to go to Kobalos.

The man in black felt he had learned much from his affair with Belgad. He had not won his war, at least not yet, but each battle had been a growing experience. Mistakes had been made, culminating in Wyck's death, but there had been elements of the conflict Kron had not expected, including Randall's involvement and the inclusion of Kobalos into Kron's troubles. Belgad was evil, yes, but he was nowhere near as demented as Lord Verkain.

The end of Adara's rapier dipped. The woman was considering. She did not have much in the world, so she had little to lose by joining with Darkbow, other than possibly her life. Adara did not know how Fortisquo would react to losing her, especially to a foe, but she did not think it would be with well-intentioned aplomb.

"What are you doing with him, you conniving bitch?" The well-known voice came from behind Adara, making up her mind for her.

Fortisquo stood leaning against the doorway of the patients' room attached to Randall's office. He was disheveled, his one good eye barely open, with no shirt to cover his chest and only white cotton breeches for pants. In his right hand dangled a sword.

Adara jumped to one side, placing Randall's desk between herself and Darkbow while making sure to keep her weapon pointed at Kron and an eye on her former lover. "Fortisquo! You're awake."

"That's right," the swordsman said, raising his blade. "The healers must have been negligent in their duties. And I heard enough to know you're a traitor, bitch."

Pain filled Adara's eyes. "That is not true."

"Yes it is! Now I know why you stopped me from killing him!" The peak of Fortisquo's sword darted to point at Kron. "You're leaving me, just like you left Jarnac and DeGrassi before me."

"Fortisquo ... " Adara's voice trailed off. She did not know what to say to the man. She had been contemplating exactly what he was saying. She could not call him a liar.

"Of all men, you are leaving me for Darkbow." Fortisquo took his weight off the doorway so he was standing straight. "The man is an enemy! He is *our* enemy!"

Kron shifted to one side so Adara was not between himself and the sword master. "I am only an enemy to Belgad."

Fortisquo snickered. "You cut such a fine line, you could be a duelist."

Kron turned his attention on the woman. "Adara, we have to kill him."

Fortisquo's lips formed a smile.

Kron's words were flat, simple, stated with no emotion, backed by a dark logic. "He will alert others to my presence, and he would turn both of us over to Belgad."

"We can't kill him. I won't allow it." Adara had no love for Fortisquo, but she did not wish him a speedy death. The man had taught her much and was a genius of the rapier. He deserved a better death than what Kron proposed.

Leisurely, but with intent, Fortisquo placed his right foot in front of his left and went into a fencing position, his blade aimed at Darkbow. "Whenever you are ready." His words were soft.

"No!" Adara yelled. "There is no need for this."

Kron's hard gaze slipped over to the sword master. "Even if we escape, he will follow."

"That's right, bitch." Fortisquo spoke to Adara though he kept his eye on Kron.

Her blade still leveled on Darkbow, Adara eased away from the desk and toward Fortisquo. "At least allow me to explain."

"There is nothing to explain!" The swordsman lunged.

The woman twisted the sword in her hand to block Fortisquo's attack, but she knew it would be too late. Her former lover had too long a reach and was too quick.

Three small lines of black metal appeared in Fortisquo's sword arm, causing the man to yelp and drop his weapon.

Adara looked from Fortisquo to Kron, who stood with one arm extended toward the assassin.

Fortisquo dropped to his knees and yanked one of Kron's throwing darts from his arm.

"Come." Kron turned his open hand so it beckoned Adara.

The woman looked from man to man and back again. Then she turned to Kron, sheathed her sword and walked to him.

The man in black grinned. "Brave woman."

"Do not make me regret this decision."

"I will attempt not to."

Adara shifted to see Fortisquo pulling another dart from his arm. "I am sorry, my love."

Kron gave the sword master a dark look, one that told Fortisquo he was only alive because of the woman's generosity.

Then the pair were out the door, running.

Tears flowed from Fortisquo's one good eye as he grasped the last of the darts embedded in his flesh. "Don't you worry, bitch. I'll be coming for you." He jerked the small weapon from his arm to splash blood on his sword.

Chapter Thirty

To Belgad, Percifidus looked like an old frog that had long outlived its hopping days. The man was short and stooped with a head that held only a few white hairs combed over it. His yellow eyes appeared too large for his pinched face and his chin did not exist, the skin of his jaws flowing into fleshy jowls. He wore a simple toga, once white but now stained yellow with age and grime. Percifidus's hands clutched a small black bag by its twin leather handles.

"It is about time you arrived." Belgad was none too happy.

Percifidus, with Lalo glowering behind him, paused in the doorway to one of the many rooms in the basement of Belgad's manor. This particular room was dim, a single torch hanging on a wall to provide light. The far wall was of natural rock while the others consisted of mortared stone. In the center of the room was a table of gray marble atop which lay a man of size, his ankles and wrists tied by leather bands attached to ropes that disappeared beneath the table. The man appeared to be unconscious and was unclothed except for a simple cotton loin covering.

Percifidus lumbered into the room and placed his bag at one end of the marble table between the unconscious man's feet. He proceeded to open the bag and rummage through it. After a few moments he withdrew miniature tools, similar to those surgeons and healers used. One of the tools was a small pair of sharpened pliers with points on their ends. Another was a saw small enough to fit into one hand. Other tools appeared to be needles of various sizes and shapes, some with crooked or curved ends. The last tool extracted from the bag was a small knife, mostly handle with a short, curved blade.

Percifidus turned his attention to the master of the house. "Will you provide an apron?"

Belgad waved a finger at Lalo. "See to it."

Lalo nodded in return and disappeared into the dark hall beyond the room.

Percifidus blinked his froggy eyes, looking for all the world like a sick toad ready to croak. "A chair would be appreciated. I'm not as young as I used to be."

Belgad grimaced and reached beneath the table to withdraw a wooden stool. He placed the four-legged seat next to the table to the left of the unconscious man's head.

Percifidus used a cloth to wipe down his tools and placed them on the table between the unconscious man's legs. "If I may ask, who is he?"

"Local sergeant of the city guard. He has information of which I am in need."

"So you will want to be present during the operation?"

Belgad nodded, irritated. "Yes." He did not like Percifidus. More correctly, he detested the service Percifidus performed, however necessary it might be.

The little, toad-like man was a vivisectionist, a non-magical healer who performed surgery and experimentation on living beings. He was known in Bond's underworld as useful for interrogations.

The vivisectionist went back to work, making sure his utensils were in good order. "My usual fee will be doubled since you wish to be present for the procedure."

Belgad gritted his teeth. "Very well. I'll need to ask him some questions once you waken him."

Percifidus retrieved a pair of brown stoppered bottles from his bag and placed them next to his tools. "How far do you want me to take this?"

Belgad was nonplussed for a moment. He understood the question, but he was not sure how to answer.

"Your man Lalo did not explain to me the extent to which you want me to attend to this man," Percifidus said, gesturing over Gris. "Do you wish only minor treatment? Amputation? Dismemberment? Complete dissection?"

"I want answers to my questions, and I want them to be truthful."

Lalo the Finder appeared in the doorway with Stilp, but they did not enter the room. "My lord, we have a situation."

Percifidus continued to arrange his utensils as if he were not interested in what Lalo had to convey, but Belgad immediately walked to his servant.

The lord grimaced as if anticipating bad news, the only kind he seemed to receive of late. "What is the problem?"

Lalo looked up to his employer. "Master Markwood is in your library awaiting your presence, and he has made a bit of a ruckus while waiting."

Belgad's grimace did not improve. "What kind of ruckus?"

It was Stilp who spoke, his face ashen. "A bunch of guards have been put to sleep, and Markwood won't wake them until he speaks with you."

Belgad grabbed Lalo by a shoulder and glanced over at Percifidus and Gris. "Stay here and do not let him begin until I have returned."

"As you wish." The Finder nodded.

Belgad pointed at Stilp. "Come with me."

Although Kron had been inside Belgad's mansion before, he had not had an opportunity to familiarize himself with the layout of the building. Fortunately for him, Adara had spent a good deal of time within the confines of the walls and could describe the basic design of the place.

The man in black and his student skulked in an alley near the Dartague's manor.

His black cloak making him all but invisible, Kron stared out across the way and up the hill to the mansion. "Randall will be expecting you."

"You should not attempt this alone." Adara gave her new teacher a stern look which went unseen in the shadows. "It is much too dangerous and Belgad will show you no mercy."

"I am expecting none, and I would show none, but you as of yet are not wanted by local constables, and I need someone to buy horses for us before we leave in the morning."

This was part of Kron's plan. Adara had been taken into the man's confidence, learning in their trek from the healing tower to Belgad's that Kron and Randall were traveling to Kobalos. She had thought it suicide, but Kron had promised she did not have to enter Kobalos. Considering the powerful enemies Kron and Randall faced, Adara was not sure it was smart of her to join them, but she had always entertained challenges. And heading to Kobalos with Belgad possibly trailing definitely would be a challenge.

Some of the gold for buying horses and supplies came from Kron, but Adara was not without a good bit of funds and offered it for the overall good of the three. Darkbow was hesitant, but accepted knowing he had little other choice. Adara prompted him on his current lack of heavy weaponry, meaning a sword and bow, and his reply was that he would correct the situation at Belgad's mansion.

Soon they parted, Kron slinking toward the walls of Belgad's manor while Adara made her way east into the heart of the Swamps, seeking stables willing to sell four steeds in the middle of the night.

Nearing the walls of the fortress, Kron trotted around the structure. He was surprised to find the front gate hanging open and two guards flat on their backs on the gravel path leading to the main house.

From inside his cloak, Kron drew a dagger and a fire grenado. He approached the open gate with caution but as far as he could see there were no other guards.

He checked the downed men near the gate and discovered they were not dead, but snoring away their time on duty.

The man in black grinned. He did not know who had performed this miracle for him, but he realized it was of a magical nature. He hoped it was Verkain, his war demons perhaps returning early and not happy with Belgad. He doubted as much, but Adara had told him she had heard the demons

were expected to return for an answer as to Randall's whereabouts.

Kron helped himself to one of the dozing guards' swords and belt. He wrapped the weapon onto his back, noting it was heavy but shorter than the sword he was used to carrying.

Under shadow he made his way toward Belgad's front door. There was little cover in the openness of the huge front lawn, but Kron felt sure no one could see him. It was a dark night and he was, as usual, all in black.

To his surprise the heavy front doors to the main building also hung open. Just inside, another pair of guards slept on the floor. Kron would never have planned on walking through the front door, but it appeared either Ashal had taken pity on him or a stroke of stupendous fortune had presented itself.

Belgad's voice boomed from inside. "What the hell does he want?"

Kron leaned forward to spy around the edge of one of the open doors.

Belgad, along with the dumpy figure of Stilp, was hurrying up the curved stairs of the front hall.

"It's got something to do with the healer, Tendbones," Stilp said, not more than a few feet behind the hulking Dartague.

Before more could be said, the two men vanished upstairs.

Kron hesitated. What little he had heard had given him pause, making him wonder if he should not try to follow the two. They had been speaking of Randall, and the healer's safety was of import. But Gris was somewhere on these grounds, needing his freedom or already dead. Kron decided he would have to go on with his search for the sergeant. Randall was in no immediate danger, and Kron had faith Adara would not turn traitor. Gris needed saving. Kron Darkbow was the man to save him.

As he moved into the house, Kron promised himself he would not make the same mistakes he had in the past. It was a time for results, not showmanship. He had embarrassed Belgad enough. Rescuing the sergeant had to be the priority, but he still hoped for a chance to end the large northerner's life.

Percifidus found himself with nothing to do until the Liar returned, so he sat on the stool next to Gris's unmoving body and waited. Belgad had left Lalo the Finder with the vivisectionist, but the two had nothing to say to one another.

Lalo stood as still as the unconscious sergeant, his hands clasped in front of him near the room's open door.

The servant and the vivisectionist had not been long in their silence when both heard soft steps approaching through the hall outside the room.

Lalo turned to the sound. "Did you placate him, my lord?"

A black fist caught the Finder in the face sending him reeling to the floor in front of the table.

"Oh my." Percifidus stood away from the stool.

"Do not move." Kron entered the room with his new sword pointed at the vivisectionist.

Lalo touched his broken nose, which was leaking red down his robes. Kron gave the man credit for not crying or calling out; it would have been the end of his life if he had done either.

The Finder glared up at the man who had wounded him. "What do you want?"

"Him." Kron's sword pointed at Gris.

Lalo gave a snake's smile. "Take him if you like, but you'll never make it out of the house."

"I beg to differ. It appears someone has already taken care of the guards." Kron wore an evil smile of his own.

Lalo moved to stand.

"Don't." Kron waved his weapon in front of the Finder's face.

Lalo remained sitting on the floor, but his face showed he was not happy about it.

"You," Kron said, turning his blade toward the vivisectionist, "untie the sergeant."

Percifidus glanced at Gris. "He's leashed with leather straps. I'll have to cut them."

"Then proceed, but do so very carefully. I'm only a hair away from finishing you both as it is."

With shaking hands, Percifidus reached out slowly and lifted his small knife from the table and began to saw at the bindings around one of Gris's wrists.

Lalo used a sleeve to wipe the blood from beneath his nose as he glared up at Kron. "Even without guards, Belgad will take care of you."

"Just like at his party?" Kron's words held some mirth, but he continued to watch every move of Percifidus.

Lalo sat back, resting on his hands. "He is not alone. He is upstairs in his library this minute with Professor Markwood from the college of magic. I am sure the professor can deal with you."

Kron gave a brief glance to the Finder before turning his eyes back on the vivisectionist. "Then your master can explain why he was trying to kill the professor's friend."

Lalo sneered beneath his crumpled nose. "You mean that healer?"

"Exactly. I don't think Markwood would appreciate —"

The blade came in high, aimed for Kron's throat. He barely had time to step back and avoid the slash before Percifidus was swinging the knife around for another attack.

The short, plump man had caught Kron off guard. The vivisectionist no longer looked afraid. The animal instinct to kill had replaced the fear in his eyes. He had used his own deceptive appearance and Lalo's distraction to his advantage.

Kron mentally scolded himself for making another mistake, for not paying more attention to the possible threat Percifidus presented. But he had no time to linger on his thoughts. The knife was coming in for a killing stab.

Instinct and training took over. Kron sidestepped Percifidus's blade, twirled and swung his own sword.

A meaty chopping noise followed as the heavy blade cut through the vivisectionist's throat, spraying streams of blood on the gray walls.

Percifidus remained on his feet. His knife dropped as he grabbed at his throat in a vain attempt to stem the flow of life. It was too late, however, and the man's froggy eyes rolled back in his head. He splattered to the floor in his own gore.

Kron pointed his dripping sword at the Finder. "Release the sergeant."

After witnessing the vivisectionist's scarlet death, Lalo wasted no time doing what he had been told. In less than a minute, Gris's bindings were removed.

Kron's luck still held. Belgad had not returned.

But the man in black could not leave Lalo free. The Finder was no combatant, and to Kron's knowledge had never killed anyone. Belgad's servant would live.

"My apologies." Kron threw another punch.

The Finder bounced back from the blow and crashed into the wall. He slid to the ground still conscious, but he now wore a black eye.

"Sorry, again." Kron smirked and stepped forward.

Lalo put up an arm to shield himself, but it was no good. Two more punches and Belgad's man was out cold.

Kron rubbed his gloved knuckles. "Must be losing my touch."

Unaware of the events going on beneath his feet, Belgad marched into his library, slamming the door open before entering.

Maslin Markwood sat in one of the cushioned chairs facing the desk. The old wizard's gray beard hung over his dark robes as he twisted in his seat to glare at the master of the house.

Belgad noticed the flames in the fireplace were higher and brighter than he had left them. A bottle of Ursian brandy from his personal stock sat uncorked on top of the desk. A short glass with a hint of brown liquor in its bottom sat on the corner of the desk nearest the wizard.

The northerner had not known what to expect, but he would not have guessed this. From what Lalo had said, Belgad had expected the magician to be in an uproar.

“Welcome. Have a seat.” Markwood waved at the chair behind the desk. “It is your house, after all.”

“Yes, it is.” Anger was building behind the Dartague’s eyes, but he was smart enough to remain wary. Belgad feared no man, but Markwood was more than a man. Magic, in the northerner’s experience, was not to be trusted, and Markwood was said to be one of the most powerful wizards in the city.

Belgad cautiously made his way behind the desk and sat, scanning the room to make sure everything was in place and he was in no imminent danger.

“I suppose you know why I am here.” The wizard reached for the glass.

Belgad watched the old man throw back the last of the drink. The wizard did not appear drunk, but his subdued behavior unsettled the Dartague.

Markwood slammed his glass on the desk hard enough for a narrow crack to appear in the drinking vessel. “Where is he?”

“I know not the location nor the condition of the healer.”

Markwood’s unblinking eyes remained on the much larger man.

Belgad watched the mage tighten his grip on the nearly-shattered glass. “Is that why you have invaded my home and disabled my guards?”

Markwood’s dark gray eyebrows creased. “I know much of what happened today. Randall’s use of the ring was difficult not to notice. The presence of the war demons was even harder to ignore. I know Randall was at the cemetery, and I know three demons made an appearance. By the time I arrived at the cemetery, all I found were dead men, all of them known to work for you. After that, I do not know what became of Randall. You will tell me.”

“I have nothing to say.”

“Are you positive?”

“I cannot tell you of what I do not know.”

Markwood stared a moment further at the northerner, his dark look growing more hard, then he turned to the fireplace. He pursed his lips as if he were kissing the air, then spat a straight line of auburn fluid across the room into the fire.

As soon as the liquid reached the flames, a blaze sprang from the hearth and shot up the wall to catch afire the bottom of a scarlet tapestry threaded in gold.

Belgad looked more annoyed than frightened.

The wizard gestured and the fires attacking the tapestry disappeared as if a strong wind had blown through the room.

The northerner did not look overly impressed. “Very nice, but it will get you nowhere.”

“If I find you are not telling the truth and Randall has been harmed,” the wizard said with gritted teeth, “I will return and burn away everything in this household. I will melt all your gold, slay all your soldiers and watch the bricks of this place crumble to the ground.”

Belgad leaned forward, his elbows resting on his desk as his hands formed into a triangle beneath his chin. “I have taken into consideration who you are and what you mean to this community, but do not make the mistake of threatening me.”

“I do not threaten.” Markwood stood, looming. “I only make you aware of certain possibilities.”

“Then allow me to provide my own possibilities. If you ever intrude upon my home again, I will be forced to arrange for one of my swords to intermingle with your intestines.”

Markwood nodded. “It is good we understand one another.”

“Yes.”

The wizard spun, his robes billowing out behind him, and marched out of the library.

The large northern man sat and pondered the wizard's words. Belgad would have to do something about increasing the magical security of his home. With Trelvigor gone, he would need a new wizard, one who was not so insane.

Chapter Thirty One

Randall and Kron had agreed to meet later in the night at an abandoned warehouse near the Docks.

When the man who wore black met up with the healer again, he brought along three horses, the woman Adara and the sergeant, who was still in a stupor.

Exhausting himself near to passing out, Randall used the last of his strength to heal Gris.

Within minutes the sergeant came around but remained groggy.

He found himself on his back on a floor of wooden beams. "What happened?"

"Much," Kron said, returning from bedding down the horses in another part of the warehouse. He explained about the war demons at the cemetery, Adara's leaving Fortisquo and Gris's rescue from the hands of a man Randall identified as Percifidus the vivisectionist.

"It is probably better for all that man is no longer among the living." The healer surprised himself at his strong words describing Percifidus.

Gris looked about at his surroundings. "Where are we?"

Kron answered. "A warehouse on the Docks."

Surrounded by his companions and rows upon rows of stacked crates and barrels, Gris knew he was lucky to be alive. Beneath the only light, an oil lamp Randall had scrounged from a room in back of the warehouse, the sergeant stared into the faces of the three sitting or kneeling around him. First there was Randall Tendbones, the young healer who apparently was a Kobalan prince on the run from his father. Second was Adara Corvus, an accomplished sword fighter who had left Fortisquo and Belgad's service because she felt drawn to learn from the darkest of the group. Finally Gris turned to look at Kron Darkbow, a man who had until recently lived by another name, who showed no fear of his enemies and seemed intent upon destroying them.

The sergeant's gaze remained on the man he had once know as Lucius Tallerus. "What happens now?"

Kron glanced from Randall to Adara, then turned to the sergeant. "We are heading to Kobalos."

Gris nearly choked. "What in Ashal's name for?"

Randall sat on the floor next to the downed city guard sergeant "It is time I faced my father, Lord Verkain. I can run from him all my life, but it will do no good. Sooner or later he would catch up to me, and before then many could be harmed."

Gris looked to the healer. "What are you going to do when you face Verkain?"

Randall shook his head. "I don't know."

Kron spoke up, his words, blunt. "Verkain needs to die."

"By Ashal, you're all insane." Gris glanced around the group. "Taking on Belgad was bad enough, but this is beyond anything I've ever heard."

"Verkain must pay for Wyck's death." Kron eased himself down on a crate. "He might not have been directly involved, but it was still his doing. If his war demons had not been —"

Gris cut him off. "If you hadn't started this stupid war with Belgad in the first place, none of this would have happened. I knew I should have arrested you that day in your room."

Kron's hard features softened into a grin. "On what charges?"

"I could have come up with something. The captain wouldn't take your word over mine, and I don't think you would have fought against me."

Kron's stare was Gris's answer.

"Where we are going is besides the point," Adara interrupted. "We have to get out of Bond and soon. Belgad and Fortisquo will be on our trail."

The man in black looked to the woman. "I am not finished with Belgad."
The healer appeared confused. "What are you talking about?"
Gris sighed. "He's going back to the mansion." He looked up at Kron. "Aren't you?"

"Stilp!" Belgad screamed.

The little man came running down the stairs into the basement. He pulled himself to a halt when he saw his employer standing in the center of the small room that was supposed to have been Sergeant Gris's torture chamber. Instead of the sergeant on the table, Stilp found Percifidus and Lalo stretched out on the ground, the vivisectionist looking the worse of the two with his throat split open and drying blood caking his clothes.

Belgad glared at the scene, his sandals splashed with the blood he was standing in. "Darkbow."

Stilp's gaze darted about the room as if he expected the man in black to swoop from a shadow.

"If not for Markwood's reputation, I would have thought he and Darkbow had worked together."

Stilp moved to Lalo and knelt next to the man. "At least the Finder is still breathing."

Belgad turned for the stairwell.

Stilp stood and stared at his master's back. "What do you want me to do?"

Belgad did not answer, and he did not stop climbing stairs.

"Oh hell." Stilp followed his employer.

Belgad stomped up the stairs to the front chamber of his house. He paused long enough to stare at the unconscious guards at the front door, then headed up another flight of stairs.

Stilp popped out of the door to the basement and chased after his boss. "What are we going to do?"

"I am going to my bed chamber." The Dartague did not halt his motion. "There I am going to take down my sword hanging on the wall, and then I am going to find Kron Darkbow and chop him into meat!"

"That's easier said than done." The familiar voice was above.

Belgad and Stilp looked up the stairs to see Kron at the top landing near the door to the library. The long blade of a sword protruded from the darkness of the man in black's cloak.

Belgad came to a stop. "You!"

"We've not finished our business." Kron waved his sword about. "You still owe me for the lives of the Tallerus family."

Belgad half turned to Stilp. "Find any guards you can. If none are awake, wake them."

Stilp knew better than to ask a question. He jogged back down the stairs.

The blade of Kron's sword continued to dance in the air before him. "Do you need your boys to do your work for you?"

Belgad launched himself, covering the distance to Kron in a single mighty bound.

A look of surprise on his face, Darkbow backpedaled, keeping the point of his weapon in front to ward off his attacker.

Belgad landed on the top step and crouched as if ready to leap again. "Don't think for a second that hunk of metal is going to keep me from tearing you apart."

In control of himself again, Kron grinned.

Belgad jumped.

The man in black slashed. The sword's tip caught the bulky Dartague across the chest, slicing open his white toga and leaving a gash of red.

The big, bald northerner ignored his wound. He swung out with a fist, missing only because his foe ducked, then powered around with a punch from his other hand.

The blow was not direct, but it caught Kron on the side of the head and sent him trundling back along the railed balcony.

Belgad moved in, his fists still swinging.

Doing the unthinkable, Kron slammed his sword into its sheath on his back. Then he stepped into his foe.

Belgad had not anticipated the move, and was taken off balance as he tried to correct his attack for a nearer enemy.

Kron smashed out with a gloved fist, connecting with the center of the larger man's face.

The Dartague's body shook for a second and a glazed look crossed the man's eyes. Then he blinked and focused again. He glared at his opponent with a grin.

"Damn." Kron swung another fist.

Belgad was ready this time. He twisted to one side, and with his longer reach snapped out a hand to grab his foe's wrist.

Kron suddenly found himself held in place, but that did not mean he was helpless. His free hand yanked a dagger from his belt and stabbed.

The blade did not travel far, barely breaking the skin before Belgad's other hand grabbed the wrist holding the knife.

The two strong men struggled in place, their feet planted wide and their arms locked together. Sweat dripped off each of their brows as their breathing grew heavier and their eyes locked on one another.

Belgad pushed down on Kron's arms, trying to lower his opponent's defenses for a head butt, but the man in black proved as strong as the barbarian.

Kron tried to push his dagger home, to impale his foe on the small weapon, but Belgad was no weakling to allow such to happen.

They were at a stalemate.

Sounds of running feet and jingling chain armor from below drew their attention.

Stilp and a handful of guards were running along the hall for the stairs.

"Your time draws near." Belgad's wide grin showed blood in his teeth.

"As does yours." Kron bent back the dagger in one of his pinned hands and slashed with it, cutting into Belgad's bare wrist.

The Dartague screamed but held fast to his adversary.

Kron pushed and twisted the knife, cutting deeper and deeper until scarlet was flowing from the bulky northerner's arm.

Stilp and the guards were at the bottom of the stairs, charging up.

"Damn!" Belgad shoved back on Kron, freeing the man in black.

Darkbow saw a chance to escape and launched himself over the balcony railing.

Belgad slung out his good hand and snatched a fistful of Kron's cloak. "Got you!"

Kron was jarred, suddenly caught and hanging by his cloak, his feet kicking at air with the ground swaying below. The dagger bounced from his hand and fell, crashing to the floor.

"Get under him!" Belgad shouted.

Stilp and the guards turned and charged back down the stairs.

Kron gagged, the cloak tight around his neck cutting off his air. With blurring vision he glanced up, saw Belgad's outstretched arm holding him, and tried to reach the other dagger in his left boot. He pulled up his leg and stretched forth an arm, but the weapon was just out of reach.

The guards clambered toward his position.

Kron had no other choice. He slipped one of his precious grenades from a pocket of his belt and flipped it up and behind.

Belgad didn't know what hit him. Fire burst from behind the big man, spraying flames. Surprised and singed, the Dartague dropped his heavy foe, allowing Kron to fall to the ground.

The man in black landed in a roll, a hand sliding out to retrieve his dropped dagger before he came up on his feet. Stilp and the three guards suddenly found themselves facing a ready and armed Darkbow, but their eyes were pinned on the fire above.

Belgad screamed and moved back along the upstairs rail, fire licking at his heels.

“Good day, gentlemen.” Kron waved a hand, turned and fled deeper into the house.

Stilp and the others did not follow, suddenly busy scurrying for buckets and water.

Several minutes later, from atop the high wall surrounding Belgad’s grounds, Kron watched the flames growing in strength the front hall of the house. Screams and yells still came from within.

With a grin, Kron dropped outside the fence and took off at a run.

“It is done.”

The others in the warehouse stared at the man in black in surprise, as if they found it difficult to believe what he had said.

Randall was the first to speak. “Belgad is dead?”

Kron nodded. “I believe so.”

Gris did not appear overjoyed with the news. “Thus falls a legend.”

Adara’s mood was little better. “It’s not over. Fortisquo will be after us, or at least after me.”

“The war demons might be able to follow us, too,” Randall pointed out. “I definitely won’t be able to use the ring again, or it will draw them to us.”

Gris patted the healer on a shoulder. “Markwood could handle them.”

Randall frowned as he looked to the sergeant. “I don’t want Maslin involved any more than he already is. The less he knows, the safer he will be.”

Gris nodded and turned his attentions on Kron. “I can’t change your minds about going to Kobalos, can I?”

Kron shook his head. Adara and Randall remained silent.

“So you’ve taken on the most powerful businessman and underworld figure in Bond,” Gris continued to his friend, “and now you’re turning your sights to Kobalos and the most powerful madman on the continent. That makes perfect sense. Whatever happened to settling down, getting married, having a few kids and enjoying the good life?”

Kron face was impassive, like dead stone. “It died with my parents, and with Wyck.”

“It died with my parents, too,” Adara added.

Randall saw no reason not to join. “And mine when my father murdered the rest of my family.”

Kron smirked at the sergeant. “It’s not as if you have become a family man.”

“No, but I had hoped I’d put most of this type nonsense behind me when I left the Prisonlands.”

Gris grumbled and stared about at the other three.

Kron’s only response was a darker grin.

“When are you leaving and which way are you going?” Gris then interrupted himself. “No, don’t tell me. The less I know the safer it will be for the three of you.”

The others gave one another surprised looks.

“You will be going with us,” Kron said.

“Me? No.” Gris shook his head. “You can ride faster without me.”

Adara seemed the most disturbed by the idea, her voice pitched high. “It won’t be safe for you here.”

“Fortisquo and Verkain will be busy hunting you three.”

“You would be taking a large risk,” Randall said.

Gris turned to look at the healer. “Do you honestly think I will be safer on the road with you three?”

None of the others had an answer. They knew the truth. Their path would be a dangerous one.

Kron also expected another potential danger. Kobalos lay far to the northeast, a month's hard ride. The mountain range called the Needles lay between West Ursia and the eastern part of the continent. Once over the Needles, the group would have to travel through either the Prisonlands or East Ursia to reach Kobalos. Neither path was appealing and each had dangers of its own. The only other option was an oceanic route through the northern sea, and that way was little better what with the snowy cold conditions and Jorsican pirates.

"He's right." Kron looked to Randall and Adara after having pondered Gris's words. "He will be as safe in Bond as he would on the road with us. Also, he can serve a purpose by letting Markwood know we are not in immediate danger."

The healer's eyes flared. "I said I did not want Maslin involved."

Kron spun on Randall, then eased his approach. "If he is not told something, he will try to find you himself. And as you yourself said, he is likely to try and join our band. While his aid would be appreciated and helpful, there is little use in us endangering an old man."

Randall appeared taken back by the last words. "That old man is the greatest wizard living."

No one could disagree with the healer.

"When are you setting out?" Gris asked.

"The morning sun will be up within the hour." Kron glanced toward high windows in the warehouse walls. "We'll rest until then. If you want us to, we will escort you to Markwood. If not, then we'll make sure you are in condition to meet him. Either way, we will be leaving before noon."

The morning was one of mute sadness. None of the group spoke as they stoically ate a breakfast of biscuits and tarts Adara purchased from a near vending booth.

Kron's lips turned up slightly as he stared at the blueberry tart in his hands. The meal reminded him of Wyck and the sweet treats the boy used to buy with the money Kron gave him.

After breakfast, they packed what gear they had on their horses and mounted up outside the warehouse.

Kron reached down from his horse and shook Gris's hand. "Are you sure you don't want us to come with you to Markwood's?"

Gris gave a weak smile. "I'll be safe enough. It's you lot Ashal needs to be watching."

Randall steered his animal to the other side of the sergeant and reached down to shake the man's hand. "Tell Maslin not to worry. It will be some time before we reach Kobalos, and that is when the real danger will begin."

Gris grinned up at the younger man. "I will do as you say, but don't be surprised if the old wizard shows up on your trail."

Randall laughed as he steered away. "I wouldn't at all be surprised."

Adara sat unmoving in her saddle. She had no one for the sergeant to pass words along to.

Gris turned to the woman but did not approach. "Fortisquo will be looking for you." He smiled with gritted teeth. "I hope you give him the end of your blade."

Adara returned the ferocious smile. "Thank you," she said, and she meant it. The words of encouragement soared through her. She feared Fortisquo, but not because he was a grand master of the rapier; she feared the man because of the betrayal she had done to him and the emotional pain it had caused both of them. Still, she would not have done things differently. Life was a challenge, and Adara always sought more challenges. Kron offered her training to face those challenges and he and Randall brought along enough challenge of their own.

Kron sauntered forward. "We should be going."

The three riders directed their horses away from the sergeant as he waved a goodbye.

Kron turned in his saddle and gave Gris a two-fingered salute, the sign for recognition of one Prisonlands border warden to another.

Still smiling, the sergeant returned the salute, fearing he would never see his old friend or the others again.

Kron steered the others across the North River bridge and into Uptown, thinking Belgad would not have as many contacts in the wealthiest section of the city, thus lessening any chances they would run across spies of the Dartague.

The group remained quiet for most of the ride through the town's crowded morning streets until they spied several city guards speaking with two men wearing chain shirts and carrying long, heavy swords near the eastern gates of the walled city.

Randall pulled his steed to a stop next to Kron. "They could be Belgad's men."

Kron showed no signs of pulling away. "Keep riding."

To their surprise, they were not stopped by the city guard nor the other two men.

"They must not have a description of us," Kron said as they made their way through the gates and away from the city.

Once they were nearly a mile outside the walls, Darkbow halted his horse and turned in his saddle to stare back at the city he had called home as a boy and had come to know again in the last month. He gave the warden's salute again and turned to face forward, riding east next to the river and his traveling companions.

Continued in:

Road to Wrath: Book II of The Kobalos Trilogy

and

Dark King of the North: Book III of The Kobalos Trilogy

About the author

Ty Johnston is the author of several novels and short story collections and a former newspaper journalist who has been writing fiction for nearly twenty years. When not busy writing or reading, he enjoys spending time with his wife, their beagle and house rabbits. To find out more, check out his blog at tyjohnston.blogspot.com. Also, sign up for the [author's newsletter](#).

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