

Dimension Shifter

Published by T.M. Nielsen

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Chapter 1

Kyrin crouched down behind a tall stone crypt and readied her flail in her hand. Her breathing was slow and steady. It wasn't the first time she'd been attacked, nor the first time she'd had to spill blood because of her past. She scanned the area around her with big brown eyes, eyes that darkened to almost black when she was mad.

She was a petite woman, but muscular from years of fighting. Though magic was her preferred weapon, she wasn't above using brute force if necessary. Her long brown hair was tied into a thick braid that fell down her back and brushed the back of her knees, and a thin scar ran along the side of her face.

She was beautiful, but hid behind lowered hoods and kept to the shadows. She took offense to being thought of or called beautiful. In her world, beauty was something that could easily get you killed and most who flaunted it were brainless and dim-witted. Beautiful women were sold as wives or bartered for the lives of the family.

She heard footsteps approaching, footsteps of the Shadowmere Consortium. They'd been following her for the past six years, ever since she escaped from their slavery. Since her escape, they sought her out as a lost prized possession. They'd spent years honing her magic and turning her into a powerful sorcerer, and the Shadowmere never let such time and money go to waste. They had use of her abilities, and her capture was their main focus.

"Come out, little one," a gruff voice called out. Waymen was the head Apprehender for the Shadowmere Consortium, and was the first to find her trail into this new dimension, "You can't hide from us anymore. You're cornered here."

Kyrin looked around carefully, searching for any sign that a portal was near. Her innate ability to dimension shift had kept her alive for the six years she spent on the run, but first, she had to find a key to open the portal. The Shadowmere weren't natural dimension shifters, but were quickly learning some of the portal ways.

This dimension was full of the dead. A place dimension shifters used to hide the bodies of loved ones so the undead Consortium, the Nosata, wouldn't find them and use their corpses as minions. Beautifully carved headstones and elaborately decorated tombs filled the dimension, and the smell of death was strong on the wind.

"She's here," Waymen said to another of the Shadowmere.

"Aye, she is."

"Kyrin, you can't hide from us anymore! Mika has promised you won't be punished if you'll turn yourself over to us. We won't hurt you."

Kyrin knew it was a lie. The Shadowmere were master torturers and punished for even the smallest crime. Most of their devoted minions were tortured into submission, and Kyrin had spent many

nights in their torture rooms. It was during one of their brutal tortures that her magic began to form, and also when the Shadowmere found out that their indentured slave was more than just a new servant, she was a weapon.

Mika, leader of the Shadowmere Consortium, oversaw Kyrin's training and personally watched over her daily life. It was rumored he was going to add her to his concubine when she became of age, but when she ran from him at the young age of 11, she was still a year away from that.

Hiding, she was reminded of that night six years ago, when she first saw the shiny coin on the ground. At first, she ignored it. She had more on her mind at the time than scavenging lost coins from the ground. She'd just escaped from Mika's room, where his training had turned more into a personal nature, and her instinct to run kicked in. Using forbidden magic, she got away, and had hidden from the Shadowmere's Apprehension Crews in a small graveyard outside of the city.

By the time the Shadowmere passed, she realized she would need money to find transportation away from the city and away from Mika and his crews.

She also worried that the Clemency Consortium would be after her for breaking the laws. Their name was a far cry from their true nature, and they had appointed themselves the law enforcement. Breaking the laws of magic restriction was punishable by death, and Kyrin had used magic to get away from Mika's unwanted advances. All magic was banned by the Clemency Consortium because it was unnatural and seemed evil to the self-proclaimed Consortium of mercy.

As soon as the 11-year-old had picked up the coin, the doorway appeared in front of her. It wasn't like any doorway she'd seen. It was more of an outline, a tall rectangular outline that shone brightly in the night. Though almost blinding, it caused nothing to

cast a shadow, and didn't seem to draw the attention of anyone nearby. It opened slowly and beyond it, Kyrin had seen a new land, one covered in dead fields and dry wastelands.

Having no other choice, she stepped through it and looked behind her. In the bright light of day, the doorway was gone and only more hillside was behind her. There was no sign that the dark night had been there just moments before. She could feel it inside of her as soon as she stepped through the portal. She was born to walk between the dimensions, and the ability had saved her life.

Six years later she was still on the run. Kyrin looked around again, hoping to find something that would point her to a new dimension. She silently prayed to her god that he would bring her help, but he often neglected his followers and enjoyed seeing them punished and abused. She tried anyway, and when she opened her eyes, she saw it from across the graveyard. The small stick was lying up against a rock wall, and would be inconspicuous to anyone other than those with dimension shifting in their blood.

Two of the Shadowmere were standing right beside it as they looked around for any sign of her. They were in the usual Shadowmere garb, worn black armor, their faces hidden behind thick metal faceplates. Kyrin knew that beneath the armor were bodies rippled with muscles and covered in battle scars and mutilated flesh. The Shadowmere never wore cloaks. They hindered their fighting, and the Shadowmere were well-known for and very much feared for their fighting skills.

Kyrin had to act fast. Portal keys were never around for long, and if she didn't get out of this dimension soon, the Shadowmere were going to track her down. She could only imagine the horrors she would face after being on the run for six years. During that time, she'd killed five of the Shadowmere's Apprehension Team and injured countless others. It was time to fight the best way she knew how, with magic.

She tucked her flail carefully into her belt and clenched her hands into tight fists. Anger fueled her magic, something else the Shadowmere had taught her. She knew of a magic shield that would protect her from projectiles, but wouldn't stop the hard steel from a sword, so it wouldn't help her now. Kyrin shut her eyes and whispered an incantation as her hands lightly clasped together, the spell would hopefully buy her the time to get to the portal and get the door shut behind her.

She felt the pull from within as her soul split and her exact image was projected off to the side of the graveyard. She had to work quickly. Any damage her split image took was inflicted on her when that part of her soul reconnected in her body. .

“Hey!” one of the Shadowmere yelled, and then readied his sword and ran at her image, followed by the other one. A thunder of loud footfalls sounded as the rest of the Apprehension Crew heard their call and came to help. They didn't take her magic for granted and knew she thought nothing of killing them to get away, so they sent full force in the direction of her image.

Her boots carried her faster than most mortals, a gift from a friend, and she rounded the tallest crypt and ran for the twig. Its image began to shimmer, and she cursed herself for waiting too long to make a break for it.

“Kyrin!” Waymen screamed just as she grabbed the stick, and a lit portal appeared. He wouldn't be able to see it. Only those born into dimension shifting could see the outline of an activated portal, but he knew what she was about to do, and that she used illegal magic to trick them.

Kyrin disappeared through the door and shut it less than a second after her alter-image faded, and her soul became one. Once she was sure the Shadowmere couldn't get through the same portal, she looked around. She wasn't familiar enough with the

dimensions to know which led to which, so she was always on guard when she walked through a portal.

As she surveyed the area, she drew her flail and felt its comforting weight in her hand. The black leather handle was custom fit to her hand. From the top hung three thick chains, each ending in a spiked ball and each of varying length. The Shadowmere were weapon experts, and their weapon specialists had made the flail, specifically to work off of her strengths. It was small enough to be easily tucked away if she had to change tactics and switch to magic.

Nothing jumped out at her from behind any of the trees in the dense forest she stood in. A tiny stream ran alongside where she had walked through the portal, and when she couldn't hear anyone around, she bent down and drank deeply. The dirty, tepid water was the first water she'd had in over a week and was a rare commodity in the dimensions. Water was what drove the formation of the Consortiums and made men rich, and other men dead.

From a small bag on her hip, she produced a leather flask, and she held it in the water and waited patiently while the slow trickle filled it. She put the stopper in and hung it from her belt before leaning down for another drink. As she stood, she carefully scanned the trees for anything she could eat.

Food was another thing she was used to doing without. It wasn't uncommon for the Shadowmere to use starvation as a punishment, and since being on the run, it was getting harder and harder to come by. Sometimes a small rabbit would give its life to keep her fed, but she would go days without seeing anything to eat.

Thievery was something Kyrin refused to do. The Shadowmere thought nothing of stealing, though the Dieb Consortium were the true thieves. Kyrin found it disgusting to take from others, even though her own god was often worshiped by the same Assassins

and pick-pockets that made up the Dieb Consortium. There were no deities in the Kyrstalis Dimension. It wasn't until she began to dimension shift that she even heard of such a being.

As she walked slowly toward the rising suns, she thought this dimension held nothing of value. It was beautiful, something she didn't find appealing. Beauty was useless. What she needed was wildlife and plants to eat, and a good cave to hide in so she could nurse her wounds and find some sort of peace. She'd neglected her god long enough. It was hard to pray when looking down the long sword of an angry man, but he demanded a certain level of reverence, and she didn't want to cross him.

Kyrin sighed, looking around the quiet forest, and wondered if there was anything alive at all on this dimension. She was reminded of the death river dimension. She didn't know the true name of it, but all it held was a river that brought death if touched. Bodies floated in it, bodies that were bloated and decayed, but were still able to reach out and grab you if you got too close.

For hours, she walked along the little stream. When she found water, she wasn't about to lose sight of it, most certainly not in this quiet land. If there was any sign of civilization, it would be around the water. When the suns began to set at her back, she found a clearing alongside the stream and sat down for the night.

She had no blankets, no warmth, but she was used to sleeping on the ground under the stars. This dimension had three moons, and she watched as they rose above her. Once the moons were directly overhead, she knew it was time to thank her god for helping her out of the world of the dead.

Kyrin pulled a dagger out of her bag. One embellished with jewels and stained red with blood that would no longer wash off. She drew an elaborate 'D' into the dirt around her and then knelt inside of it. She lowered her hands and dropped her eyes to the ground.

Her voice was quiet and passionate as she concentrated and thanked her god for his help. When she was done, she braced for it. Daemionis often required blood in return for helping his faithful, and there was no telling when he was appeased with words, or when he required pain and suffering.

Kyryn fell back against the ground when the pain hit. An intense burning filled her chest, and she writhed in agony as a scream escaped her lips. Blood-stained her tunic and spread quickly across her chest, then began to pool beneath her on the ground. Her back arched as the pain continued and her screams pierced the night.

When it stopped, she rolled onto her hands and knees and fought to catch her breath.

“Repayment is complete.” The stern voice sounded from around her, though no one could be seen. The voice seemed distant and uncaring.

She nodded and finally whispered, “Thank you.”

Without moving from the blood-soaked ground, Kyryn collapsed and instantly fell asleep.

The sun in her eyes woke her up, and she opened them slowly and looked around the small clearing. She got lucky that the Shadowmere hadn’t caught her while she recovered from Daemionis’ influence.

Her stomach growled as she crawled over to the water and drank, grimacing at the stale taste of it. When she got up, she stretched and checked in her shirt to make sure Daemionis hadn’t left a wound. He never did, but it was still something she checked.

After trying to eat a leaf and finding it bitter and inedible, Kyryn gathered her small amount of personal items into a bag on her belt and started walking up the stream again. When the trees ended, a

dead grassland stretched out before her, and she continued to follow the stream. The suns beat down on her, and she debated heading back into the trees, but was still hoping to find something to eat.

It had been five days since she'd had a bite to eat, and then it was only a rat that she found burrowing under a bush. She didn't have fire, but devoured it, tearing its flesh with her teeth as it squealed and tried to get out of her grasp. She grimaced at the thought, and wondered what would become of her if she didn't find a place to rest for a while, a place with fresh water and food.

As night fell again, she made camp beside the stream and then laid back and looked up at the stars. The moons were partially hidden by clouds, and she turned to look off to her left when a bright light flashed. The crack of thunder sounded moments later. She didn't plan on finding refuge from the impending rain. Water was water, and she wouldn't turn it away at any cost.

Before falling asleep, Kyrin felt pangs of loneliness and wished she could find Paramide Dimension again. Her only friend lived there, and it was also home to her god. She knew of one dimension that attached to Paramide, and that was Kyrstalis, home to the Consortiums that were out to get her.

Kyrin rolled onto her side and was soon asleep with her hands under her face and her flail tucked in at her side.

A noise woke her up, a soft snap from far away. In such a quiet land, that small sound jerked her senses, and she flew to her feet with her flail in her hand, readied to defend herself. She scanned the grass around her, and nothing moved as far as she could see. Not even a breeze came up to shift the grass, but she felt like she was being watched.

Kyrin squatted low in the tall grass, and she was thankful she was small enough to hide behind it. Her height often helped hide her in

times of need. As she slowed her breath and concentrated, she heard another sound. She was trapped. If she stood up and ran, she would be out in the open and an easy target to anyone with a bow.

Her hand tightened on her flail, and she heard footsteps heading toward her. They were heavy, and the distinct sound of moving metal echoed through the silent land. The sound sent shivers up her spine and made her heart race. It was the sound of armor.

The Shadowmere weren't smart enough to be quiet, but they never needed to be. Their very presence sent terror through anyone around them, so they wanted it known when they were around. Kyrin learned a lot about hiding since she escaped from them, but she learned a lot about fighting from them, and she was ready when they were near enough that she could hear them speak.

"Mika said he no longer cares if she's dead or not. It's an embarrassment," Waymen said, looking out along the grass.

"But if we can get her alive?" someone asked.

Waymen sounded pleased, "Then we get a stipend, and she gets to become his wife."

"He knows that would produce magical children."

"Yes, but he thinks he can beat magic out of a child and turn it into a fighter."

"She has to be here."

"Oh, she's here," Waymen said. "I can feel her. That bitch has another thing coming if she thinks she can hide from me for much longer."

Kyrin shut her eyes and forced her breathing to slow and her heart to beat normally. Magic was negatively influenced by

nervousness, and she had to be strong to get away from the Shadowmere again. Though not natural dimension shifters, they were learning quickly how to travel through the dimensions, and she knew she had to find somewhere to get some rest.

She had injuries that were being neglected, and she hadn't rested for more than a few hours in weeks, and her body was starting to give out on her.

"Well spread out," Waymen said. "Comb this grass and find her."

Kyrin felt her hands begin to tingle as she chanted softly. The spells came naturally, and she could never explain where the words and incantations came from. This instinctive ability scared the Shadowmere worse than anything.

When Kyrin stood up, she took a step back as she came face-to-face with the massive members of the Apprehension Crew.

Waymen smiled and pulled his sword, "Time to stop running, Kyrin."

Her hands glowed at her side, and Waymen's smile faltered.

"I'm not coming back with you, and you can tell Mika he's next on my list of dead Shadowmere," Kyrin said. She tried to make her words commanding and fierce, but her hesitancy made Waymen smile.

"Interesting, but not true. It's time to come with us. We can kill you now. Our orders have changed."

"Come and get me then," she said. They came at her and she immediately threw her hand forward. A green ball of flame shot out of it and slammed against two of the closest Shadowmere, who instantly fell to the ground, writhing in pain.

Kyrin turned to run. Another advantage of her size was her speed. She hoped the Shadowmere never realized that their heavy armor hindered their ability to move quickly. She almost immediately gained a good lead, and began throwing her hands toward them, pelting them with green balls of light. When they hit a Shadowmere, they would fall back in pain.

A single arrow flew through the air and lodged deep into her thigh. She screamed and her hands instantly began to lose their green glow. She limped over and headed for the dying trees, struggling to keep her distance from the advancing forces.

“Kyrin!” Waymen screamed, partially laughing. “Are you injured dear? I smell blood.”

Her heart was pounding, and blood poured out of her leg as she limped as fast as she could, trying to get away. When she saw the flat rock, well away from any water, she knew she’d found another portal. With bloody hands, she picked it up and then disappeared just as Waymen came into sight. He slammed into the portal door when it closed, and Kyrin leaned against it from the other side, bracing in case he figured out how to come through.

Once she knew she was away from them again, she turned slowly and looked out over the mountainous terrain. There was dirty snow covering most of the rocky surface of the mountain, and she looked down hundreds of feet to a valley far below. Blood dripped out from the embedded arrow and fell onto the rocks behind her as she walked over to the side of the small plateau.

Kyrin sighed with relief when she saw an abandoned structure not far below her. Its destroyed walls still held the shape of a large manor, long since forgotten at the top of the vast mountain. Half of it had a partial roof, and Kyrin planned on using that part to get out of the snow and assess the wound.

Kyrin couldn't find an easy path down, but got onto her knees and lowered herself carefully to a rock outcropping just below where she was standing. She had to ignore the growing pain in her leg as she maneuvered down the sheer face of the cliff toward the ruins.

When her feet sunk into the snow at the base of the cliff, she turned slowly and looked over the tall walls of what once was a grand castle. She limped toward the only shelter she could see, and then sat down and pulled off her belt and flail.

In her travels, she'd learned how to treat wounds correctly, and she knew better than to yank the arrow out of her thigh without having a tourniquet ready. She wrapped her belt around her leg, pulling hard with her teeth as her hands tied it into a knot, cutting off the blood supply.

Kyrin braced herself and, with shaky hands, pulled the arrow out of her leg. She bit against the belt and stifled a scream. Almost blacking out, she laid down on the cold ground and tossed the blood covered arrow off to the side. Once she was sure she wasn't going to pass out, she sat up and then pulled her pants down and away from the wound.

"Shamagiem," she whispered, and her hands began to glow red. Bracing herself, she touched her leg and then screamed when the wound began to burn. This time darkness invaded her vision as the magic began to cauterize the wound. She collapsed back against the cold ground until the pain began to subside and her head cleared.

Using what strength she had left, she backed up to one of the crumbling walls and then untied the belt from her leg before she shut her eyes to rest.

When she woke up, night had set in, and she could see her breath in the freezing air. She was shivering in the cold, but was finally able to summon the strength to stand slowly and get dressed. There was enough wood around to make a small fire, and she fell down beside it and warmed her hands.

Swift movement off to her side caught her eye, and a small creature came into view. She wasn't sure what it was, but it was going to be her next meal. It wasn't paying attention to her, so she was able to cast at it and immediately kill it. Within minutes, she was tearing at its flesh, too hungry even to bother cooking it.

Once she calmed the hunger pains, she looked around carefully, but didn't see or hear anything that would point to danger. She allowed herself one tiny swallow of water, and then leaned back against the ground to get some rest.

An hour later, the sound of fast running woke her up, and she stumbled to her feet with her flail in her hand. The footsteps were erratic and coming nearer. Within a few seconds, she could hear fast breathing and a soft panicked mumble.

Kyrin crouched low against the wall, hoping whoever it was would just run by. Her fire had long since died out and there was no other sign that she was even there.

She looked over when a tall, thin figure in a robe appeared and knelt down not ten feet from her. His back was to her, and he was peering around a pile of rubble, still mumbling incoherently. Just as she readied to kill him, the sound of hoof beats pounded in the darkness.

Kyrin looked up suddenly as four horsemen came into view. She held perfectly still, glad that the shadows hid her from obvious view.

“We told you that you cannot hide from us, Priest,” one of the horsed men said, laughing.

“Why are you doing this?” the man asked frantically.

“You know why! Your Lord has been the bane of my existence for years and how better to get back at him than to kill his loyal Priests.”

“He’ll not stand for this!” The Priest’s voice was high and squeaky.

“No he won’t, will he? He’ll be forced to come after me for this. I fully plan on dealing with him once and for all once I get him away from his adoring minions.”

The Priest stood up and shook his head, “No... no, don’t do this! Sithias will not stand for this.”

“I’m not afraid of your god!”

“Hey, look over there,” another of the mounted men said. Kyrin gasped when all of them turned to look at her.

She stood slowly and her hands immediately began to glow.

“Well hello there,” the closest one said, smiling down at her. She knew the look, and it infuriated her. It was the look one gave a helpless damsel, not someone they feared.

“I have no business with you,” Kyrin said angrily.

He rode his horse up closer to her, “Gorgeous thing, aren’t you?”

She scowled at him.

“Are you from Valhara?”

“No”

“You can’t be from Qualsax. I would have remembered you.”

“Again, I have no business with you, so I suggest you kill your Priest and get out of here,” she said, backing up a step. She reached in and grabbed her flail, reveling at the feel of its heavy steel in her grip.

He leaned his head back and laughed, “You don’t care if we kill him?”

“Why would I care?”

“Evil little wench, this one,” he said, smiling at the others.

Kyrin had had enough and swung her flail at the unsuspecting man’s neck. The sickening crunch of bones sounded as blood splattered across her and his horse. A gurgle escaped his dying lips, and he fell from his horse as the other men dismounted and came at her, no longer interested in the Priest.

She fell into a defensive posture after her hands touched, and she readied the flail in her right hand. Her left hand balled into a fist and began to flicker with a deep yellow.

The closest man frowned and took a step back, his sword dropping slightly, “What’s that?”

“She’s one of them magic people,” another replied, somewhat fascinated.

“There’s no magic anymore.”

Without letting them finish, she advanced on them. The first she took out with a face hit from her flail. She spun and ducked down under a sword, then brought her hand up toward him and shot a yellow arch of lightning directly at his chest. It disappeared inside of him and his eyes grew wide, moments before he exploded, sending raw flesh onto his companions.

Kyryn dodged just as one of them swung a long sword at her, but the second caught her in a tight grasp and turned her to face the other, with her hands trapped at her sides.

“You just killed two of the Qualsax Warriors!” he yelled, moments before backhanding her. She glared up at him and ignored the blood dripping from the corner of her mouth.

“You are under the mistaken impression that I care what a Qualsax Warrior is,” she yelled. She dropped suddenly, catching the man restraining her off guard. The second she was out of his grasp, she spun and brought her flail up squarely into his groin.

The white-hot stab hit her instantly, and she looked down just as the tip of a sword appeared from her stomach. Lightning erupted from all around her as she fell to her knees. The last thing she heard was someone shouting in a language she didn’t understand.

Chapter 2

“Dewell, bring her in here!” one of the Priests said from the doorway of a large temple.

The Priest who had first encountered Kyryn was carrying her toward the temple, and he was covered in her blood. He quickly ran up the stairs and laid her down on a wooden table. She was suddenly surrounded by twelve men, all wearing the same deep, purple robes.

“What happened?” one of them asked as he pressed his hands against the sword wound.

“I ran into four Qualsax Warriors while gathering wood. They chased me, and I found her out by the Borianna ruins. Just as they were going to kill me, they saw her and she... she fought them.”

“And she’s alive? How is that possible?”

Dewell’s voice dropped, “Magic.”

“This one cannot know magic.”

“I saw it.”

Without another word, they began to undress her to see if they could save her life. What they found under her worn and tattered clothing was a body riddled with fresh wounds and vicious scars.

“She’s very young,” yet another said.

“Yes, I think she is. Maybe she’s been a prisoner of Qualsax.”

“Maybe”

“What is this?” one of them asked, and pointed to her wrist. Burned onto the soft side of her wrist was a tiny ‘D’.

“I haven’t seen that mark before.”

“It could be a brand.”

“It could be a deity.”

“We need to inform Lord Alric immediately. We can’t heal her if she poses a risk to Valhara.”

“I’ll go,” Dewell said. He looked at her once more as one of the Priests covered her with a thin white sheet, and then he turned and ran out of the temple. He ran through the streets of Valhara and

toward the tall castle that stood at the base of a great mountain. It was heavily guarded, but they let the Priest through without question.

When Dewell entered the main foyer to the castle, he was met by one of Lord Alric's private guards, "What do you want, Dewell? Lord Alric is resting."

Dewell bowed, "I found a girl... out in the mountains by Boriana ruins."

"Why do we care?"

"She fought off four Qualsax Warriors."

"One girl did?"

"Yes, she used magic."

The guard grinned slightly, "She what?"

"She's injured badly and we're waiting for Lord Alric before helping her."

The guard nodded, "Very well. Go back to the temple and I will alert Lord Alric."

Dewell nodded and then turned and walked out of the castle.

The guard watched him leave and then turned to the nearest staircase. He quickly took the stairs, two at a time, and was soon on the top-most floor. Two more guards were standing before a set of intricately carved wooden doors. The guards bowed to him, and he knocked softly.

"Come," Lord Alric said. He was a tall man with broad shoulders and a well-muscled body. His blond hair was long, but tied back in a low ponytail. His age was somewhat hidden by a short goatee.

The guard walked in and bowed, "I'm sorry to bother you, Sir."

Lord Alric looked up from his book as he read in a lush chair by the fire, "No bother, Finn."

"Dewell has just come from the temple. He found a girl out by Borianan ruins, and they were attacked by Qualsax Warriors."

Lord Alric put his book down and stood up, frowning, "Is she dead, then?"

"No, my Lord. Dewell claims that she fought off all four of them... using magic."

Lord Alric smiled, "Magic?"

"Yes, my Lord. That's what he said."

"I doubt that. There hasn't been a magic user for almost a century."

"I know, Sir."

"I'll go take a look. Is she speaking?" Lord Alric asked as he pulled on a belt containing a long sword.

"No, Sir. She is badly injured, and the priests are waiting for your ok to heal her."

Alric started out of the room, "They better not have killed her by waiting, simply because Dewell thought he saw her use magic."

As they descended the steps, an older man appeared and looked up the stairs at them, "Sir?"

"You might as well come too, Trox," Alric said to him.

The elder man nodded and followed them down the stairs. He was in a long silver robe, and his white beard and mustache hung down against his chest, "Where are we going?"

Alric smiled, amused, "Dewell claims to have caught a magic user."

Trox rolled his eyes, "He has an imagination, that one."

"Yes, well. She's injured, and the priests don't want to heal her without my permission."

"I'm sure it's a misunderstanding."

"Yes, I agree."

Horses were waiting for them when they got out into the cold night air. They mounted quickly and then rode off toward the temple. The lights were on, and Dewell was waiting at the door for them.

Alric dismounted and tied his horse to a post, "She better still be alive, Dewell."

"She is, Sir. She isn't well though."

"Then you should have healed her immediately. This land needs no more casualties from Qualsax."

Dewell nodded and moved aside so they could enter. Alric shook his head and sighed when he saw the body laid out on the table. As he got nearer, his heart constricted at the wounds the small body held. Vicious scars were covered by bruises and fresh tears across her flesh. Her thigh was still tied tightly with a new bandage, but the skin beneath it was red and inflamed.

"Qualsax did this?" he asked, moving up to the table.

"Not all of this, Sir," Dewell explained. "The only damage she took from the Qualsax Warriors was the abdominal wound."

Alric turned to him, “This girl killed four Qualsax Warriors and only sustained a single injury?”

“Magic, Sir. She used magic.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yes, my Lord.”

Alric turned to her again, this time more guarded and leery, “Heal her. I want to speak to her.”

“She has seen battle,” one of them said as he gently laid his hands over the inflamed arrow wound on her thigh. A soft yellow glow appeared from under his hands and when he moved them away, the wound was gone. He removed the blood-soaked bandage and tossed it into the fire beside them.

“She could be dangerous,” another priest said. He was running his hands over the sword wound on her abdomen. When the wound didn’t heal, two other priests joined him. Their hands were glowing slightly, but the wound was taking a while to heal.

“Sir?” one of the priests said, lifting her hand. He flipped her hand over to expose the soft side of her wrist, and the ‘D’ burned there.

Alric moved forward and looked at it, “I’ve not seen that before.”

“It could be a property brand.”

“It could, though I’ve never seen one that small or in that location.”

“A lot of these scars are from early childhood,” one of the priests said. Alric looked over at him just as a light-blue glow erupted from his hands, and the scar beneath it disappeared.

Trox walked up and studied the scar that ran alongside her ear, “Even Qualsax wouldn’t have visibly scarred one so beautiful.”

“Yes, they do like their women beautiful, don’t they?” Alric said, standing back. “However, she’s dirty, dehydrated, and underweight. That is common for Qualsax slaves.”

“She wouldn’t be a slave, I daresay,” Dewell said as his hands ran along a fresh wound across her lower leg.

Alric nodded, “That is true.”

“What was she carrying?” Trox asked, looking around the room.

“There, on the table,” Dewell said, pointing to a small table beside the fire.

“That’s all?”

“Yes”

Trox went and looked through the small amount of belongings, “I’ve never heard of a magic user having a weapon.”

Alric walked over and picked up the flail, “I’ve never seen a weapon like this, either. It’s seen battle too.”

“Yes, it has. She has a flask of water, two gold coins, and a dagger that looks ceremonial to me.”

“Not many possessions. That again points to Qualsax. She couldn’t have been on the run for long.”

“The Qualsax Warriors claimed they hadn’t seen her before,” Dewell told them.

“It doesn’t make sense,” Trox said, shaking his head. “If she was in Qualsax, her owner would have shown her off to the others.”

“She’s scarred. He may have been ashamed.”

“Even scarred she is beautiful though.”

“My Lord?” one of the priests said. Alric turned and saw that the girl was now lying on her stomach. Her back was as covered in scars as her front, most of them indicative of lash marks.

Alric walked over to her and looked down on a beautifully tattooed wolf on her right shoulder, “Qualsax does not tattoo their women.”

“I wonder why a wolf. They are unpredictable and violent.”

“When she wakes, we’ll get answers,” Alric said. “Why is she still not waking up? She is mostly healed.”

“I forced her into a trance. She will heal faster if she is resting,” the closest priest said.

“When she is completely healed, clean her up and restrain her hands at her sides.”

“Sir?” he asked, looking over at his King.

“Magic user’s hands must touch to activate their power.”

“So you think she may use magic?”

“I don’t know. The stories of the magic users spoke of evil old men and withered, haggard women.”

“Evil wears on the soul,” Trox said. “The use of magic aged them before their time.”

“Still, restrain her hands. Even if she doesn’t use magic, she obviously knows how to fight.”

The priest nodded and began to warm water over the fire to clean her with.

Alric went back to her belongings and held the flail in his hand, “This weapon is weighted improperly.”

“Shoddy craftsmanship probably,” Finn said, and walked over.

“Don’t be so sure,” Trox said. “I’ve never seen anything like this. Why go to this amount of trouble to make such an ornate and deadly weapon if not to do it correctly?”

Alric gently set it down beside her things, “I am going to retire. Keep her unconscious through the night and I will come in the morning to talk to her.”

When Alric arrived at the temple the next day, the girl had been moved to a bed in one of the rooms on the first floor. The priests had put a simple white nightgown on her, and her hair was out of its braid and softly lying beside her. Her wrists were bound with soft leather, and she was deep asleep.

Dewell was waiting for Alric in her room, “Good morning, Sir.”

Alric looked down at her, “Is she completely healed?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“How old do you think she is?”

“Not quite 20 I would guess.”

“Wake her.”

Dewell put his hands over her head and softly began to chant. A blue glow emerged and covered her head for a few seconds before he stepped back and she began to stir.

Alric moved up to the bed and watched as she slowly came out of the healing sleep.

Kyrin could see light, but was finding it hard to open her eyes. It seemed strange. She wasn't asleep on the ground or the hard cots used by the Shadowmere. The bed was soft and she felt the heaviness of blankets on her, something she'd never felt before.

"You are safe," a soft voice said from beside her.

Her eyes flew open and she sat up and immediately reached for her flail, only to find her hands restrained. She looked around the room quickly and pulled against the restraints, fighting to get free.

"Please, do not struggle. We won't hurt you," Alric said to her.

She filled with panic. If she couldn't get her hands together, she couldn't use magic, and her flail wasn't near her. Kyrin reached down and tried to bite at the leather restraints on her wrist, but wasn't able to get near enough. She briefly saw the soft white nightgown she was wearing, but forgot it when she realized that she couldn't easily get loose from the binds.

Kyrin looked up at Alric with an icy glare, "Let me go."

He smiled softly, "We will soon. I promise you. For now, you are restrained for our protection."

Her arms ached at the odd angle sitting up put them, but she pulled anyway.

"Please, stop before you dislocate your shoulders," Dewell said, stepping closer to her.

"Who are you?" she asked, studying them.

Alric waited for her to stop pulling at the restraints before speaking, "I am Lord Alric from Valhara."

“What dimension?”

He frowned slightly, “I’m not sure what you mean.”

She had run across a couple of dimensions that didn’t understand the vast universe. They thought their dimension was the only one.

Kyrin looked around the room, “Where’s my water!?”

Dewell turned to a table with her things, “Your flask is here for when you require it.”

“I’m sure the flask is, but my water damned well better be there too.”

Alric studied her, “Are you thirsty?”

She turned angry eyes to him, “Do not even try that on me.”

“Try what?”

“If one drop of my water is gone, you’ll have to pay for it.”

Dewell picked up the full flask and handed it to Alric. Kyrin watched it carefully and then struggled to get loose when he opened it and smelled the water.

“What’s so special about this water?” he asked her after putting the lid back on. “It smells stale and maybe even poisoned.”

“Why am I here? Are you mad I killed your little warriors?”

Alric put down the flask and then returned to the bed, “Those were not from Valhara.”

“Then why am I here?”

“We nursed your wounds and erased the signs of battle from your body.”

She gasped, “You did what?”

“The injuries have healed and the scars are gone.”

She inhaled slowly and glared at him, “The truth is out then, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“What am I to be? Your bride or are you selling me?”

His eyes narrowed, “You have misunderstood our intentions.”

“Oh, I know your intentions!”

“I think we have gotten off on the wrong foot.”

She simply scowled at him, but again pulled against the binds.

“We haven’t taken anything from you, and we healed your wounds to help you.”

She shook her head, “You haven’t helped me! You’ve made me a target.”

“How so?”

“Don’t treat me like I don’t know what I’m talking about! I’m not stupid, and I’ll die before marrying you.”

His eyebrows rose and he smiled, “I’ll remember that in the future.”

“Let me go.”

“First, talk to me,” Alric said, sitting beside her on the bed. “One of the Priests claims to have seen you use magic.”

“Magic is illegal.”

“I wouldn’t call it illegal, dead maybe.”

She frowned slightly, “Where did you say I am?”

“Valhara”

“No, I did not use magic.”

He smiled, “I thought not. Where have you seen battle?”

“I won’t allow you to punish me for killing those warriors.”

“Again, those were not mine, and I don’t care that you killed them.”

Kyryn pulled against the restraints, “Let me go! I cannot run. I’m indebted to you.”

“For what?”

“For saving my life. I remember the fight. I was stabbed through the stomach, a life-threatening wound.”

“We don’t require repayment for that.”

She smiled and shook her head, “Nothing comes free. I’ll pay my debt and then leave.”

Alric nodded at Dewell, who walked over to Kyryn and untied her binds. She flew to her feet and put her back to the wall, watching them.

“Will you sit and talk?” Alric asked, moving to sit in a chair beside the table.

Kyryn moved quickly and picked up her flask. She watched them carefully while she opened the top and smelled it. She took a small sip, and then put the lid back on.

When she kept a tight grip on the flask, Alric called for a glass of water to be brought in. Her eyes narrowed as a priest came in with an empty glass and a large pitcher full of crystal-clear water.

Alric poured a glass and then pushed it toward the seat across from him, “Sit, please.”

Kyrin’s mouth seemed hopelessly dry as she saw the clean water in the glass. She swallowed dryly and then looked down at the flask in her hand. The water was murky and tasted awful, but it was wet and wasn’t poisoned.

Seeing the conflict in her eyes, Alric called for another glass and poured himself some water from the same pitcher. She watched as he drank it and then motioned again for the seat, “Sit.”

She reached down and picked up the flail before walking over to the table and sitting down. She couldn’t take her eyes from the water, and couldn’t remember when the last time was she’d seen that much water, or water that clear.

“You are thirsty. Have some,” Alric said to her.

Her hand tightened on the flail.

He fought the instinct to unsheathe the sword at his side, and finally smiled at her, “It’s safe to drink.”

She reached out and lightly touched the cool glass, “How much?”

“For the water?”

“Yes”

“No charge.”

She frowned at him, “I won’t drink until I know the price.”

“Why would we charge you for water?” Dewell asked her.

She absentmindedly tapped her fingers on the wooden table as she watched the water.

“You said you are indebted to me?” Alric asked her.

She nodded, and her body tensed.

“Then I order you to drink.”

Kyryn hesitantly picked up the glass and cradled it in her hands. She met his eyes and then took a small sip. The water felt amazing against her dry mouth and the taste was unlike any she’d had before. No longer able to fight the thirst, she tipped the glass back and drank deeply, quickly finishing the entire glass.

When she put the glass down, Alric poured another glass, “You may have more if you’d like.”

She shook her head, “Name the debt that I must pay to leave.”

He smiled, “You name it. I don’t hold you to a debt. You are free to go when you like.”

He was playing a dangerous game, and she had done it before. Name a price too high and you were taken advantage of. Name one too low and you could be punished for it.

“One year in your service,” she said to him.

“That seems a steep price.”

She glared at him, “As a slave, not as your wife.”

He couldn’t help but grin, “You’re pretty concerned I want to marry you.”

“I won’t be your property, but I will work for a year.”

“That sounds like a deal then.”

“Where do you want me to start?” she asked, still gripping the flail.

“You need to rest first. We healed the wounds that we saw, but there are injuries we cannot see.”

“I’m ok to work.”

“I’m sure of that. However, you will rest.”

She hesitated and then placed the flail on the table, “You will want that.”

He simply looked at it, “Why would I take your weapon?”

“Slaves cannot own weapons.”

“Interesting”

She reached out and touched the glass lightly, “May I have more?”

“Yes, drink all you like.”

Once the glass was empty, she stood up, “Where are my clothes?”

Dewell picked up a stack of neatly folded clothes and held them out to her, “Yours were destroyed. We brought you these.”

She looked down at the soft, beige fabric and winced, “Not a dress, correct?”

“Well... actually yes, it is.”

“Part of my servitude is to wear a dress?”

“I wouldn’t call it part of your servitude, no.”

“Then I will make my own clothes,” she told him.

Alric was finding her thoughts and actions amusing, “Just put it on. A dress isn’t going to kill you. I’ll talk to the tailor and have another tunic made if you’d like.”

Kyrin walked over to the table with her belongings on it and pulled out the tiny leather bag. She opened it and dropped two gold coins into her hand.

“What are you doing?” Alric asked when she turned and held them out to him.

“My belongings are yours as long as I am your servant. This is all I have.”

“I do not want your coins.”

She looked down at them, “They are a bit worn.”

He smiled, “Keep your coins. If you’ll get dressed, I will have some breakfast delivered.”

She looked up at him quickly, “Food?”

“That’s normally what we have for breakfast, yes.”

“What kind of place is this!?”

Alric looked questioningly at Dewell, who simply shrugged.

“Are you not hungry?” Alric asked her.

“Who feeds a servant?”

“I do.”

Understanding that the food would be poor quality and most likely cause her stomach pain, she nodded and then walked behind a dressing curtain to change into the dress.

Alric smiled at Dewell and then watched as another priest came in and put down two plates full of sausage, biscuits, and thick gravy. The priest left and came back carrying a bowl overflowing with fresh fruit. Four forks were laid out beside each plate, and placed on top of purple and gold napkins bearing the Valhara crest.

When Kyrin walked out from behind the curtain, she was obviously uncomfortable with the clothing. Alric tried not to look at her for too long, but he couldn't help but notice again how beautiful she was. The long sleeved, floor-length dress fit her perfectly and a thin gold belt hung low across her hips, giving it a more feminine touch. She was busy braiding her hair when she appeared.

“Breakfast is here,” Alric said, turning to his plate.

Kyrin sat down and then her eyes grew wide at the food on the plate. She looked at his plate and was astonished that his held the same thing hers did.

“Is something wrong?” he asked as he laid the napkin across his lap.

She looked around the room nervously. Alric smiled when she met his eyes, and then he took a bite. Kyrin had never seen food like this before. Most food was barely edible and often led to what was known as the stomach disease, the worst of which caused a painful death. The only ones who ate like this were the Consortium's leaders. She heard rumors about it but had never seen anything close to it.

Alric motioned to the plate in front of her, “Eat, please.”

Her stomach growled as she smelled the aroma from fresh food, and she watched longingly as Alric took another bite.

“Do I need to order you to eat?” he asked when he noticed she was watching him.

Kyrin looked down at the plate. She had often been tortured with food, and one such way was to be offered a meal that was then removed before a bite could be taken. One night they allowed her a single bite of an exquisite dish, only to have it taken before she could have more.

Alric jerked slightly when she dove at the plate and began shoveling food into her mouth with both hands. He became amused and sat back to watch her as Dewell went to find a bucket she could wash up with when she was finished.

When her plate was clean, she looked up at him and waited to see if a punishment would follow. Without a word, he took his fork and began on his breakfast again. He chuckled when she reached down and wiped her hands on the skirt of the dress.

Dewell came in a little while later with warm water in a bucket and a soft towel. He set it down in front of her and then stepped back.

Kyrin looked into the bucket and gasped at the amount of water inside of it.

“It’s to clean your hands,” Dewell told her, though he saw she had already cleaned them off on her clothing. “Maybe clean clothes are in order too.”

She looked up at him and frowned, “You want me to clean my hands in water?”

“Yes,” he said, sounding unsure.

“Then what will you do with it?”

“Then I will dump it out back.”

She frowned, “Dump water?”

“Yes, it will be dirty.”

Kyrin stood up and looked around the room, “Daemionis, am I dead?”

“Who is Daemionis?” Alric asked her.

She nodded, “That’s it then. I died in battle.”

“You are not dead, my Dear.”

“No one would pour out something as precious as water.”

“Is your country in a drought?”

She looked at him oddly, “You could say that.”

“Well we have unlimited water here.”

“You do?”

“Is Daemionis the reason you have a ‘D’ on your wrist?”

Kyrin looked down at the small burn scar, and then clenched her hand into a fist and looked up at him without replying.

“I, myself, am a follower of Sithias.”

“I’ve never heard of her.”

“She is a he... and I am one of his Holy Knights.”

“He keeps you fed?”

“Well, not exactly. We have livestock that we eat from and gardens to feed us.”

She slowly nodded, “Yes, I am one of Daemionis’ followers.”

“It’s odd that I haven’t heard of him.”

Kyrin simply watched him.

“How old are you?”

“Why?”

“You seem very young, almost a child.”

“I am 17.”

“Yes, very young. Where are your parents?”

“I don’t have any.”

He nodded, “So you are a roamer?”

“Maybe”

“Who raised you?”

“Does my servitude include divulging a past that I don’t wish to speak of?” she asked him.

Alric smiled, “No, it does not.”

A younger priest walked in and set another stack of clothes in front of her, then bowed to Alric and left the room.

“What are those?” she asked, looking at the stack.

“Clean clothes, yours are soiled.”

“They are fine.”

Alric stood, “Then you may bring them with you.”

She nodded and stood up also, then grabbed the clothes along with her tiny bag of belongings, “Where am I going?”

“Take your weapon, I don’t want it.”

Bracing for a trick, she quickly grabbed it and then looked over at him when he spoke, “You will be staying in the castle.”

“I’m to serve there?”

“You could say that.”

When they started for the castle, Alric watched her pass the horses and begin the journey on foot, though she carried her boots. He figured the rocks would cut her feet, but followed her to see what she would do.

Her ways were foreign and intriguing. Any sound brought a scrutinizing glare from her, and she almost attacked a young man who came to bring fresh bread to her. It wasn’t uncommon in Valhara to share with strangers, and he was surprised when she readied her flail when offered the gift.

Alric smiled at the Baker and motioned for him to return to his home. The confused man bowed at his King and returned inside.

He couldn’t help but notice how guarded and untrusting she was, and how she was always tense and ready to fight. He wondered what she’d been through to cause that, although the lands he knew of were all fairly peaceful and none of them were in a drought. Alric fully planned on asking Sithias about this young girl as soon as possible.

[Chapter 3](#)

“Kyrim”

She looked up with wide eyes when Daemionis appeared beside her in the small room. She immediately jumped up from the floor and fell to her knees before him. He had visited her before, but only when he needed her to do something for him.

“My Lord,” she whispered.

“How have you come to be in this dimension?” His voice was stern and sent fear into her. He stood over 8 feet tall, and his scaly green skin was pulled tight over inhumanly large muscles. Tall horns stood out from his mutilated face, and blood appeared in the corner of his mouth when he spoke. He stepped toward her on hooved feet, though they made no noise against the wooden floor.

“I was running from the Shadowmere.”

“This dimension is like no other I’ve seen.”

She nodded, “Yes, my Lord.”

“You have accidentally stumbled into Paragoy Dimension.”

She gasped, “I have?”

“Yes, quite an accomplishment.”

“I didn’t know.” The legendary Paragoy Dimension was rumored to be spared from hardships other dimensions were terrorized by. Shifters sought it and often died trying to find it. No one was sure if it was unreachable, if it was but a fable, or if those who reached it never returned.

“You are indebted to the king here?”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“I will be watching you.”

“What do you wish for me to do?”

“Learn about them.”

“Is that all?” she asked, and then looked up when he didn’t answer. She was alone in the dark room. The bed stood unused off to the side, and a single blanket was laid across the floor where she slept. It was dangerous to change clothing, so she slept in the dress she’d worn for the past week since her arrival. Various items of clothing were brought in for her, but she simply put them aside.

Kyrin stood up and pushed the curtains away from the window, so she could watch the sun rise. She saw servants begin to move about the castle grounds, so she walked over and opened the door to her room. Just outside was a large bucket of sudsy water and a clean towel. They hadn’t allowed her to work, claiming that she still needed to rest to heal from the wounds.

It was obvious the time for rest was over, so she knelt down beside the bucket, and wondered briefly why it was on wheels. Taking the hem of her dress in her hand, she dipped it into the warm water and began to scrub the floor. Once the spot was perfectly clean, she used the towel to dry it and then she scooted back to start on a new section of floor.

Kyrin looked up when she heard footsteps, and one of the many servants appeared. The young maid looked at her oddly and then turned and walked out of the hallway. Only a few minutes later, more footsteps were heard, but she kept cleaning. The hallway was long, and she figured it would take the entire day to finish.

“We didn’t give you the bucket to clean the floors with,” Alric said, stopping beside her. He fought back a grin when he realized she was scrubbing the floor with her dress and drying with the towel.

She knelt up and frowned, “Then what is it for?”

“For you to bathe in.”

“Bathe?”

“Yes, to get clean.” He watched with anticipation to see how she would react to what would surely be another waste of water.

“That is what I’m doing... cleaning.”

“No, bathing is when you clean your body.”

She looked down at her dirty dress, “I don’t understand.”

Alric reached out and pulled the bucket easily into her room, so she stood up and followed him. He decided not to ask why she was sleeping on the floor, and turned to her.

“There, you put this in your room, and you get in,” he explained.

“Into the water?” she asked, unsure if she understood.

“Yes”

“Is that part of my duty?”

He smiled, “Actually, yes it is.”

She nodded and then went to step into the large bucket.

“Wait,” he said, putting a hand out to stop her.

Kyrin looked up at him.

“You have to undress first. I will step out.”

“You want me to undress?”

“To bathe, yes.”

“Am I to be that kind of servant?” she asked, taking a step back.

He thought for a moment and then gasped, “No! I will leave, and you will be alone.”

“Alone?”

“Yes, you can even lock the door behind me.”

“But you have a key.”

“Well, yes... but I won’t use it. When you are done, please put on clean clothes. The tailor made you a tunic and pants.”

“Please tell me what you want,” she whispered, watching him.

“What do you mean?”

“You give me food, the same food you eat. I have water to drink, and a place to sleep that is warm. You’ve handed me clothing I can’t pay for and waste water for me. Doing so has added almost six months onto my sentence, yet you won’t stop.”

“Can you not trust me that I’m not adding to your time, merely offering you the same comfort I offer every person?”

“Trust you?”

“Yes”

“No”

He studied her, “You trust no one, do you?”

“No”

Alric sighed, “I hate to order you, but you’re about to leave me no choice.”

She glanced at the water and then back to him.

“Fine. I order you to strip naked, get into the water and clean. Then put on clean clothing and meet me out on the south lawn by the barracks.”

Without another word, he left the room, and she heard him use the key to lock the door behind him.

“What do I do Daemionis?” she whispered. He very rarely answered when she asked him something, so she felt she had no choice but to do as she was told.

“My Lord,” the Captain of the guard said with a deep bow. Alric had just walked onto the south lawn where the Castle Protectors were standing in rows. Their plate armor was shiny in the bright sun, and he was pleased to see their perfection.

“Thank you for gathering on such short notice,” Alric said. He looked out over the elite Knights.

“We are ready.”

“I see that. We need to wait though, another will be joining us.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“Actually, please have two of your newer members ready themselves for a fight.”

The Captain turned and ordered two of the Protectors forward. They moved quickly and soon had their swords in hand as they stopped before their leader.

They waited silently until Kyrin appeared. She had changed, as instructed, and looked more comfortable in the pants than she had been in the dress. Alric wasn't surprised to see her flail tucked into her belt. She surveyed the gathered Knights as she walked up to Alric.

"Much better, thank you," he said, smiling.

When she saw the two battle ready Knights, she suddenly drew her flail and crouched toward them, instantly prepared to fight.

The Captain chuckled, "Interesting."

"Kyrin, this is for training. They won't actually try to kill you," Alric told her.

"What exactly do we do then?" one of them asked him.

"I wish to see her skill level. Start off easy and we'll go from there."

"You want them dead?" Kyrin asked, narrowing her eyes.

Alric smiled, "I don't think you can kill them, but yes, that's the general idea."

The two Knights gasped when she lunged at them without the signal to begin. She kicked one hard in the chest and sent him flying to the ground. The precision it took to knock the Knight off balance using his own armor as leverage was surprising and the Captain was no longer smiling.

She swung the flail at the same time as she kicked the first, catching the other Knight in the throat. He fell to the ground. His windpipe had collapsed, and he fought for air. Alric barely had time to react as she brought her flail down onto the Knight she'd kicked and the spiked balls connected with his side. She swung

her hand back and the flail ripped his breastplate off, exposing his vulnerable torso.

“Stop!” Alric yelled, and Kyrin turned with furious eyes. The evil look on her face made him take a step back, “That’s enough.”

The innocent expression returned to her face, and she nodded and stepped back. Alric dropped to his knees before the injured Knight, and within a few minutes, he was breathing again. Being a Holy Knight of Sithias granted him the ability to heal.

The Captain watched Kyrin closely and had even called some of his best Knights forward to keep her from attacking anyone else.

Once Alric was sure the Knights were ok, he stood up and faced Kyrin. She seemed un-phased by the brutal beating she’d just given to two of his Knights, “Care to explain?”

She looked over at him, “You said to kill them.”

“How long have you been fighting?”

“I’ve always fought.”

“I think I underestimated your ability.” Alric checked with the Knights again and then walked over to talk to the Captain in private.

Kyrin ignored the angry glares from the Knights, and looked around at the green lawns and lush trees. Most of the dimensions were brown and dead, so it was shocking to see one with such an abundance of water.

“Kyrin,” Alric said finally. She looked over at him, “I apologize, that was my fault. I do have a concern though.”

“Such as?” she asked.

“You don’t seem at all upset that you almost killed them.”

“You told me to.”

“Still... a conscience, some type of inner thought that killing them would be wrong.”

She shrugged, “I do as I’m told.”

“Who did you say your god is?”

“Daemionis”

“Does he have Holy Knights?”

“No”

“What are his top followers called?”

“Is this relevant?”

“Yes, it is.” Alric and the Captain were trying to decide if the small girl was one of the fabled evils. A vile, repulsive being that disappeared when magic died.

“They are his Priest and Priestesses.”

“May I see your weapon?” the Captain asked, holding his hand out.

Her grip tightened.

“He won’t keep it. Please let him see it,” Alric said.

She didn’t have a choice, so she handed the flail over to the large Knight. He weighed it in his hand and tried to grip it, but the small handle kept him from getting a good hold.

“Who made this for you?” he asked her, and handed it back.

She took it and slipped the handle into her belt, “Mika had it made for me.”

“Who is Mika?”

“I don’t believe that’s any of your concern.”

“He made it specifically for you?”

“He didn’t... but he had it made for me, yes.”

“That’s why it’s weighted differently,” the Captain said, narrowing his eyes. “It’s specifically made to move with her natural movements and to complement her personal fighting style.”

“Not only to assist her in battle, but to protect her. If an enemy were to get that flail, it would be less effective in their hands,” Alric added.

“Where can I find this Mika?”

Kyrin watched him, but didn’t answer.

“Answer him,” Alric said.

“Indebted servitude only goes so far. You may punish me for refusing to answer.”

“You would take a punishment over that small bit of information?”

“Yes”

Alric began to walk around her, “Have you been punished often in your life?”

“Define often,” she said, looking straight ahead.

“You may go back to your room.”

She nodded and then turned and walked quickly back to the castle. Once out of earshot, Alric turned to the Captain, “She’s too young to be an evil.”

“Is she? Maybe she’s lying.”

“Still, magic is dead.”

“Not all evils had magic.”

He nodded, “That’s true. Her fighting is impressive though, for one so young.”

“We don’t know what she’s been through, Sir. She may have spent her entire life fighting,” the Captain said.

“That’s what I’m afraid of. That hard of a life can turn a heart cold.”

“Have you talked to her about the scars she had on her body?”

“No, I would imagine she won’t tell me.”

The Captain sighed, “To fight like she does, without remorse or regret, makes her more dangerous than even the Qualsax.”

“I know, but she’s so young.”

“Seventeen you said?”

“Yes”

“We need to learn more about her and somehow get her to trust us,” the Captain said. “If we have her on our side, the Qualsax wouldn’t know what hit them.”

“I cannot send one so innocent into battle with a Qualsax Warrior.”

“Innocent? She tried to kill two of my Knights.”

Alric nodded, “I know. I need to consult Sithias and see what he thinks.”

The Captain nodded and called his troops forward when Alric left for the temple. On horse, it took him only a few minutes to arrive.

“Sire,” one of the priests said, coming out to greet him.

“Lock the doors, I need to converse with Sithias.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

Alric walked into the temple and disappeared behind a hidden wall at the back of the main monastery. Behind that wall was his private chamber to speak to Sithias. Only a few bore the title of Holy Knight, and those few were able to speak to their god when necessary.

Alric left his sword by the door and then knelt before the tall statue. Sithias was a strong presence, but had a kind, caring face unless you crossed him. His statue was close to his true height of 7 ½ feet tall, and Alric looked up into the gentle face, “My Lord, I ask for your advice.”

When Alric lowered his eyes, a shimmer began before him, and Sithias stepped out, clad in white robes trimmed in sparkling gold, “You seem troubled, Alric.”

“Do you know of my houseguest?”

“Of course.”

“Do you know who she is, my Lord?”

“No, she walks from different lands than we know.”

“What does that mean?” Alric asked.

“There are lands beyond what you know. She runs deeper than you could ever imagine.”

“She’s so young.”

Sithias nodded, “Yes, but very old.”

“I fear she may be an evil.”

“Of that I’m almost certain.”

“Does she know magic?”

“I don’t know yet. It will take time to discover that.”

Alric looked up, “What if she is an evil? I cannot harbor her, but she thinks she’s indebted to me.”

“Take this opportunity to study her. If she’s an evil for certain, we’ll deal with it at that time. She is very young, and we may be able to sway her.”

“Her god, Daemionis... who is he?”

“There are many deities that I do not know. He is one of them.”

“Am I putting my people at risk having her here?” Alric asked.

Sithias shook his head, “Not if you watch her and learn her ways.”

“Her ways are barbaric and foreign to me.”

“I fear that she has led a life most of us see only in nightmares.”

“Can I help her?”

“If her soul is pure, she may come around.”

“Thank you, my Lord,” Alric said, and then bowed his head as Sithias’ image shimmered and faded.

Alric grabbed his sword on the way out of the room, and then was soon on his horse headed back for the castle. What Sithias said was weighing heavily on his mind. He was a Knight, a fighter, and didn’t know how to rehabilitate a lost girl.

“Sir!” Finn said, running up to him when he dismounted.

“What’s wrong, Finn?” Alric asked, tired.

“We had to put the girl into prison. She tried to kill Lukas.”

“She did!?”

“It was sort of his fault, Sir.”

Alric sighed, “Start at the beginning.”

“It began back in the Knight’s quarters. They started making fun of the two she fought, how they were beaten up by a girl.”

“Perfect,” Alric said, and started into the castle.

“It grew into a bit of a fight, until Lukas said he wanted a second round with her to prove he would win. She was still in her room, following your orders, but she opened the door when he knocked. He was furious by then and stormed into her room, demanding a rematch.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Pride, plain and simple. He was screaming at her that she cheated and attacked before the signal to begin. She started to get mad and when she readied her flail, he hit her.”

Alric turned, shocked, “He hit her?”

“Yes, and she just... well... she went off on him. He was cowering in the corner as she pummeled him with that flail. By the time they hauled her away from him, he was a bloody heap on the floor.”

“Sounds to me like he deserved it. Why is she in a prison cell?” Alric asked.

“She wouldn’t calm down. She attacked anyone who got near her. To protect her and the Knights, I had her locked up.”

He nodded, “I’ll go and talk to her.”

“Lukas is still healing. He could use some help, Sir.”

“I think he can heal on his own. What he did was beneath him, and I’m furious that he stooped to that level.”

“Yes, Sir,” Finn said, following Alric down into the dungeon. They stopped at the cell holding Kyrin, and looked inside. She was sitting, facing the wall with her legs crossed in front of her. She was barely breathing and not moving.

Alric dug out his keys and opened the cell, then stepped inside, “Can we talk?”

“Am I to finish out my time in here?” she whispered.

“No, I will take you back to your room.”

She turned to look at him, “What is my punishment?”

“I’m not going to punish you.”

“But you will,” she said to Finn.

“No, I will not.”

“Then I will punish myself,” she said, turning back to the wall.

“Come to your room, please,” Alric said, standing up. “I want to talk to you about what happened.”

“I wish to remain here.”

“No, come with me,” he said sternly. He wasn’t going to have her punished when she was attacked in her room while she waited out his orders.

Nodding, she stood up and turned to him. He frowned when he saw a gash along her arm.

“I didn’t know you were injured.”

“It’s nothing,” she said, covering it with her sleeve.

“I can heal it.”

“I’d rather you not.”

“Very well,” he said, and then walked up the stairs with Kyrin and Finn following. They all sat down in her room at the small table by the window.

Finn stayed just in case she lost her temper around the King. He saw her single-handedly take out 3 of his top Knights and didn’t want to risk her alone with Alric.

“I wanted to apologize,” Alric said to her. She frowned slightly and he continued, “He had no right to come in here and treat you like that.”

“Is he dead?”

“No,” Finn said. “However, he is severely injured.”

“I will be punished. It’s ok.”

“You didn’t listen to me,” Alric told her. “You don’t deserve to be punished. He attacked you, and you defended yourself.”

“Can you tell me where you learned to fight? It’s most impressive,” Finn said.

“Where I come from, if you don’t fight, you don’t live.”

“Were you formally trained?”

She nodded.

“By this Mika?”

“Yes”

“What were his methods?”

She looked up at him, “His training methods?”

“Yes”

“He put me in the arena with members of the Apprehension Team.”

“Adults?”

“Yes”

“How old were you?”

“I was 7 when I started learning to fight.”

Alric sat back and let the Captain get out of her what he could, “So you learned by fighting grown men.”

“That was Mika’s way.”

“Is that how you got so many scars?”

“Some”

“Did you ever kill one of them?”

“Yes, it was death or get punished.”

“Wait,” Alric said, shocked. “At 7 years old you were in a battle to the death with adult warriors?”

“Yes”

“I’m surprised they didn’t kill you when you lacked experience,” Finn said.

“They weren’t allowed to kill me. Once I was unconscious, they were to stop.”

He frowned, “How often were these trainings?”

“It depended. If I didn’t kill the ones I fought, then I was punished, sometimes for a full week.”

“As a child…”

“Childhood is not an excuse to be inept.”

“Children should be nurtured and cared for.”

She smiled, “Here maybe.”

“How did you come to be with Mika?” Alric asked. He had been curious from the moment she mentioned her time with him.

“I was indentured to him.”

“Indentured?” Finn asked him.

Alric watched her, “It’s a barbaric practice where fines are paid by giving a slave. That slave works to pay off the fines.”

“So your parents owed this Mika…”

“No, I had no parents.”

“Who had you then?”

She stiffened, “They had no choice but to give me to Mika or risk all of them dying at the hands of his Apprehension Crews.”

“I understand that and I don’t blame them. I just wonder who they are, how you came to be with them.”

“I was left on their doorstep as an infant.”

“These Apprehension Crews you keep speaking of, was Mika training you to join them?”

“He never told me of his plans.”

“How did you get away?” Alric asked, leaning forward.

Kyrin shifted nervously, “I...”

“It’s ok. We just want to know.”

When she tensed and looked toward the window, Alric stood.

“I think that’s enough for now. You don’t have to worry about being attacked by my Knights again,” Alric told her.

Finn scowled, “They will not bother you again.”

“Are you still going to punish yourself?”

“Yes, you don’t have to worry about that,” she said to him.

“I’m more worried about you actually torturing yourself.”

“I have to.”

“How will you do it?”

“I haven’t decided.”

“Please wait until tomorrow and let’s talk again. For now, your dinner has arrived, and I must go and speak to Lukas.”

She turned to the window, so the others left.

“Again?” Alric said when the servant picked up the tray of food from in front of Kyrin’s door.

“Yes, my Lord.”

“Did she eat this morning?”

“No, Sir. It’s been five days since I’ve seen her eat.”

Alric walked up and knocked, “Kyrin, I want to come in.”

Finn appeared from around the corner and leaned up against the wall beside her door, “Still nothing?”

“No and I don’t like how quiet it is.”

“It may be time just to go in.”

“That’s kind of what I’m thinking.” Alric knocked again, “Kyrin, let me in, or I’ll have to force my way in.”

“We don’t have a choice.”

Alric pulled out his keys and slid the key into the door, but it wouldn’t turn.

“Is that the right key?” Finn asked, taking the keys.

“It’s the skeleton key to the castle.”

Finn looked over at him, “Care if I break it?”

“Be my guest.”

Finn took a step back and then kicked the door, shattering the frame, and it swung in. They both stepped into the dark room and instinctually looked at the bed, which was empty. When Finn lit

the lantern, they both ran for her. She was lying unconscious on the cold hard floor, and her body was covered in burns.

“Is she alive?” Finn asked, looking her over.

“Barely,” Alric said, but then began chanting softly as his hands glowed. He ran them over the burns across her face and neck, and watched as they slowly healed. She was breathing in short gasps, and he was afraid he might be too late.

Two priests came in when Finn called for them, and they immediately knelt down and began working on the deep black burns. It took hours to repair the damage, and when she was resting peacefully on the bed, Alric sat down, exhausted.

“Where did the burns come from?” Finn asked, sitting beside him.

“The lantern is the only fire in here.”

“That would take a lot of willpower to burn yourself that badly with a small lantern.”

“I shouldn’t have let her be alone when I knew she felt she needed punished.”

“It makes you wonder if she punishes herself because it’s less than what others will give.”

Alric nodded, “We can only imagine what her life has been like.”

“Well we can’t leave her alone now. We can’t trust her.”

“We can’t take away her privacy either. She’s a young woman who needs time to herself.”

“To mutilate herself!”

“She told us she was going to though. I guess I didn’t believe her.”

Finn looked over at her, “Never again will I underestimate her.”

“Not for one second.”

“We need to find something for her to do.”

“She keeps trying to clean.”

“I’ve heard. I’d rather have her on my unit.”

“As a Knight?” Alric asked, looking over at him.

“She’s bested my most seasoned Knights. Seems fitting to put her out there protecting the city.”

“Except she’s impulsive and irrational. Can she be trusted to keep us safe?”

“True. Then let her clean.”

“I don’t feel right having a non-paid servant on my staff,” Alric told him. “Doing so would mean meeting her expectations of how others treat people.”

“Well she can’t sit around here in her room all day.”

“That’s what I hate. She would if I ordered her to.”

“Then let her be your personal assistant.”

Alric looked at Finn, “Do what?”

“She can follow you around and take notes, record upcoming appointments, that type of thing. You’ve always hated how after meeting with the townspeople on the full moon that you often forget things you’ve told them.”

“That’s not a bad idea.”

“Are you going to talk to her about this punishment business?”

“Not this time. If she threatens again though I will intervene.”

Chapter 4

Kyrin felt herself coming out of the dream. In it, she was speaking to Daemionis and walking along one of the dark plateaus that filled the Valley of the Dead in Paramide. Creteloc was there in the dream, and Kyrin missed her. She was the closest thing Kyrin had to a friend, and had introduced her into Daemionis’ followers in lieu of killing her as a sacrifice.

“Kyrin?” Alric asked when she started to stir.

She remembered she was in the middle of a punishment, but could no longer feel the cleansing of pain. If she was prematurely out of pain, then she couldn’t be fully absolved of trying to kill a member of her master’s elite guard.

“Come on, Kyrin. Open your eyes.”

Once she was able to pull free of the deep sleep, she looked over at him to see if he was mad.

Alric smiled, “Welcome back.”

The soft bed at her back was uncomfortable and unfamiliar, so she sat up slowly and looked around the room.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

“No”

“I should rephrase that... you need to eat.” Alric stood up and then walked over to the table, “I took the liberty of bringing you some breakfast.”

Kyrin looked down at her arms where the burns should have been.

“I healed you.”

“Why?”

“I don’t punish.”

“That is why I did it.”

“Sit, eat.”

Kyrin finally sat down and Alric watched as she picked up the food with her hands and ate it.

“Remind me to introduce you to a spoon,” he said, amused.

She licked the butter from her fingers and kept eating.

“While you eat, I want to tell you about a task I have for you.”

He waited to see if she would respond, but she continued to eat, “I need an assistant. Someone who follows me on day-to-day tasks and keeps track of things I need to remember.”

She frowned slightly, “You have a lot of faith in my memory.”

“You can write it down.”

Kyrin stopped eating and smiled crookedly, “You think I can write?”

“Oh, I hadn’t considered that you can’t write.”

“Why would I be able to write?”

“Why not?”

“Fighters don’t need to waste time learning to read and write.”

He smiled, “I know how.”

“May I ask you a question?”

“Yes”

“You said magic is dead.”

“Yes, it has been for a century.”

“If it’s dead, how do you heal someone?” she asked, and then sat back in the chair.

“Sithias has given me the ability.” He reached out and handed her a napkin when he saw butter dripping from her chin.

Kyrin took it and then frowned, “But it is magic.”

“No, it is a blessing from Sithias.”

She shrugged, “So now that I can’t write your notes, what will I do to pay you back?”

“I still want you with me.”

“As protection?”

He fought back a grin, “No, not as protection. I do rather well at protecting myself.”

Kyrin finally remembered to wipe her face, “So you want me to just follow you around all day?”

“Yes, after you put on clean clothes.”

“Do you realize you all care too much about appearances?”

“I don’t believe so.”

“I wore the same clothes for three years and didn’t seem to suffer.”

“Just do as I ask,” he said, and then smiled and left as he shook his head.

Several minutes later, she came out dressed in clean clothing, and was tying her hair into a braid.

“Ready?” he asked.

“I am.”

He smiled and then started out toward the castle’s foyer. Kyrin turned around when three Knights fell in behind them. She narrowed her eyes and then placed herself between the Knights and Alric.

They all stopped at a line of magnificent white horses and Kyrin watched when Alric mounted and looked down at her, “Are you coming?”

She stepped back away from the nearest horse, “On that thing?”

“That thing, is a horse.”

“I don’t care what it’s called. It could feed an outpost.”

“We use them for transportation.”

“A waste.”

“Just get on, from the left.”

“I’ll walk,” she told him, and crossed her arms.

“You can’t keep up with a horse.”

Kyrin wanted to just cast a spell to make herself faster, but knew doing so would get her killed. She walked up to the large beast and watched as one of the Knights mounted. Mimicking his movement, she pulled herself onto the horse and then swayed and hung onto the saddle when she almost fell off.

“There are no horses where you come from?” one of the Knights asked.

“If there were, we ate them,” she said, irritated.

Alric chuckled and clicked his tongue. Soon, the rest caught up with him as they headed into Valhara. Kyrin started to get the hang of riding a horse, though she didn’t like it and felt awkward on it.

“When is she supposed to arrive?” one of the Knights asked.

“She should be arriving within a few minutes,” Alric answered. Kyrin knew better than to ask where they were going or who she was, but she was curious.

People from Valhara came out of their houses to watch them pass. Most waved and smiled, but some looked at her questioningly, and she couldn’t help but check to make sure her flail was still on her hip.

A coach was arriving when they rode up, and Kyrin stopped her horse a ways from it. Alric got off of his horse and moved quickly to the door. When he opened it, a woman appeared and Alric pulled her into his arms and kissed her softly.

Kyrin frowned. She’d not seen a kiss, and it seemed a disgusting and odd practice. Alric let the woman go, and then she stepped back and watched as the coachman unloaded her bag. The woman wasn’t very pretty, but was in a long pink and gold dress that was embellished with sparkling gems. Her hair was blonde and piled high on her head.

Alric handed her bag up to one of the Knights and then easily lifted the woman onto his horse, though she had both legs off to one side, which Kyrin wondered how she was going to stay on. Alric mounted behind her, and they kissed again before starting back for the castle.

Alric and the woman spoke quietly, and Kyrin fell back with the Knights, as it seemed that was what she was supposed to do.

As Kyrin watched them, she started to understand that Alric had just purchased the woman and would probably force her to marry him soon. The entire thought made her stomach tighten, and she wondered if the woman already had a mercy plan in place, or if she should offer her services.

More armored Knights met them out in front of the castle, and Alric lowered the woman into the hands of Finn, who was in full armor and looked ready for a fight.

“It’s good to see you, my Lady,” Finn said, setting her down. Two servants came out of the castle that Kyrin hadn’t seen yet, one young man and one young woman. The man went and took her bags, then disappeared into the castle, while the servant girl went and stood behind the woman beside Alric.

Alric kissed the woman again and then walked up to Kyrin as she tied her horse up just as the Knights were doing.

“Kyrin, I wanted to introduce you to Genessa,” Alric said, motioning to the woman.

Kyrin bowed, “Nice to meet you.”

Genessa smiled, “I hope he’s been treating you well.”

Kyrin tensed and nodded, not sure she wanted to see the punishment that type of statement could bring to a newly purchased bride.

Genessa turned to Alric, “Why have you given her the clothes of a boy, Alric?”

He smiled, “Her request. I assure you.”

With that, Alric put his hand around Genessa’s waist and led her into the castle. Kyrin wasn’t sure where to go. He’d asked her to stay with him, but she knew what happened to newly purchased brides, and it wasn’t something that required an audience. Of course, if he needed Kyrin to help, then that would make sense.

Deciding that’s what Alric needed from her, she started into the castle after them, but Finn put a hand out, “I think you should probably stay out here.”

“He asked that I follow him,” she explained.

Finn smiled, “I’m sure he did, but they need time alone.”

Kyrin nodded and then looked over when she saw a large orchard off to the side of them. She’d never seen trees in a fence, and hadn’t noticed the orchard before. She walked closer to it when she saw red balls hanging from the trees. They seemed odd, and she wondered what they were.

Finn followed her and then leaned up against the fence, “Want an apple?”

“Those red things?”

“Yes”

“What do you do with it?”

“Eat them. Do you not have trees where you come from?”

“Of course we have trees, don’t be silly. They are just all mostly dead,” she said, and crawled through the fence.

“Right, the no water thing. Well go ahead, pick an apple and eat it.”

“Are you teasing me?”

“No”

Kyrin reached up and picked a bright-red apple and then smelled it and looked over at Finn, “It’s not poisonous?”

“Why would I ask you to eat a poisonous food?” he asked, watching her closely.

Kyrin tossed the apple to him and then crossed her arms, “You first.”

“You’re the most untrusting little thing I’ve ever met,” Finn laughed, and then took a bite of the apple.

Once he swallowed and took another bite, Kyrin picked another and then hesitantly took a bite of it, still watching Finn.

He grinned and kept eating.

She couldn’t imagine having this much food just outside of your house. She took bite after bite, reveling at the sweet water that burst into her mouth with each bite. When she finished the apple, she tucked the core into her pocket and then started for the fence.

“Have another,” Finn told her.

She stopped and looked over her shoulder, “Another?”

“You can have as many apples as you want.”

“I can?”

“Sure”

He was high enough ranking she figured he could give her permission, so she turned and began loading apples into her pockets. When her pockets were full, she tucked her tunic in and filled the front of her shirt with more of them.

A sound caught her attention, and she froze and listened. It sounded like laughing. Kyrin walked toward it and deep in the trees saw a little boy and girl playing. They were tossing an apple between them and laughing each time it hit the orchard's ground.

Kyrin's fury rose and she yelled at them, "Get out of here, or I'll remove your heads!"

The children's eyes grew wide, and they immediately ran.

Kyrin took another bite and then went back toward where Finn was waiting, at the opposite end of the orchard. He laughed when he saw her, with her clothing full of apples.

"The orchard isn't going anywhere," he said, highly amused.

She stopped walking, "Am I not allowed to take that many?"

"No, no it's fine."

Kyrin walked up and stood beside him as she took another bite.

"So if you don't have apples at your home, what do you eat?"

"Whatever you can find," she managed to say with a full mouth.

"How did you survive?"

She shrugged and took another bite so big she couldn't chew with her mouth closed.

Finn watched her, fascinated. He'd never met anyone without any manners before, nor one that could take down so many of his

Knights. He wanted to learn more about her, but she always became guarded when someone began asking a lot of questions.

“Saw you have a tattoo,” Finn said finally.

She nodded and tucked the apple core into her pocket.

“Why a wolf?”

Kyrin looked toward the castle, “How much did he pay for her?”

“How much did who pay for whom?”

“Alric, how much did Genessa cost?”

Finn smiled, “He didn’t buy her.”

Her eyes narrowed, “He stole her?”

“No”

“So she’s indentured.”

“No, she was a courtesan, and they fell in love.”

“Right,” Kyrin said, rolling her eyes. She started back for the castle, “If you don’t want to tell me, just say so.”

Finn simply laughed and followed her, “So besides flail work, what else do you know?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you hand-to-hand fight?”

“I can hold my own, but I’m too small to make it worth my time. I keep my flail with me.”

“Can you shoot a bow?”

“No”

“Swords?”

“What’s wrong with my flail?”

He shrugged, “Nothing’s wrong with it. Diversity is nice though, in case you are ever without it.”

She stopped and looked at him, “Diversity doesn’t make mastery.”

“I’m a sword master, but if you attack me right now, and I don’t have it, I can still defend myself.”

“Why would you be without it?”

“Well I don’t sleep with a sword at my side.”

She just watched him.

Finn leaned his head back and laughed.

“What?”

“You do sleep with that flail, don’t you?”

“Of course.”

He shook his head, “Do you ever just... relax.”

“No”

“You should try it.”

She shrugged, “Anyway... you can’t be a sword master if you are also excellent at hand-to-hand.”

“And I’m pretty deadly with a bow.”

“Then you aren’t a master.”

“I am though.”

“No you aren’t,” she said, watching him. “If you were a sword master, then every minute you have spent training otherwise would have been spent with the sword.”

“Let’s take the scenario that I’m in battle with another of equal strength and skill as mine.”

“Ok”

“During the battle, I lose my sword.”

“If you were a master, you wouldn’t lose your weapon.”

Finn shook his head, “Would you just go along with me on this one?”

“Fine”

“He’s armed and I’m not. I would still win this fight.”

“Doubt it. If you’re incompetent enough to lose your only weapon, then you aren’t smart enough to get out of that situation.”

“But I’m skilled in hand-to-hand combat.”

“This would be hand-to-sword.”

“Not for long.”

She looked at him, unimpressed, “You can disarm a man with your hands?”

“Yes”

“You’d need more than arrogance to do that.”

“You’re calling me arrogant?”

“Yes, I am. I understand that the common male ego prevents you from accepting the fact that you aren’t a master of your trade. However, confidence isn’t necessarily going to help you win in hand-to-sword fighting.”

He frowned slightly, “I’m starting to get offended.”

“You have to admit that those who wield a sword are sometimes ruled by sheer brute and no brains.”

“Now that I am offended by!”

“No offense intended.”

“How can I not be offended? In just the last few minutes you’ve called me arrogant, ego-driven, inept at my own sword, and stupid.”

She smiled softly, “Don’t be offended. I apologize for speaking so bluntly, I was out of line.”

“Telling me what you think isn’t the problem. The problem is that you doubt my abilities because my training is multifaceted.”

“I only know what I’ve seen over the last 17 years. What I’ve seen are men who stretch out their resources and end up a master of nothing.”

“Jack of all trades, master of nothing?”

“Pretty much.”

“Still... in a battle between you and me, I would have the advantage.”

“How’s that?” she asked, and her hand twitched at her side. She’d been taunted enough into a fight to know what was coming.

“All I have to do is disarm you. Once you have no flail, you would be an easy kill.”

“I didn’t say I can’t fight. I just said it wasn’t something I spent a lot of time on.”

“So you were trained in hand-to-hand.”

“No, not trained. Mika taught me nothing but the flail. Once I left though, I had to learn to fight.”

He couldn’t help but sigh, “I wish I could see what you’ve seen and know what you’ve been through in your life.”

Pity was something she loathed, and she wasn’t going to have Finn pity her because her life wasn’t as pleasant as his had been. Kyrin reached out and pulled her flail from her belt, and then smiled when Finn gasped and instantly had his sword readied.

She surprised him by tossing the flail off to the side and then crouching slightly into a defensive posture. He grinned, taking the challenge, and tossed his sword over by her flail.

“I’m almost a foot taller than you and outweigh you easily by 100 pounds,” Finn said as he cracked his knuckles.

“Yes, that does give you the disadvantage. When I win, I will take that into consideration,” Kyrin told him.

“Here are the rules...”

“Rules to a fight?”

“Yes, I’ve seen you fight, and I don’t want this to turn into a blood bath. This is for fun.”

Kyrin stood up and crossed her arms, “Fine, name it.”

“You win when the other surrenders. No death, and I won’t hit you.”

“I’m not afraid to be hit.”

“Still, I won’t hit you, but you may swing at me if you like.”

“No then,” she said, and started for her flail.

Finn stopped her, “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t need you going easy on me. If the rules aren’t equal, then it’s not a real fight, and I’m not going to waste my time.”

He smiled, “Ok, even rules then. All’s fair until someone surrenders.”

“Deal,” she said, and slipped off her long-sleeved tunic. Careful not to lose an apple, she wrapped them carefully in the tunic. The fierce wolf tattoo on her shoulder stood out from under the sleeveless shirt she wore.

Taking her lead, Finn stripped off his armor and then cracked his neck and faced her, “Whenever you’re ready.”

Seeing their Captain face-off against the young girl, the Knights began to surround them to watch. It wasn’t at all uncommon for two to face off in a friendly fight, but they’d seen her fight before and knew she took things to the extreme. They also wondered how their Captain would fare against the feral girl.

Finn was just starting to count down when Kyrin lunged at him. He was expecting it though, and was easily able to dodge. It didn’t pass his notice that she’d gone directly for a round-house kick to his groin, and he realized this was going to be a real fight, not a joke.

Against what he’d told her, he couldn’t hit her. Gentlemen wouldn’t hit a woman, no matter how much they might ask for it.

His goal was to make her cede to him before the Knights, to show her that her ways weren't necessarily the best, and that she wasn't a better fighter than he.

When she came for him again, he quickly grabbed her wrist and spun her around, trapping her arm behind her back. She ducked and twisted hard, and then kicked off from his chest, surprising him. She flipped mid-air and landed in front of him, her wrist still in his grasp.

“You're quite the little vixen, aren't you?” he asked, tightening his grip.

Her eyes were almost black as she glared at him and then turned and tried to back-kick his knee. He jerked at the last second, let go of her wrist, and grabbed her foot, mid-air. Finn quickly slammed his fist into the back of her knee, and it buckled as he pushed, sending her onto the ground.

She turned immediately and flipped onto her feet, again ready to attack. By now, all of the Knights had gathered, and some of the servants were stopping to watch the fight.

Kyrin balled her hand into a fist and swung for his neck, hoping to collapse his airway. He caught her wrist, spun her and slammed his elbow against her arm, dropping her to the ground where he pinned her against the ground with a hand to her neck.

Just as a cheer erupted from the Knights, Kyrin got a hand free and slammed her palm against the side of his neck. He let go of her when a loud boom sounded through his ears, and a bright light flashed before his eyes. When he could see again, Kyrin was just getting to her feet and rounding to attack.

She could feel the blood pumping through her body, and the need for blood grew stronger. There was a part of her that remembered that this was a game, a fun fight, but another part had to win to save her life.

Finn stood and tried to grab Kyrin when she ran at him. She nimbly dodged to the side, grabbed his hair and put one foot against his hip, then kicked off and swung her other leg over his shoulder. He grabbed for her, but she leaned forward, throwing him off balance and both of them tumbled onto the grass.

“What’s going on?” Alric asked, running up.

“The Captain and the girl are play fighting,” one of the Knights told him.

“This doesn’t look like play.”

“Yeah, well, she’s a serious fighter.”

“So we should stop them.”

“It’s an honor fight, Sir. No death, just a surrender.”

Alric nodded, “That may actually be good for her.”

They turned back to the fight, and both Kyrin and Finn were on their feet. Kyrin dove at him again, this time going for his groin. He caught her wrist, twisted it and slammed her against the ground. She screamed in anger when he put his knee in the middle of her back and rotated her arm further.

“Do you surrender?” he asked, out of breath.

She didn’t answer, but struggled to get out from under his weight.

“Say it,” he said angrily.

When she didn’t give up, he raised her arm until he was a fraction of an inch from breaking it. Her face showed the pain it caused, but she refused to surrender.

“Say it!” Finn yelled, applying just a little more force.

With a scream, Kyrin dislocated her own shoulder and turned over beneath him. The cracking sound shocked Finn. He stood up quickly and backed away from her.

When Kyrin started for him with her good hand in a fist, Alric stepped in front of her, “Enough.”

She started around him, but he put his hand out, “I said enough.”

Finn was watching her, still in shock at the extreme measure she took to keep from losing a fight that meant nothing. He was breathing hard as he looked around at the gathered crowd. They were all completely silent as they watched Kyrin and Alric. She was panting and tense as she stood to face him. She couldn’t defy him, but it angered her that he’d stopped the fight.

“Disperse,” Alric said, not taking his eyes from her. He’d seen enough battles to know that she was moments from finishing the fight she’d started.

Kyrin turned angrily as her arm hung limply at her side. She walked over and grabbed her flail with her good hand, and then tucked it into her belt. Finn was beside her when she stood up, and he picked up his sword and sheathed it.

“Let me see your arm,” Alric said from behind her.

“It’s fine,” she told him.

“No it’s not. It’s not even fully attached right now.”

Looking into his eyes, Kyrin grabbed her bad arm and jerked it forward, wincing as it popped back into place. Alric was stunned when he heard the grinding pop.

“There, it’s attached,” she said through gritted teeth.

“I could have done that without pain,” he told her.

“Why are you so afraid of pain?”

“Not afraid, but it’s unnecessary. Now let me look at your arm.”

“Is that an order?”

He thought for a moment and then shook his head, “No, it’s not an order.”

Finn frowned, “I don’t understand how it dislocated. I didn’t put that much pressure on her arm.”

“She did it to herself,” Alric explained.

Kyrin seemed un-phased at their surprise.

“Why would you do that?” Finn asked.

“I don’t surrender.”

“It wasn’t a real fight! That was for fun.”

“I don’t surrender,” she said again.

Alric turned to Kyrin, “I want Dewell to look at your arm. He’s inside the castle right now. If you won’t let me heal it, at least let him use medicine to help you.”

Kyrin reached down and picked up her tunic, “Fine.”

“When you’re done, meet me in the ballroom. We have an event tonight, and I want you there.”

She nodded and walked into the castle.

Finn walked up to Alric, “Every time I talk to her, I get the impression she’s an evil.”

“I do too.”

“Why are you letting her go to the wedding?”

“Because I want to see what she does. Sithias is learning from her.”

“I’ll watch her.”

“Please do so.”

Finn and Alric turned when everyone in the ballroom fell silent. Kyrin had just entered with her arm in a sling and her flail on her left side. The people from Valhara had heard about the fight and were starting to wonder about her being an evil. While no true evil had existed in over 100 years, rumors still held them in grips of fear.

She ignored the glances and how the people moved back when she came closer.

Alric watched her, “How is your arm?”

“He’s making me wear this,” she said, looking down at the sling.

“If you let me heal your arm you won’t need it.”

“I’m fine.”

He nodded and then sighed, “Were you in the orchard this morning?”

She froze and her eyes grew wide, “Yes.”

“I said she could have the apples,” Finn told him.

“I’m not worried about the apples. Did you threaten children playing there?”

Kyrin smiled, “Yes, and your welcome.”

“Why did you threaten to remove their heads?”

“The vile little beasts were playing.”

A soft murmur ran through the crowd.

“Children are allowed to play in the city orchards,” he told her.
“And they aren’t vile beasts.”

Her brow furrowed, “You allow them to run free?”

“They’re children.”

“They’re repulsive, and an embarrassment that should be hidden.”

“Just those children or all children?” Alric asked her. He knew Sithias would be quite interested in this new development.

“The whole idea of children.”

“Sire,” Trox called out to them. They all turned and watched him walk up. He had a natural presence that demanded respect. Kyrin figured he’s the oldest person she’d ever met and his eyes held wisdom and understanding beyond her comprehension.

“Is there a problem?” Alric asked him.

“Yes, may we speak in private?”

“Sure, let’s go to my office.”

Trox and Alric left, and the others resumed their decorating. Kyrin walked over to stand beside Finn, so she wasn’t in the way of workers.

“So what are they preparing for?” she asked after a few minutes of silence.

“A wedding.”

“Alric and Genessa?”

“No, it’s two folks from the city, but Alric is performing the ceremony.”

She nodded and watched as flowers were brought in, “Why the decorations then?”

“I told you, it’s a wedding,” Finn said, and turned to her. He wondered at the curious look on her face, but was still feeling the effects from the fight and didn’t want to chat with her.

They watched as decorations were finished and guests began to arrive.

Finn finally looked down at Kyrin, “I’m going to go get ready. You might as well go change.”

“Into what?” she asked.

“I would assume into a dress.”

“Why?”

“Do you know what a wedding is?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m very much aware of what it is.”

“Well in Valhara, we dress up for it.”

“I’m dressed more than appropriately for a wedding,” she said, irritated. He looked down at her blood-red tunic and pants, and then shook his head and left to get ready.

Kyrin watched as more and more people began to arrive. When one young man from the town smiled at her and started toward her,

she backed into a shadow away from him. He frowned slightly and then moved off to talk to a man at the other end of the room.

It was obvious when the bride and groom arrived, and Kyrin couldn't help but glare at him. He looked happy and pleased with his choice of brides, but Kyrin noticed that his bride seemed nervous and on the verge of tears.

Kyrin looked around to see who was going to help the bride. When Alric appeared, he was wearing a deep purple tunic that fell to his knees. He also wore a golden sash, and medals lined his left side. No one was helping the bride, and Kyrin watched carefully as Alric started to make his way to the front. When the people saw him, they began to sit down to get ready for the wedding.

She started to panic, and she couldn't sit by while no one helped the bride. Once the bride and groom took their places at the front of the room, Kyrin maneuvered quickly to the front. The people fell silent as they watched her, and Alric moved quicker to get to them. He caught Finn's eye, and Finn was also trying to get to them.

Kyrin moved up to the bride and whispered to her, "Here."

The bride looked down at the tiny vial in Kyrin's hand and then took it and smiled, "Thank you."

"You better hurry," Kyrin said, glaring icily at the groom.

"Drink it?" the bride asked.

"Yes"

"What is it?" she asked, pulling the stopper out of the top.

"It's ok... it's not a painful death. It'll be quick."

Alric heard the last part and quickly took the tiny vial from the bride as Finn pulled Kyrin away from her. The bride was now in the groom's arms as he snarled at Kyrin.

“What are you doing!?” Alric yelled, looking down at the harmless looking vial of clear liquid.

“She doesn't have a mercy killer!” Kyrin said angrily. “So I'm helping her.”

“You tried to kill her.”

“So?”

“Get her out of here,” Alric ordered Finn. Finn nodded and pulled Kyrin from the room amid gasps and whispers from the audience.

Finn pushed her roughly into her room and then followed her in and slammed the door behind him, “Why would you try to kill the bride!?”

Kyrin calmly sat down, “I was doing her a favor.”

“By killing her?”

“Yes”

“How is that a favor?”

“I realize that as a man you aren't aware of this... but death is favorable to being the property of a man.”

“Do what?” he asked in a whisper. He'd never heard anything like this, and it concerned him how casually she spoke about it.

“I know what marriage is. You're given to a man, so he can beat you and do what he wants with you. I've heard the stories of how all a man wants it to shove a baby into you.”

Finn didn't know what to say, so he just watched her.

“Then for nine months you get to hide in shame, too disgraced to so much as show your face to anyone. The man gets off easy. His deed isn't known to others, but the gods punish the woman by displaying her humiliation. Then when the baby comes, you have to give it away before anyone finds out you even have it.”

He could hardly breathe as what she said began to sink in.

Kyrin reached over and pulled another small vial from her pack, “I was simply acting as her mercy killer, because I didn't see as though she had one.”

“How many of those do you have?”

“I have 7 left, but I can make more.”

“You carry poisons?”

“Some”

With the final proof Finn needed that Kyrin was an evil, he backed out of the room and locked the door from the outside. He called in two more Knights to watch her door, and then left to talk to Trox.

Kyrin wasn't surprised that she was locked in her room. She was surprised she hadn't been beaten first though. Mercy killing a bride was frowned on by men. It was invented by women and passed on by women to offer an easy out for women about to be bound as the property of the husband.

Knowing that Finn would be back to take her small stash of poisons, she carefully hid them deep inside the mattress. She could make them most of the time, one of the things Creteloc had shown her. The problem was she wasn't born a rogue, so the poisons sometimes didn't turn out well, and could often have the

opposite effect. These poisons were from Creteloc though, so she had to hide them to keep them safe.

Once she was sure the poisons were safe, she sat down to re-wrap the handle on her flail. She carefully unwrapped it and then began the meticulous process of re-wrapping it tightly. Proper weapon care was ingrained in her from youth, and she knew that she had to keep good care of it if it was to save her life.

When night came and no one came to punish her, she spread out her blanket on the floor and was soon asleep.

“Ok, I’m here,” Alric said as he walked into the room with Trox and Finn.

“Finn told me about the poison offer,” Trox said. “We’re both convinced that Kyrin is an evil.”

Alric sat down and sighed, “I know.”

“She’s dangerous.”

“In her defense... she didn’t attempt to murder the bride.”

“She handed her a poison and told her to drink it,” Finn reminded him.

“As opposed to simply killing her. She gave her the option. I just want to know why.”

Finn leaned forward and told Alric about Kyrin’s views of marriage and everything that was said in the bedroom a few hours before. Alric listened carefully as his heart constricted.

“She is an evil,” Trox said.

“I know.”

“To protect Valhara, she must be destroyed.”

“She’s 17, Trox,” Alric said, sitting back in his chair.

“So she will grow stronger.”

“Sithias wants to study her. We can’t kill her until he is done.”

“Sithias must know by now that she’s an evil and will want her killed. We can’t risk their return.”

“Maybe she’s not really an evil,” Finn said, deep in thought. “Evils chose that way of life above that of honor and civility. She’s been forced into her ways by years of abuse and misguided rules and customs.”

“It doesn’t matter how she came to be an evil. She’s still dangerous,” Trox said.

“I can’t kill her simply because she’s an evil. She’s innocent and doesn’t know any different,” Alric told them.

“There’s no such thing as an innocent evil. Her heart has hardened already. We’ve seen it.”

“Why don’t we try to help her?” Finn said. “She’s savage and barbaric. She doesn’t trust and is prone to fight, but maybe that’s all she knows. If we can show her other ways to do things, calmer, peaceful ways, then she can make an informed decision on how to lead her life.”

“She will choose the dark path.”

“Maybe,” Alric said, looking out the window. “I will ask Sithias what to do.”

“Bring her before him,” Trox said.

“Why would I do that?”

“He’s watching your interactions with her, studying how she reacts to you and those around her. Maybe he would learn from how she interacts with him directly.”

“She has a god though. He may not like her being brought before mine.”

Finn shrugged, “She’s an impressive specimen. I’ve never met one with her skill or passion for fighting. We train our Knights, but they’ve never seen the kind of fighting that was common for her. She could teach them.”

Alric smiled at him, “She’s also 13 years younger than you are.”

Finn grinned and shook his head, “I’m married, plus, I get the impression she’d have the head of anyone who tried to marry her.”

Trox scowled, “Stop talking about her like she’s a young girl who simply needs proper guidance! She’s an evil, and we should be weary of being anywhere near her.”

“Trox...” Alric sighed.

He stood up, “No! I was around the last of the evils, and I know what they can do and what they are like! I won’t have one living in Valhara, free to roam. She should be killed immediately!”

“I’m not going to kill her simply because she displays some of the evil traits.”

“Not traits... she is an evil.”

“Sit, please,” Alric said calmly.

Trox sat down and lowered his voice, “I’m your advisor for a reason.”

“My trusted advisor, but sometimes your logic gets in the way of your humanity.”

“Logic never gets in the way. I’ve seen the evils, and you can’t imagine what they are capable of.”

“My Grandfather spoke of them often,” Alric said. “I understand how dangerous they were. Then I see Kyrin and realize how she’s lived and what she’s been told, and I’m not convinced she’s a true evil.”

“She is.”

“I wonder if she should spend time with Genessa,” Finn said unexpectedly.

“Why?” Alric asked.

“She views men as tyrants.”

“Can Genessa defend herself if Kyrin attacks her?” Trox asked Alric.

“She’s handy with a bow...”

“Kyrin would have her for lunch. That girl can hand-to-hand with the big boys and always has her flail with her. By the time Genessa drew a bow, she’d be dead,” Finn said.

Alric nodded, “She’s also not shot a bow in years. Since she moved to the castle she doesn’t fight.”

“So it’s too dangerous to have them together,” Trox said.

“I don’t think so. Finn has a point that Kyrin won’t be as defensive around Genessa.”

“Genessa can be harsh though.”

“Yes I know. It seems to be getting worse.”

“If Genessa oversteps, Kyrin will fight back.”

“Why don’t we put guards on Genessa, in case Kyrin attacks her?”
Finn suggested.

Alric thought for a few minutes before speaking, “Let’s do it then. We’ll put two Knights with Genessa, and we’ll ask Genessa if she can help Kyrin with some basic manners.”

Finn grinned, “She is lacking a lot of social etiquette.”

“A lot of? She has the social graces of a goat.”

Chapter 5

“Come in, Kyrin,” Genessa said, smiling. She stepped back and let Kyrin and two of the Knights into her ante-chamber.

Kyrin looked around the room. It had too many decorations for her liking, but the bow on the wall caught her attention. It had been used, but was now covered in dust and being used to display flowers. The couches were soft and made of blue velvet, and a small table sat between them with tea set out.

“Please, have a seat,” Genessa said as she sat down and crossed her ankles. Kyrin couldn’t imagine wearing a long dress all day, but

Genessa always wore them and often had matching jewels and elaborate hairdos to go with it.

Kyryn sat down awkwardly and looked over at the Lady, “So whose bow is that?”

“It’s mine.”

She raised her eyebrows, “You any good?”

Genessa smiled, “Ladies don’t carry weapons. It was from my younger days, and I was quite good.”

“Why can’t women carry weapons?”

“Not women, Ladies... as in the woman over the city.”

“Oh”

“Did Alric tell you why you are here?”

“Yeah, he thinks I need help with acting proper or something.”

“Yes, mostly. What do you think about that?”

Kyryn sat back in the chair, “I think I’m fine. It’s a waste of time if you ask me.”

“I see, well... as you are to be in this castle for the next year...”

“Eleven months.”

“Ok, 11 months, then you’ll need to act like you belong here.”

“Ok”

“I’d like to start by making you look like a proper lady.”

“You mean like dresses.”

“Yes”

Kyrin tensed, “Is he trying to get me ready to sell?”

“No!” Genessa said, shocked.

“Yeah well look what dressing up got you.”

“It helped me find the love of my life.”

Kyrin rolled her eyes, “Right... I’ll ask you again on your wedding night.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning nothing. Let’s just get on with it as I don’t have a choice.”

Genessa briefly tried to figure out what Kyrin meant, but then wrote it off as savagery, “I had a dress made for you. Please step into the parlor and change into it.”

Kyrin sighed and then stood up and walked into the next room. She saw the burgundy dress hanging from a clothes rack and walked closer to it. The skirt was long, as expected, and hung open at the front to expose another dark-blue skirt beneath it. A gold strip trimmed the neck and then met at the middle and followed the body down to where it split. The sleeves would be tight on her arms, which she knew would hinder any chance she had of fighting in it, but she didn’t have a choice.

She changed and then looked in the mirror and shook her head. The skirt was fuller than she’d seen and would trail behind her a bit as she walked. She was relieved that the neck was high enough it completely covered her neck and chest, and the body was loose and not constricting.

Kyrin hated her figure, and hid it beneath thick shirts and baggy pants. Nothing in her life had been harder than when her body

began to mature and the feminine curves she despised began to show.

“Are you coming out?” Genessa asked after a few minutes.

“Yeah, I guess,” Kyrin said, and then walked out into the room with the others.

Genessa’s smile faded and her words were insincere, “Lovely, Dear. Simply lovely.”

Kyrin looked down at the dress and shrugged.

“You’re quite scrawny though, aren’t you?”

“So?”

“Have a seat.”

Kyrin sat down on the couch with her legs far apart and her arms awkwardly at her side. She was obviously alert and ready to stand at a moment’s notice.

“Relax,” Genessa said.

“I am.”

One of the Knights laughed and Genessa silenced him with a glare before speaking, “No you aren’t. I have been in battle, and you are tense and ready to fight. As a proper lady you should be relaxed and calm.”

“Then you become a sitting duck.”

“No, you aren’t. You would then have men around you to fight if anyone attacks.”

She smiled suddenly, “You want me to sit here and let the men fight for me?”

“Well... yes.”

“No chance.”

“We’ll deal with that later. I actually want to look at your hair.”

Kyrin frowned, “What?”

“I’ve only seen it done up in a bun and in a braid. I want to let it down so I can look at it.”

“Why?”

“Please?”

Obviously not happy about it, Kyrin stood up and then began pulling her hair out of its braided bun. It took a while, but she finally dropped it and let it fall.

“My word it’s long,” Genessa gasped. She walked behind Kyrin and saw that her thick brown hair would easily have touched the back of her knees.

“Yeah, so?”

Genessa reached out and touched it, scowling at how soft and smooth it laid, “Why do you not cut it?”

Kyrin caught a tone change and wondered what she’d done wrong now, “I don’t know.”

Hair was a source of great importance in Kyrstalis. Short hair advertised one who was for sale and waiting for bids to make her a wife. Long hair meant the girl was either already spoken for or wasn’t currently for sale. Kyrin wasn’t about to cut it and deal with the unwanted advances if she returned to Kyrstalis Dimension.

Genessa moved to face her again and was no longer enjoying her new task, “You aren’t giving me a lot to work with, but I can try to make you a lady.”

“How so?”

“First we cut off this mop you call hair.”

“No”

“No?”

“No, I don’t cut it.”

“Why not?”

Kyrin looked at her angrily, “No.”

“Fine, but it’s ugly,” Genessa said, and sat down again.

Kyrin sat also, not caring that she’d sat directly on her hair.

They sat in awkward silence for a while before Genessa sighed, “Go ahead and change back into your... thing. I’ll tell Alric that you cannot be changed.”

“Fine by me,” Kyrin said before walking back in to change. She just wished they would leave her alone and let her work her year in peace.

When she walked out, Genessa and one Knight were talking in the corner, and the other Knight was nowhere to be seen. Kyrin watched them for a moment. They hadn’t heard her come out. She shook her head when she saw the way they looked at one another, and how the Knight gently took Genessa’s hand and kissed it softly.

“You’re bought and paid for,” Kyrin said from behind them.

Genessa jumped, and the Knight dropped her hand and looked over at the girl.

“So you’re just asking for a severe beating,” Kyrin told her.

“It’s... not what... I’m sure it’s not what it looked like,” Genessa said quickly.

Kyrin shrugged, “I don’t really care what you do. However, you should be more careful and not get caught. I’ve seen women stoned for less than that.”

The Knight was too terrified to even speak, so he suddenly turned and walked out of the room.

“Just saying...” Kyrin said, and followed him out.

Before Kyrin had even returned to her room, Finn was waiting for her, “So where’s the dress?”

“I don’t think Genessa likes me.”

“Why do you say that?”

Kyrin shrugged and started re-braiding her hair.

“I’ve never seen hair that long before.”

“It’s going up.”

“You should leave it down,” Finn said, watching her.

“Why?”

“It’s nice.”

She ignored him and finished braiding it, then tied it into a bun at the base of her neck.

“I have a brother about your age.”

“Ok”

“You might like him. You hang around us old folks all day.”

“You aren’t old.”

“No, but you may have more in common with him.”

“I’m not interested in meeting your brother.”

He smiled, “Why’s that?”

“Just not.”

“Well maybe you should come to dinner one of these nights. You can meet my wife and kids too.”

She turned to him, “You have children?”

“Yes, three of them.”

He watched as her entire demeanor changed, and she sat down to clean the ceremonial dagger that she carried with her.

Not sure what to make out of her reaction, he continued, “Mom’d love to have you. They have heard about you in the town, but no one’s met you.”

“No”

“Because of my brother or because I have children?”

“I just can’t imagine you doing that.”

“Having children?”

“Yes”

“Why not?”

She shrugged and watched him.

“Well, she and I wanted more children, but we haven’t had any luck.”

“She wanted them?”

“Yes, very much so.”

“Or did you just not give her the choice.”

He frowned, “I’m not like that.”

“Sure you aren’t. Just because women can carry your children, doesn’t mean they should be demeaned like that.”

“You have the wrong idea about marriage and children.”

“No I don’t! I’ve seen how men act and how the women have no choice when he decides to humiliate her with pregnancy. It’s disgusting and I thought highly of you, until now.”

“She had a choice. It was a mutual decision, and pregnancy is not humiliating.”

“No, not for you.”

“Wait a minute!” Finn said, starting to get angry. Before he could continue, a rush of footsteps sounded through the castle and both of them ran out into the hallway.

Kyrin watched as all of the Knights began to gather outside on the lawn.

“What’s going on?” Finn asked a passing Knight.

“Remeau was attacked.”

Finn grew furious and headed out onto the lawn also, followed by Kyrin. Alric was seconds behind them and began shouting orders for the Knights to mount up. They were heading out immediately.

“I want to go,” Kyrin said to Finn as he got his horse ready.

“Why?”

“Why not?”

He thought for a moment and then nodded, “Fine.”

Kyrin picked out a silver mare and mounted it quickly, then headed out behind the Knights. When Alric saw her a few miles out of the city, he simply shook his head and then turned to speak to Finn. She kept an eye out and stayed ready, in case they were attacked on the way.

Smoke became visible before they arrived, and Kyrin knew what they would find. As they approached the small village, the death and destruction became apparent. No building stood undisturbed and bodies were strewn around the streets in various stages of mutilation.

No one spoke as they dismounted and went in search of anyone who might have lived. Kyrin watched them and then headed off away from the others. Ash crunched beneath her boots as she wove in and out of rubble that used to be houses.

She stopped suddenly when a small body came into view. The child was obviously dead and covered in the ash from his burnt-out house. She poked him with her boot and then moved out without a second glance.

A soft groan off to her side caught her attention, and she headed toward it. Lying up against the remains of a wall was a warrior in full battle gear with his sword set off to his side.

She walked over and then squatted down beside him, “You alive?”

His eyes opened and he managed to nod, though he was in a great deal of pain. She studied him for a moment and noticed that his armor was dented and worn, and he had a tattoo on the side of his face with the mark of the crow.

“You from Qualsax?”

He again nodded and managed to mouth the word, “Help.”

Kyrin checked around her carefully to make sure no one was watching. When she was sure she was alone, she pulled a small empty vial from her pouch and pulled the stopper.

“Help,” he whispered again between gasps of breath.

She held the vial up to the blood pouring from his mouth, and then returned the stopper when it was full. After placing it back into the pouch, she checked again to make sure no one was looking.

Stealing from the dead wasn't truly stealing, so she went through his pockets and put the handful of coins he carried into her bag, along with a necklace with a sparkling green amulet that he wore around his neck.

His eyes grew wide when she grinned down at him and then laced her fingers and put her hands over his heart.

“Vasieth,” she whispered, seconds before lightning shot out of her hand. The Qualsax Warrior's screams pierced the quiet day for only a second before his heart stopped, and Kyrin stood up.

His screams caught the attention of the Valhara Knights, and they all ran toward her as she stepped back away from him.

“Are you ok?” Alric asked, running up to her.

“Sure, why?”

“We heard a scream.” He looked down as Finn knelt beside the newly dead Warrior.

“He’s from Qualsax.”

“He’s dead?”

“Yes, newly dead,” Finn said, and then looked up at Kyrin.

“Did you kill him?” Alric asked.

“Why would I kill him?” The other Knights watched her. They knew she was rumored to be an evil and thought nothing about killing.

“That’s not what I asked. Did you kill him?”

Lying came easy to her, “No.”

“Do you swear?”

“Yes”

He nodded and then turned back to the Knights, “Keep looking, there may be more.”

Kyrin was already a long way off, still looking through the rubble.

“He’s still warm,” Finn said, standing slowly.

Alric nodded, “I’m sure he is. She killed him. Stay with her.”

Finn ran off to catch up with Kyrin. They had barely finished searching the village when the sun began to set. A call was heard, and they all headed back to the horses to meet up with Alric.

Alric looked at those gathered, “It’s too late to bury them now. We’ll camp here tonight and then bury them in the morning.”

Finn sighed when Kyrin spoke up, “Why bother burying them? Predators will clean them up.”

Alric cringed and ignored her, “There’s a lake nearby if you need to wash up. I want camp set up within the hour, and Unit 4 will take the first watch.”

Kyrin stood back and watched as the Knights went to work. They put up a big tent and started to stake it down to the ground. She was curious why they needed shelter, when there wasn’t any storm in sight. She saw a smaller tent being put up beside it, and a cook fire built.

Once they were done, Finn came up to her, “The smaller tent is yours. We’re going to go clean off so stay here.”

“I don’t need a tent and why can’t I go?”

“Because we’ll not be dressed. We’re covered in blood and ash.”

She shrugged, “How different can you be naked than I am?”

He was speechless for a moment, “Have you ever seen a naked man?”

“Well, no.”

Her innocence always shocked him, especially in light of how she’d just killed a helpless enemy, “No, stay here.”

Kyrin scowled and watched them all walk off together. She looked around the now empty camp and debated what to do. The dead bodies littering the village floor were full of potion ingredients, but she figured if they were willing to bury the dead, they probably didn’t want their bodies pillaged first.

She walked over and peeked into the smaller tent. Inside was a soft mattress set out for her, covered in blankets and fluffy pillows. She shook her head and then walked back out. The moon set

behind the nearby mountains, and in the dark she felt less conspicuous than she had wandering the empty camp in the light.

When she heard the others coming back, she walked toward the campfire to wait for them. Alric and Finn were laughing about something when they walked up, and when they saw her, they went over to her.

“Sorry we took so long, Kyrin,” Finn said. “We decided though that if you need a bath, we’ll go and make sure no one bothers you.”

“I don’t need a bath,” she told him.

Alric looked down at her ash and sweat covered skin and then smiled, “You sure about that?”

“Yes”

“Is it the water you don’t like, or being naked?”

She wouldn’t admit it, but in the last few weeks in Valhara, she’d begun to like the feel of water and looked forward to when the large tub was set outside of her room for her to bathe in, “I don’t like any of it.”

“But you’re covered in ash.”

“Does that bother you?”

He thought before answering, “Yes.”

“Fine, but I go alone.”

“We really should go. What if you run into trouble?” Finn said.

“I can bathe alone.”

“We’re not going to peek.”

“Either I bathe alone or I stay like this.”

Alric finally sighed, “Very well, but we will come after you in 20 minutes if you’re not back.”

“Dinner will be ready when you return,” Finn said, and then pointed off into the dark. “The lake is that way.”

Kyrin found the lake easily and checked around before stripping and setting her clothes off to the side. She hesitantly dropped her flail beside the clothing and then stepped into the warm lake. The moon was shining on the water, making it look like it was pitch-black and bottomless. She smiled and dipped into the water, reveling at the feel of it. She’d never in her wildest dreams imagined she would ever find enough water to submerge in.

She pulled her hair out of the tight braid and then ran her fingers through it, combing out the knots and anything that may have gotten caught in it. Just as she’d finished, she felt something brush against her ankle in the water.

She jerked away and began swimming quickly toward the shore. Seconds later, the feel of something scaly wrapped around her ankle, and she was pulled into the black water. Kyrin struggled to get her ankle free, but whatever was holding her leg only tightened. Without being able to speak, she couldn’t get a spell off, so she struggled to get free.

Deep in the water, an eye appeared, an eye almost as big as her head. She gasped in a lung full of water and then began striking out at it, trying to dig her fingernails into the giant orb. When she finally managed to draw blood from the beast, tentacles appeared and began pulling at her limbs, trying to tear her apart. She was out of air, and her vision was beginning to fade. It was like looking through a tunnel.

Her head was pounding, and her lungs ached to draw in a breath. She could see the surface of the water, and the rippled form of the

moon. Her left foot broke free of the tentacle holding it, and she kicked hard, sending her foot through the beast's already injured eye.

When she broke the surface of the water, she gasped in air and found renewed energy. All she needed now was to get her hands together, but the beast was still pulling painfully at her limbs, though its movements were now more hectic and jerky than before. Managing to get her mouth near her wrist, she bit the tentacle and green blood oozed out of where she'd bitten, and the tentacle let go.

The second her hands touched, she shouted, and the entire lake seemed to erupt into a bright flash of lightning. The beast immediately let go of her, and she felt its dead form slide down her body as it sunk in the water. Fish began to appear along the surface, killed by the spell that finished off the beast.

She swam to the shore and collapse onto the sand, still gasping in breaths of air. Her arms and legs ached from the beast pulling at her, and there were burns on her ankles and wrists where it had grasped her. The foot she sent through its eye was throbbing and in a great amount of pain.

Once she could breathe again, she managed to pull on her clothing and then turned back to the water. Tentacles from the creature were floating lifelessly across the black face of the water, along with other creatures that called the lake home. She wasn't sure how to get out of this one. Only magic could destroy everything in a lake at once.

Kyrin knew she couldn't hide the injuries. They were too great to keep from all of the Knights. Carrying the boot from her injured foot, she limped back toward camp, hoping the rest were asleep and she could crawl into the small tent and nurse her wounds in private.

She chastised herself for not seeing him. One of the Knights was guarding the camp and off behind a grove of trees. He saw her limping toward the camp and immediately called for help as he put his arm under hers to help her into camp. Her foot was hurting worse, and she wasn't able to bear any weight on it at all.

“What happened?” Finn asked, kneeling down beside her when the Knight helped her to sit by the fire.

“I'm ok,” she said, and held her foot out to the fire to look at.

The Knights became furious when the fire lit up the damage to her foot. The skin was hanging loosely and peeling away from burned and blackened flesh.

“My god,” Finn whispered, and called for someone to fetch one of the Priests.

“No,” she managed to say, and then she put her hand out to him. “I'm ok. I can handle this.”

He was leaning down to get a closer look, “What did this?”

“I don't know what it was.”

“Were you attacked in the lake?”

“No, it was on the way back.”

“Go,” he said, nodding to two of the Knights, who immediately set off into the night.

Kyrin began to tear off the bottom half of her tunic, and then wrapped it tightly around her foot. When she stretched her hands out, it exposed the burns around her wrists where the tentacles had grabbed her.

Finn spoke softly, “We need to get you looked at. You could lose that foot if we don't have it healed.”

“I just need to lay down.”

He nodded and then helped her to her feet, and acted as a crutch, so she could get into the tent. Finn stepped out just as the two Knights returned.

“What did you find?” he asked them.

“We went all the way to the lake and didn’t see anything.”

“She lies often. Did you look at the lake?”

“It was too dark. Clouds are covering the moon.”

“We’ll go look in the morning and see if we can find what attacked her.”

“Yes, Captain,” they said, and returned to the fire. Finn debated for a moment and then went and grabbed a plate of food. When he made it back to her tent, she was already fast asleep.

“Kyrin?” Alric whispered, and touched her arm softly.

She looked up from the ground beside the mattress in the tent and sat up when she saw him.

He sat back against the side of the tent, and she was surprised to see the sun was up.

“Want to tell me what happened last night?” he asked.

“I was attacked.”

“Then you managed to kill an entire lake?”

“No, I can’t kill an entire lake.”

“Finn went to the lake this morning and found a dead tentacle orb along with thousands of dead fish.”

“Coincidence”

“Well it just so happens that the eye of the orb contains an acid. Something that would do similar damage to your foot.”

“Ok, so the big eye attacked me.”

“Water attacks are hard for melee.”

“What are you implying?” she asked, irritated.

“That you have more poisons than we imagined. Did you poison that lake?”

“Is it illegal to do?”

“Well, no.”

“I was attacked. I had to do something to get away.”

He nodded, “I understand that. I just wonder why you lied to Finn about being attacked in the water.”

She shrugged and looked down at her foot, which was completely healed, “I wish you’d stop doing that.”

“Healing you?”

“Yes”

“Why? Is it so hard to accept that I want to help you with no strings attached?”

“Nothing comes without a price.”

“Well I fully plan on proving you wrong.”

“Where were you anyway?” she asked, and then winced when she realized she shouldn’t have asked.

“I was going to talk to Sithias, but was called back when Finn was worried you might lose a foot.”

“I would have been fine.”

He studied her and then nodded, “Ok. Some are breaking up camp, and the rest of us are going to bury the dead. Just hang around until we’re done, and then we go back to Valhara.”

She nodded and started to unwrap her foot.

“Oh, another thing,” he said, turning at the door. “How long before that lake water is good again?”

“Should be fine this morning.”

“It should?”

“I mean it is.”

He seemed unsure, but turned anyway and left her tent. She followed him out and was immediately handed a plate of food by Finn, “You need to eat.”

“Are you mad?” she asked, taking a bite with her fingers.

“Not mad, more frustrated.”

“At me?”

“At the entire situation. I knew we shouldn’t have let you go alone at night. Then you lied to us for no good reason, all to hide poison use.”

She didn't know what to say, so she ate quickly and then went back into the village to see what she could find to do. It took hours for the bodies to be buried, and once a prayer was said over the grave, they all mounted up and started for the town.

Kyrin got the impression that others were talking about her behind her back, but each time she looked toward them, they were facing forward silently. She wasn't sure why the paranoia, but she didn't like the feeling and was ready to get back to her room.

It wasn't until the next day that anyone really talked to her again. She woke up to a light knock on her door. She sat up from the floor and then yawned and called for them to come in.

Finn came in and sat down on the floor beside her, "Wondered if you were going to wake up today. Lord Alric had to go into the temple, but he thought when you woke up that you could maybe see about another session with Genessa."

She cringed, "Really?"

"Yes, she has a lot she can teach you."

"She hates me."

Finn smiled, "No, she doesn't."

"Why aren't they married yet?"

"It's complicated."

"So you don't know is what you mean," she said.

"No, no I know why. I'm just not sure it's any of your business."

"Is something wrong with her?"

"No"

“Are his other wives refusing?”

Finn almost choked, “Do what?”

“His other wives... if they hate the new wife it can cause a delay.”

“What makes you think Lord Alric has other wives?”

“Of course he does. He’s rich.”

“So rich men have many wives.”

“Doesn’t he?”

“No, he’s not married.”

She thought about that and then frowned, “Is something wrong with him?”

“No”

“So she should jump on the chance to marry him, then she can be first wife.”

A smile crossed Finn’s lips, “You’re putting me on.”

Kyrin stood up and stretched before adjusting the flail at her side, “Fine, I’ll go see Genessa.”

“Have her talk to you about marriage.”

“I know enough about marriage,” she said, and then walked out the door as he laughed.

Kyrin walked up several flights of stairs before she got to the rooms belonging to Genessa. Just outside of the door she heard a loud groan and stopped to listen. She heard noises from inside the room that sounded like Genessa may be getting sick. When the Knight spoke from inside the room, Kyrin figured he must be

punishing her, so she backed away silently and then walked down the stairs to gather more apples.

Alric fell to his knees and lowered his eyes as the image of Sithias began to shimmer into focus before him.

“You have a report?” Sithias asked softly.

“Yes, my Lord. It was the Qualsax Warriors.”

“How many have died?”

“127 of them died in the village.”

“I will lead them into prosperity, fear not.”

“Thank you, my Lord. The attacks aren’t as bad as they used to be, but they are still bloody and senseless.”

“You wish to retaliate?”

“Yes, of course.”

“With my blessings, then do so.”

“Thank you.”

“What of the girl?”

“Trox is sure she’s an evil, but I have doubts.”

“What doubts?”

“She’s so innocent, my Lord. She looks at the world through the eyes of a child.”

“Is she dangerous?”

He sighed, “Yes, my Lord.”

“Yet innocent... interesting.”

“I don’t think she’s been given the chance to learn right from wrong. It seems her harsh reality forced her to see the worst in everything.”

“What do you want to do?”

“I want to watch her and study her.”

“What evil traits does she display?” Sithias asked as he walked slowly around Alric.

“Anger, mostly, the ability to kill without remorse, and she’s been known to use poisons.”

“For that you brand her an evil?”

“I have no experience with them, just what I’ve read in books. Trox though, he is convinced.”

“Yes, Trox has had many run-ins with the evils.”

“I’ve never known one of her age to be so naïve. She can fight off the strongest of my Knights, but has no clue about the differences between men and women.”

“She knows what kept her alive,” Sithias said. “Study her, find her true nature and see if you can guide her to the right.”

“Did you find out about her god?”

Sithias sighed, “Yes. Daemionis wasn’t hard to track down. He’s not of this world and is definitely the god of evils. This girl doesn’t fit into his minions though, and I wonder how she came to be a follower.”

“What are his minions then?”

“Creatures of the night... Assassins, thieves, murderers. He is a ruthless god and punishes his followers for his own amusement. They stay with him out of fear..., but this young girl is different. He seems to have a vested interest in her that normally is reserved for our elite.”

“So she may be one of his Priestesses?”

“She is not. That’s what concerns me. She has something he wants or needs, and I want to know what it is.”

“I will watch her and see what I can find.”

“Blessings go with you,” Sithias said, and then disappeared from the room.

Alric rode quickly back to the castle, and thought over what he’d learned from Sithias. Her deity sounded horrible and he now feared for her life. Such gods thought nothing of killing their followers for petty crimes, and if she didn’t fit into his minions, he may not want her around. Alric wasn’t convinced of Sithias’ thoughts on Daemionis’ interest in Kyrin, so he planned on making it his mission to find out.

He saw her out in the orchards as he rode past, so he stopped his horse and watched her. She’d climbed into one of the tall apple trees and was watching across the farmlands as she ate. It struck him again as he watched her how very much unlike an evil she seemed. Sitting in the tree, unaware she was being watched, she looked innocent and pure.

When Kyrin saw him watching her, she jumped down from the branch and walked over to him.

“Just saw you as I passed and thought I would say hello,” he said when she approached.

“Well, I’m supposed to be with Genessa, but I don’t think she’s up for company.”

“Why’s that?”

She wasn’t sure he should be told that Genessa had earned a punishment from a Knight, “Just got that feeling.”

“I’ll go check on her when we get back. I heard you’re going to dinner at Finn’s house tonight?”

“He invited me, but I haven’t accepted.”

“Why not? His brother is your age.”

Her head cocked to the side slightly, “Why does everyone keep telling me that? What does it matter if he is my age?”

“It just means you might have more in common with him.”

“I doubt it. He’s never seen battle, and I’ve never studied alchemy.”

“Just because you don’t have similar interests, doesn’t mean you will hate him,” Alric told her.

Kyrin studied his face as her eyes narrowed, “You aren’t thinking of selling me to him, are you?”

He sighed, “No.”

“Are you lying to me?”

“I don’t lie.”

She shrugged and started toward the castle after pulling an apple out of her tunic to eat.

Alric kicked his horse to follow her, “So are you going?”

“Why do I get the feeling you want me out of the castle tonight?”

“Because I do.”

She stopped and looked at him, “Why?”

“We’re having another wedding, and I don’t want a dead bride.”
He had to hide his amusement.

“I don’t see why I would want to go, but if you need me gone, then I will.”

“Good, I’ll tell Finn. Are you going to dress up?”

“Why would I want to do that?”

“It’s common to dress up when going to another’s home for dinner.”

She put her hands on her hips and glared at him, “How much has he offered for me?”

“No one is selling you! When are you going to understand that?”

“Then why else am I to get dolled up and paraded in front of this brother?”

“You know what? Go in what you’re wearing, at least it’s clean,” he said, and dismounted. One of the servants came and took his horse as he headed inside, too frustrated to keep talking to Kyrin.

She went to her room and waited for Finn to get her for dinner. There was a dress hanging in her room when she arrived, but she

refused to put it on, and instead decided to polish the spiked balls of her flail while she waited.

It was only an hour later when Finn appeared, “Ready, Kid?”

“I guess,” she said, and then slipped the flail into her belt before following him out of the castle. A short horse ride later, and they were walking into a modest home at a farm outside of Valhara.

“Oh, my Dear, come in, come in!” an older woman said. She was short and pudgy and wore a dirty apron covered in flour and something brown. The woman took Kyrin’s hand in hers and smiled broadly, “I’m Finn’s mom. It’s so good to finally meet you.”

Kyrin nodded and looked around the room.

Finn came in and stood beside the others, “This is my wife, Emerisa, and my children, Anni, Sreeva, and Pater. Then that’s my brother York and my youngest brother, Hicks.”

She looked at them and forced a smile. She was very uncomfortable about the way his youngest brother looked at her, so she turned to his mother.

“Come sit, Dear. I hope you’re starving.” Finn’s mom led her over to a table, so Kyrin sat down and her eyes grew wide at the amount of food on the table. She’d never seen this much food and everyone sat around the table and began to dish up portions onto their plates.

Kyrin watched them closely, not sure how to act. She knew others were shocked when she ate with her hands, but utensils were awkward and when she used them, she often spilled. Much to her dismay, Finn’s youngest brother, Hicks, sat down beside her.

“So I heard you’re new to Valhara,” he said, scooping a heaping pile of potatoes onto his plate.

“Yes,” she said, still not sure what to do.

He started to eat and then looked over and saw her empty plate, “Are you going to eat?”

She nodded and then reached out and grabbed a hot roll from the table.

“Is that all?” he asked, frowning.

The entire situation was uncomfortable, and she was getting irritated at being put into it in the first place. She was hungry and the food smelled really good, but she didn’t want to make a fool out of herself in front of them.

Kyryn looked over when Finn picked up a chicken leg with his hands and smiled at her before starting to eat. She took the hint and tore the other leg from the chicken, and then began to eat also. Once she had food, Hicks turned back to his plate and dove in.

She was amazed at the amount of food he put down, but figured he was still growing and maybe needed it. Growing Shadowmere always got the first pick of the food and as much as they wanted. Because she wasn’t a man, she never got that luxury, but got the leftovers from when the others were done.

The family talked about their day and how the kids were growing and learning to read. She couldn’t help but keep out of the conversation, as she was feeling insulted by having to eat with children in the first place. It was odd to her how Finn’s wife kept reaching over to help the children to cut up food, and even cleaned up when one of them spilled.

After dinner, Hicks showed Kyryn into the next room where the family gathered to visit. She sat quietly until Hicks turned to her, “So what about you? Are you enjoying your time in Valhara?”

She swallowed hard and looked at the others before nodding, “Yes.”

“Finn said you’re from an entirely different place than this.”

She nodded.

“You’re quiet. Why don’t you tell us about your home?”

She froze and then Finn spoke, “She’s pretty shy. Let’s just let her be for now.”

Kyrin breathed a sigh of relief, and sat back to listen to them.

“It’s getting late. Why don’t I walk you back, Kyrin?” Finn said, standing up.

“No, it’s ok. I can find my own way back.”

“I’ll take her,” Hicks said. He’d been watching her all night, and she did not want to be alone with him. She’d seen that look before, and it always ended up in a cash offer.

“That ok, Kyrin?” Finn asked. He was smiling proudly at his little brother.

She sighed, “Sure.”

“Let me get you a cloak. It’s cold out,” Hicks said, and headed into an adjacent room.

“I don’t like cloaks.”

He turned and looked at her, “Why?”

“Slows response time if attacked.”

Finn chuckled and just nodded for Hicks to go. Kyrin glanced once more at Finn and then followed his brother out of the house.

It wasn't a long walk to the castle, and she just wished they would let her walk it alone.

They walked in silence for a while, but when Hicks' hand brushed hers lightly, she stepped away from him to give him more space. She couldn't figure out how he was taking up so much room, but ignored it and kept walking.

"Pretty night," Hicks said.

"Yeah"

"We could go out along the orchard and watch the fireflies."

"Why?"

He smiled, "True... I guess that is kind of a stupid idea. So, do you have a boyfriend back home?"

"I don't have any friends back home at all."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Why's that?"

"Well... you're... you know. You're very pretty."

She spun toward him, "What?"

He smiled and shifted nervously with his hands in his pockets, "Too forward?"

The light came on behind them, and Hicks looked up. They were standing right in front of the temple, and one of the Priests had hung out a lantern.

"I guess not," she said, watching him closely.

He was acting even more nervous, and her eyes narrowed. Before she knew what he was doing, he moved to her and pressed his lips to hers.

She immediately raised her knee and caught him squarely in the groin. When he gasped and doubled over towards her, she flattened her hand and slammed the side of it into his neck, cutting off his air.

Hicks sank to the ground, fighting for breath, and was immediately surrounded by Priests. Rough hands grabbed her from behind, and even though she struggled to get away, the two men managed to throw her into the town jail.

When they slammed the doors shut, she sat down on the hard cot and looked around, not quite sure what to do. Magic could free her, but then she would be a target marked for death.

She laid back and watched the ceiling, until she heard someone walking up.

“Why was I called out of bed to come to the jail and get you?” Alric asked, frustrated.

She sat up and shrugged slightly, afraid to tell him why she assaulted someone else.

“Come out,” he said, and opened the cell door.

Kyrin walked out without a word and then looked up when Finn ran up.

“Care to explain?” Finn asked irately.

“Calm down,” Alric said. “I don’t even know what happened.”

“She assaulted my brother! The Priests had to save his life.”

Alric turned to Kyrin and frowned, “Why did you assault him?”

She shrugged.

Finn grabbed her shoulders and shook her, “Tell me!”

“Let’s hear her out,” Alric said, and pulled Finn away from her.

“He...”

“What would be so bad that you’d try to kill him?” Finn screamed.

“He put his lips on mine,” she whispered, watching the ground.

“A kiss earned him death?”

“It’s...”

Alric sighed, “She doesn’t know what a kiss is, Finn. I’m sure it seemed like an assault to her.”

Finn moved to her and grabbed her shoulders roughly, “Listen here! No one is out to get you. You aren’t about to be sold to the highest bidder! Women aren’t oppressed or tortured! When are you going to understand that you aren’t in danger!?”

She had to fight not to use magic to make him let her go. The pull was strong to defend herself, but with Alric watching, she couldn’t deny the magic use later.

“Finn,” Alric said softly. “Let her go.”

She stepped back and watched the Captain with wide eyes as Alric tried to calm him.

“She had no right! He liked her.”

“You knew she wasn’t going to deal with that well. You should have been with them or warned him not to touch her.”

Finn finally calmed some, “I did tell him that.”

“Is he ok then?”

“Yes, he’s going to be talking higher pitched for the next week though.”

Alric turned to Kyrin, “You have to calm down and stop lashing out at everything.”

“He shouldn’t have touched me.”

“It’s common here, and usually doesn’t result in a beating.”

“He just caught me off guard,” she said to her hands.

Finn spun and stormed off, leaving just Alric and Kyrin in the dark road.

“Let’s go to the castle,” Alric said, and mounted his horse.

She nodded and began to walk beside it until Alric reached down and put her on the horse in front of him. He then kicked the horse to move faster back toward the castle.

Chapter 6

“Now cross your ankles,” Genessa said, and demonstrated.

Kyrin followed her lead and crossed her ankles beneath the dress. As much as she hated dresses, now that she knew how to move in one, they were becoming more manageable. The hardest part was

the overly tight corset. It took Genessa and the Knight both to get it tight enough, and Kyrin found it painful and almost unbearable.

Genessa sighed, "I guess that'll do for now. Try not to act like an oaf."

"What's an oaf?"

"Just don't," Genessa said. She reached out and took a small tea cup daintily in her hand, "So let's try the tea again. Try not to spill it this time."

Kyrin sighed and picked up the delicate glass, and then brought it to her lips and took a small sip.

"Too loud," Genessa snapped.

Kyrin began to wonder if the reason Genessa's Knight punished her every time Alric left was because of how moody Genessa was. In front of Alric, she was pleasant and happy, but without him around, she was prone to yell and often shouted insults at Kyrin.

Kyrin tried again to take a drink, this time she didn't even drink any, but just brought it to her lips.

Genessa sighed, "You can't do it quietly, can you?"

"I'm trying," Kyrin said through clenched teeth.

"Don't talk to me like that, or I'll have Alric punish you."

Kyrin nodded and took another sip. The last thing she needed was for Alric to get mad at her. He seemed intent on Kyrin acting more like Genessa, so she held her tongue and did as she was told around the Lady of the house.

"You're getting your hair in the tea," Genessa said icily.

“That’s because you won’t let me put it up.” Kyrin was required to wear her hair down during training, although it often got in her way and Genessa threatened to cut it on a daily basis.

“Ladies wear their hair down.”

“You don’t.”

“Do not talk back to me!” Genessa snapped. “I swear. You are all but un-trainable aren’t you?”

Kyrin held her tongue.

“Now get your hair out of the tea and take a scone.”

She did as she was told, but winced when Genessa slammed down her glass.

“Do it correctly! Your pinky goes up when you pick up a small pastry. I’ve told you this and told you this. I’m going to tell Alric to sell you as a wife. I can’t put up with this.”

Kyrin stood up and stormed out of the room, slamming the door shut behind her. She hadn’t even bothered to change out of the richly embellished silver dress. The Knights posted throughout the castle took a double look when she passed, never having seen her in a dress with her hair down.

Just as she headed out the front door, Finn and Alric came up on horses.

“All done training, Kyrin?” Finn asked, crawling off of his horse.

“I’m done!” she screamed.

“What happened?” Alric asked, walking up.

“I can’t take it anymore! She’s going to suggest you sell me, and I’m almost ready to let you...”

“Wait, she said that?”

“I can’t breathe! My hair’s in my way! I hate this! Sell me. It has to be better than this.”

“Calm down,” Alric said, taking her arm. “Let’s start off simple. If your hair is in your way, why don’t you put it up?”

“Genessa said ladies wear their hair down.”

“She did?”

“Yes”

“Ok,” Alric said, wondering at what he was being told. “Why can’t you breathe?”

“This corset is too tight. It leaves bruises, and it’s not worth it.”

“You have on a corset? Why?” Finn asked, looking down at her abnormally tiny waist.

“I have to wear a corset to get into the dress! That Knight pulls as hard as he can to get it on. I can’t take it.”

“A Knight laces it up?”

“Well I put it on, but once training begins Genessa’s Knight tightens it.”

Alric frowned, “I didn’t know Genessa had a Knight assigned to her anymore.”

“Of course she does. It’s the same Knight who is her punisher.”

“I’m confused.”

“About what?” she asked, still irate.

“Genessa doesn’t have a Knight and most certainly doesn’t have a punisher.”

“Of course she does. I hear them sometimes when I go for training.”

“What do you hear, exactly?”

She sighed, “You know! He’s yelling at her to take it. She’s groaning in pain.”

Finn gasped and looked over at Alric, who was becoming furious.

Kyrin wasn’t sure why he was looking so enraged, “She knows she needs punished. She asks for it to get harder.”

“How often do you hear this?” Alric asked her.

She shrugged, “I don’t know. It’s when you’re out of the castle.”

Alric looked at Finn, “Did you know about this?”

“No, Sir!”

“Who is this Knight?”

“I didn’t know she had a Knight, my Lord.”

“Who is it?” Alric asked Kyrin.

“When Genessa’s in pain, she screams for Falon.”

Alric pulled Kyrin over to the wall of the castle, followed by Finn, “Tomorrow, I’m going to head out to the temple first thing in the morning. What time do you normally go up there?”

“She gets punished around 8am. So when I hear it, I leave and come back around 10.”

“Go up again at 8am, if you hear them... well... punishing her,” Alric said, grinding his teeth, “you will meet up with Finn in my bedroom.”

“I don’t know where your bedroom is,” Kyrin told him.

“It’s at the top of the stairs. Keep going up until you get to the top floor and my room is the only one up there.”

“Ok.” She frowned slightly, “Did you not know she’s being punished?”

“No, I did not.” Without another word, Alric stormed into the castle.

“It’s odd to punish her without his consent,” Kyrin said to Finn. “He owns her and should know.”

Finn grinned, “You have no idea.”

Kyrin sighed and headed up the stairs, already in a dress with her hair down. She didn’t want to go to training today, and especially didn’t want to see Alric mad if Genessa was being punished without his knowledge.

She cringed when she heard Genessa moan loudly. Doing as she was told, Kyrin turned around and then walked up the stairs to the top floor. She knocked lightly, and Finn opened the door.

Kyrin walked in and was surprised to see Alric in his room, “She’s getting punished.”

Alric rushed past her and down the stairs, followed by Finn and four of the Knights. Kyrin ran after them, wanting to see what happened to Genessa.

When Alric opened the door, Falon jumped to his feet, completely naked. Genessa screamed and grabbed for the blanket lying next to her on the couch.

The Knights rushed forward and held Falon still while Alric walked over to Genessa. Kyrin had never seen him this mad, and she wondered if he would kill her on the spot. She peeked around Finn long enough to see where Alric was going, but caught sight of the naked man in the room.

She frowned, “What’s that?”

Finn gasped and spun, taking her with him. He began to haul her down the stairs quickly. She thought she was going for a punishment too, but wasn’t sure why. It wasn’t until they were in her room that she saw Finn’s face and noticed he was blushing and grinning sheepishly.

“What’s wrong?” she asked him.

“Nothing, I just... I think we needed out of there.”

“What will he do to the Knight for punishing Genessa then?”

He looked at her oddly, wondering how she could still think Genessa was being punished after seeing both her and the Knight naked, “Well...”

“I suspect he’ll be hung.”

Finn almost choked on his own saliva, and began to cough violently. Kyrin slapped him on the back, “Are you ok?”

He nodded, laughing too hard to answer her. When he had his laughing under control, he smiled at her, “I love having you around, Kid.”

She watched him, still not sure what was so funny, “Good to know.”

Finn sat down to wait and see if Alric needed Kyrin at the trial. He figured they all had seen enough without Kyrin’s account of her involvement. He watched her, confused, as she tried to sit down, but stood up immediately.

“Are you ok?”

She sighed, “I can’t breathe.”

“Come here.”

Kyrin walked over to Finn, and he spun her and reached up under her dress. She gasped and tried to pull away, but he already had a firm hold on the corset and was untying it. She stopped struggling when air flowed back into her lungs.

When he was done, he pulled the corset out from under her dress, and she sighed, “Thank you.”

“Bruises does it?”

“Yes, bruises where the buckles are.”

He reached over and tossed it into the trash.

Kyrin picked it up and brushed off bits of lint, “Genessa will want me back in that.”

“I’m thinking your time with Genessa is done.”

“Really?” she asked, looking over at him.

“Yes, really.”

“So I can change?”

Finn nodded and stood up, “Sure.”

She waited until he walked out and then pulled off the dress and immediately changed into more comfortable clothing. Once done, she opened the door for him and began to tie her hair up.

“You really should leave that down,” he said, taking his seat again.

“It gets in the way.”

“So cut it.”

“No”

“Well I like it down.”

She turned to the door when trumpets blared from outside, “What is that?”

“That means a verdict has been reached.”

“So the Knight is being punished?”

“So is Genessa.”

“Why? It’s not her fault that she got punished.”

He debated trying to explain the truth to her, but figured she didn’t need to hear that from him, “It’s a long story. Want to go see what’s happening?”

She nodded and walked out of the room. Finn led her up to the courtroom, and they took a spot standing at the back. Falon and Genessa were both standing before Alric. Falon looked terrified, and Genessa was sobbing into a dirty handkerchief.

The only other people in the room, were the four Knights who were with Alric during the capture, and Trox. Alric was deep in thought as he watched the two angrily.

Almost 20 minutes later he leaned forward, "I'll sentence Falon first."

Falon nodded and stepped forward, his eyes down.

"I'm almost madder at you. You were one of Valhara's elite! My own Knight."

"I'm sorry, my Lord," he whispered.

"You are to be hereby stationed to outpost Zeta for the duration of your life."

"Zeta?" he asked, his eyes wide.

"Yes"

"Sir, it's often attacked by Qualsax and has no defenses."

"I'm aware of that. You will be taken to it immediately."

Two of the Knights moved forward and escorted him out.

Alric sighed and looked at Genessa, "I guess I'm just glad we aren't married yet."

"We were never going to get married. Not with... her... around," Genessa said, glaring.

"Who?"

"That girl! You bring in a young, beautiful girl for what other reason than as a mistress when we are married."

Kyrin frowned, not quite sure Genessa was talking about her, but she suspected she was.

“You are wrong, and are hereby banished from Valhara with no possessions. You go in only what you’re wearing.”

Kyrin had to stand on her tip toes to see, and then laughed when she saw that Genessa was wearing only a sheet wrapped around her.

Genessa gasped, “You can’t do that! I’d have to travel through Qualsax!”

“I’m aware of that, but you are no longer any of my concern.”

“Don’t do this!” she screamed as two Knights came to escort her out. “I still love you! You can bed her while we’re married! I don’t care!”

“I hereby ban Genessa from these lands, and this incident will never be spoken of again,” Alric said, watching her.

On the way out the door, Genessa screamed at Kyrin and pointed at her, “You did this! I hope you’re happy you little tramp! Has he already had you!?”

The Knights pushed her out the door and Kyrin looked up at Finn, “Has he had me do what?”

“Nothing,” Finn said, and took her arm when Alric motioned them forward. She walked up with him and then glanced back when she heard Genessa scream again.

“I’m sorry about that,” Alric said to her.

“What does it mean to bed me?”

He smiled, “I need to decide how best to explain that. For now, don’t worry about it.”

She thought for a moment, “Why is she getting banished for being punished?”

“Again, it will all be explained in time.”

“Ok,” she said hesitantly.

“For now, I will take over your training, starting immediately. Things need to return to normal.”

She froze and pointed at Finn, “He threw away the corset!”

Finn grinned.

“The corset is unnecessary, as is the dress, and your hair down. Come as you are,” he explained.

“Ok,” she said again, but it was obvious she wasn’t sure about what was going to happen.

Alric smiled and then stood up and walked to the library. Finn followed with Kyrin, and they all sat down when the doors were shut.

“I want to start over on your training,” Alric explained. “I don’t know what all Genessa told you, but forget it. It seems she was out to harm you rather than help you.”

“Forget it all?”

“Yes”

“What if she was right?”

“Then you will re-learn that with me.”

“You know I could go take care of her for you, right?”

Alric frowned, “Do what?”

“Well you’re the King. You can’t kill her because it would look bad. I can kill her without anyone knowing.”

“You have to stop talking like that, Kyrin.”

“Why?”

“It’s not right!”

She thought, “So am I killing her or not?”

“No, you are not,” Alric said, sighing. “I want to start with some traditions that we’ve noticed over the last two months that are in conflict with what you already know.”

“Is this really worth it? I’ll be out of here in 10 more months anyway.”

“Yes, it is worth it.”

“Ok then, what traditions?”

“Let’s start with Children,” Alric said, and then sat back on the couch. It didn’t escape his notice that her nose wrinkled at the mere mention of them, “In Valhara, and even in Qualsax, for that matter, children are nurtured and cared for. They are special in their own right.”

She frowned, “Here maybe. In my world, and in others, they are vile and disgusting. They are born of an evil act and are punished until they are old enough to be a benefit to society.”

“Not here. Here, we treat them with kindness and respect, and have patience and understanding with them.”

“Treat them how you will.”

He realized this was going to take more than one explanation to get across, so he moved on, “Now marriage.”

She tensed, “What about it?”

“Here... and again in Qualsax even... marriage is consensual between both adults. No one is sold into marriage, and wives aren’t routinely beaten or punished.”

“Why not?”

“There’s no cause for it. They are rational, thinking adults and the relationship was mutually agreed upon.”

“It’s still a barbaric practice.”

He smirked, “You’re calling marriage barbaric?”

“Yes”

Finn interrupted, “I’m curious about something though. If marriage is bad, and children are bad, how do you plan on continuing the species?”

“Nothing I can do will stop either one. I just don’t plan on doing my part,” she said bluntly. “Men love their property, and wives are nothing more than that. They are something to be used and tossed away.”

“Oh right, thus multiple wives,” Finn said.

“Multiple wives?” Alric asked.

“Yes... the rich have more than one wife. They can afford multiple and if one is disgraced with pregnancy, he has others he can parade around,” Kyrin explained.

Alric sat back, deep in thought while she looked up among the books.

“Maybe she needs to talk to my wife,” Finn suggested.

“That’s not a bad idea,” Alric said.

“It is a bad idea. I can’t stand listening to what a woman goes through. They should have had a mercy killer before getting married.”

“Oh right. Death before marriage.”

“I don’t see why I can’t sit regular,” Kyrin asked as she looked up at the side-saddle on the horse.

“You’re in a dress,” Alric said, stating the obvious.

“So?”

“So it’s not proper. Up you go.”

She shook her head and then mounted the horse as instructed. She almost fell off, but was able to correct her balance, “Happy?”

“Yes, that’s much better.”

“Why am I even in a dress?” she asked, frowning. She brushed the hair off of her shoulder, but the wind blew it back on again.

“Because you’re in training to learn the proper ways of a lady and ladies do wear dresses.”

“If I’m attacked…”

“You aren’t going to be attacked during training. You don’t even have a weapon on you.”

“I may fall off.”

“Well that can’t be helped.”

“Can I get down now?”

“No, we’re going out for a ride,” he said, mounting his horse. Four of the Knights came up behind them, also on horses.

“If we’re not going to get attacked, why do you need guards?”

“I don’t need guards. I take Knights when I go out, that’s what Kings do.”

“Suit yourself.”

He laughed as they rode out of the city past the apple orchards. They were soon riding through the dense forest that surrounded the main city of Valhara. Kyrin was finally getting the hang of riding side-saddle, and was looking around her, checking for attackers.

In her three months with Alric, she’d yet to let down her guard for even a moment. Something the Knights found annoying, but the King found highly amusing and interesting to watch.

“Sir?” one of the Knights said, looking off to the left.

They all rode over in the direction he was watching, and came upon a rock set out among the trees. The large rock was dripping with fresh blood. Everyone but Kyrin dismounted and went to investigate.

She watched, uninterested, as the others began searching for signs of what had died.

“I’m at a loss,” Alric said after an hour of searching. “Bring Trox here.”

One of the Knights rode off quickly toward the town.

“Kyrin?”

She looked over at Alric, “Yes?”

“Sithias doesn’t honor sacrifices.”

“Ok”

“You are the only one of us in Valhara that isn’t a follower of Sithias.”

“Ok”

“Did you do this? Did you sacrifice something?”

“No”

“Does your god require sacrifices?”

She shrugged, “Sometimes.”

“When’s the last time you sacrificed something?”

“Being indentured doesn’t mean I have to divulge secrets of my god.”

“Have you sacrificed since you’ve come to Valhara?”

She simply crossed her arms and turned away from him.

“Alric,” Trox said, coming up quickly.

Alric turned to talk to Trox quietly, and then Trox glanced at Kyrin and began to go through the area. Less than an hour later, Trox returned with something in his hand.

“What did you find?” Alric asked him.

“A human heart.”

“Where did you get it?”

“It was buried out in the woods. I suspect the sacrifice was human.”

Alric glanced nervously at Kyrin, but she was looking through the trees again.

“I don’t think it was her,” Trox said. “If I had to guess, it’s the Qualsax trying to cause tension within Valhara.”

“Are you certain?”

“No, but evils brag about what they do. If she were to perform a sacrifice, then she would have said something.”

Kyrin had to fight back a smile as she listened to them speak behind her.

“Now we need to know if it was one of us,” Alric said, looking around.

“Send out search parties to every city around Valhara. I want to know if anyone is missing,” Trox said.

After getting a nod from Alric, the Knights rode off to follow his orders.

Alric looked up when Kyrin turned and looked at the heart in Trox’s hand. He looked down at his hand and then up to her, “I’m sorry you had to see that.”

“A heart? Why?”

“It’s not something we see often unless in battle.”

She shrugged, “I’ve seen worse.”

“Do you worry that someone may be missing from Valhara and may be dead?”

“Why would I? I don’t know them.”

Trox sighed and then walked off with the heart.

“Let’s go back,” Alric said, mounting his horse.

Kyrin clicked her tongue and started out for the castle. With just her and Alric it was nicer, and no one was watching her like she might snap and attack one of them.

“Trox doesn’t trust me,” she said.

“No, he doesn’t.”

“Why?”

“He suspects you’re what we call an evil.”

“And if I am?”

He smiled, “You’re not.”

“But...” she stopped suddenly and turned to the side when she heard a twig break.

Alric heard it also and stopped to listen. He was only slightly surprised when Kyrin reached under her skirt and pulled out the flail. He readied his sword when footsteps were heard coming at them quickly.

Kyrin jumped down off the horse and then growled slightly when she got tangled in the long skirt. In one swift movement, she tore off the bottom half of it and tossed it to the side.

“Who’s there?” Alric asked toward the trees. His eyes narrowed when twelve Qualsax Warriors came out at them.

“Fancy meeting the King here,” the front Qualsax said, smiling at the two from Valhara.

“Why are you on Valharan land?”

He walked forward, cocky and assured, “Why not? Valhara will soon be under Qualsax control. We’re just scoping out the territory and look what we found... the King and his beautiful maiden.”

Kyrin dove forward and immediately crashed her flail into the skull of the closest Qualsax Warrior, instantly caving it in. Alric was surprised by her sudden attack, but was able to join in soon enough to catch them off guard. He easily stabbed the Warrior beside him and then swung and decapitated the Qualsax next to him.

When Alric took down the third Qualsax Warrior, he spun and found himself alone in the trees with the four dead. There was no sign of Kyrin or the other eight Warriors. Broken branches showed the path they took, so Alric followed them, hoping it wasn’t too late to get to them before they killed her.

He knelt down beside two Warriors, who were covered in deep burns, and both were dead. Alric stood up and continued following the path of destruction through the trees.

When he heard sounds of fighting again, he rushed forward and burst through the thick bushes, already swinging his sword. Kyrin had managed to kill two more, but was injured and exhausted as the other four came at her.

Alric caught them by surprise and managed to decapitate one before the other three turned on him and left Kyrin alone. The Warriors weren’t experienced, and he was easily able to dispatch the other three with only one minor wound. When he scanned to make sure no others were around, Kyrin fell to her knees, clutching her side.

“What’s hurt?” he asked, kneeling down beside her. He helped her lay down and then looked over the blood streaming from her side.

One of the Warriors had caught her in the side, slicing into her torso.

“Watch it,” she whispered, and he looked around the clearing again.

“They’re gone. Let me heal this.”

He concentrated, but no amount of energy was healing the deep wound. She was starting to lose consciousness as the bleeding continued relentlessly.

“Stay with me, Kyrin,” Alric said, and picked her up gently. She kept a tight grip on her flail, even while she teetered on the edge of unconsciousness.

He called for the will of Sithias, and his feet sped up as he ran. As soon as he had both of them back on the horse, he kicked it hard and flew through the trees. Kyrin had quit moving and was lying limp in his arms when he arrived at the temple.

“Saith!” he yelled, sliding off of the horse.

A Priest came out and then ran up to them and took Kyrin from the King.

“I can’t heal her,” Alric said, following them in. “The wounds are too bad.”

Saith laid her down on the table, and more Priests came in and immediately began to work on her. Their hands moved over her body as the deep cuts began to glow. One gently pried the flail from her hand and handed it to Alric.

It was taking too long, and Alric began to pace nervously. Finn joined him as soon as he heard of the attack, and Alric sent him immediately to attack the closest Qualsax outpost.

“Why is this taking so long?” he asked the Priest.

“She was close to death. We’re doing all we can.”

“Sithias, if you want her studied, you have to help her,” Alric whispered softly.

“She has her own god.” Sithias’ voice rang out through the temple.

“But she is mine to take care of.”

“The burden is not your own. She relies on her god for her protection. I cannot intervene if he has forsaken her.”

“Can you do nothing?”

“No, she is in the hands of your Priests.”

Alric sighed when he felt the comforting presence of his deity leave. Finn returned several minutes later, after making sure attacking forces were heading out to Qualsax’s land.

“Sir, you’re hurt to,” Finn said quietly.

Alric nodded, but watched the Priests fight to save Kyrin, “She was attacked because she was with me.”

“It’s not your fault. Trox told me they’ve been sacrificing on our land. I suspect they were lying in wait for the first Valharan to come by.”

Alric looked over when Kyrin groaned softly. He walked over as the Priests stepped back, “How is she?”

“We’ve done all we can. Rest will fix what we can’t,” Saith said, bowing to him.

“May I? Sir?” Dewell said, looking down at the bleeding gash on Alric’s arm.

He nodded, still watching Kyrin, and then picked her up once the Priest had healed him. Finn mounted his horse and reached down and picked Kyrin up from Alric. Soon, they were back at the palace and laying Kyrin down in Alric's bed.

Finn covered her with blankets and then stood back, "Why is she in here, again?"

"Her room is too small, and I want to watch over her."

"Do you need anything?"

"No, you may go. It's getting late."

Finn nodded and left, shutting the door behind him when he left. Alric stepped forward and then sat on the bed beside her. He checked the wound on her side. There was no visible wound, but he knew that internal damage was harder to heal using blessings, and she would need time to get back on her feet.

He marveled at how many Qualsax Warriors she had killed single handedly, but wondered at the deep burns across two of them. He finally wrote it off, thinking there must have been a mistake, and they weren't burns he was seeing.

Night fell, and Alric watched her sleep. She was restless and several times opened her eyes long enough to call for help before falling back to sleep. When the sun rose, she finally opened her eyes and looked over at him.

"Where am I?" she whispered.

"You're safe. I have you in my room. Do you need anything?"

"No," she said, and then tried to sit up.

"Please stay down. You were injured badly by the Qualsax Warriors."

Knowing she wasn't going to be able to stand up, she laid back down and groaned slightly.

“Can I get you something to eat?”

She shook her head, “Where's my flail?”

“It's beside you on the table.”

“They were going to take it.”

“Qualsax collects weapons of those they kill.”

She managed a weak smile, “I almost had them.”

He reached over and gently brushed the hair off of her forehead, “Yes, you did.”

“Did anyone die?”

“Not from our side.”

“You finished them off?”

“Yes”

She nodded and then fell back to sleep. Once he was sure she was down for a while, Alric walked over to the window and clutched the cross amulet he had hanging over his chest.

“I could ask Daemionis for her life,” he whispered.

When he got no answer from Sithias, he knew his god wasn't pleased with the idea. It was risky to ask another deity for anything, and doing so often resulted in blood pacts and death convictions.

“I can't let her go back to a demon,” he said softer.

When Sithias spoke, only Alric heard it, “You cannot go to a demon to ask for the life of a follower.”

“Why not? Every demon has a price.”

“His price would be your soul.”

“My time is running out. She has only nine more months here.”

“Daemionis will not let her go. She has something he desires, and we have yet to figure out what it is.”

“Can’t you do something? If she’s important to Daemionis, then she could be important to us.”

“No evil is important to us.”

“I can’t let her go back to how she was living. It’s too dangerous.”

“She is not yours to keep. You cannot have these feelings for her.”

Alric turned to look at her, “I don’t have those kinds of feelings. She’s young and innocent. Her world is too perilous.”

“It’s all she knows.”

“She’ll die.”

Sithias didn’t answer, and Alric turned back to the window.

[Chapter 7](#)

“Where is Alric?” Kyrin asked.

Finn smiled, “He’s busy greeting the elves. He asked me to help you prepare for this.”

“It’s stupid. Why do I have to go meet them?”

“They often claim that Valhara can’t be allies, because we don’t allow outsiders into our midst. You are going to help us align ourselves with them as a non-Sithias follower and someone not born here.”

“Great, I’m sure the elves will love Daemionis.”

“Just get dressed, will you?”

“How many 18-year-olds do you know have to be told what to wear?”

“So you’re 18 now?”

“Yes”

“When did that happen?”

She watched him, “Well where I come from, every year you get a year older.”

He grinned, “I know that, smartass. What I want to know is when your birthday was.”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes”

“Why?”

“Stop being stubborn and tell me.”

“Last week.”

“We should have thrown you a party.”

“For aging?”

“Birthday parties are big here. There’s usually a feast and dancing.”

“Of course they are. Do I look like I dance?”

“Do you?”

“No”

“What? Melee types can’t dance?”

Kyrin grabbed the dress and walked behind the dressing curtain, “I’ll never get used to dresses.”

“Well, try not to modify this one.”

“Hey, I was attacked and I can’t fight in a dress.”

“It’s just funny is all.”

“So glad I amused you again,” she said, walking out from behind the curtain. The dark-green dress fit loosely against her body and fell to a long, flowing skirt. She buttoned the bodice up to just under her chin and almost fell over the skirt.

“Gonna put your hair down?”

She looked at him, annoyed, “What?”

“It looks better down.”

“It gets in my way.”

“Not today. Today, you’re not fighting.”

“Right, unless these allies attack us,” she said, and started to pull her hair out of the braid.

Once she ran a brush through it, and it fell smoothly down her back, she turned to him, “Ready.”

He smiled, “Kid, you look like a girl now.”

“Great, just what I wanted.”

Finn put his arm out, “Take it.”

“Take your arm?”

“Yes”

“Won’t you need it later?”

“Just grab it, stop being difficult.”

She rolled her eyes and took his arm and let him lead her out of the room and down to the ballroom. She walked in and smiled at some familiar servants, and then turned and faced Alric, who was standing across the room with one of the elves.

The elf stood a few inches taller than Alric, and had on a shimmery silver robe. His hair was long and golden, and the tip of his pointed ears showed just below where his crown began.

Alric nodded to Finn, and he led Kyrin over to the King.

“Here she is,” Alric said, smiling.

The elf turned and nodded to her, “Hello, it is nice to meet you.”

“Tae covannek,” she said, walking over to Alric. He watched her curiously when she spoke in the foreign language.

“Petick edhavven?”

“Yes”

The elf smiled, “You speak the language of our ancestors, interesting.”

“I’ve encountered royal elves before.”

“Royal elves?”

“Yes”

“I haven’t heard that term before.”

“It’s what I’ve heard the day walking elves called.”

“As opposed to what?” he asked, frowning.

She watched him and saw that he was getting tense, “Never mind. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Alric has told us nothing about you, other than you do not follow Sithias.”

“No, I don’t. My deity is unknown to these parts though.”

“Are the Valharan customs pushed onto you?”

She smiled, “Not too badly.”

“Are you aware that the King once banned elves from entering Valhara?”

“No, I don’t know the history of this place.”

“Where are you from then?” he asked, watching her.

She glanced at Alric.

“Enough with Kyrin. Shall we talk?”

The elf looked at Kyrin, "If she comes with us."

Alric nodded and then showed them both out to a private room. Wine was already waiting on the table with three platinum wine flutes. They all sat down, and Kyrin wondered why she was even there. The last thing she wanted was to get in the middle of a political dispute.

Alric began, "Kyrin, this is Auldian. He is king of the elves."

Auldian was watching Kyrin closely and his scrutinizing gaze was making her nervous.

She nodded slightly.

"Our lands have never joined in an alliance before, but Qualsax is growing stronger and wreaking havoc on both of our lands."

"Sounds to me like it's time to do away with the Qualsax."

"That isn't as easy as it sounds," Auldian said. She got the impression he wanted to ask her a lot of questions, but she wasn't willing to give very much information to a royal elf.

"Apparently, not if you join."

"Where are you from?"

"We're not here to discuss Kyrin," Alric said. "We have to consider joining forces to provide a solid base for protection through both of our lands."

"What did you have in mind?"

"We think they have attack crews out. The Qualsax city nearest here has no Warriors in it."

"They left their city with women and children only?"

“Yes, but they know honor prevents us from attacking innocents.”

“They don’t seem to have that problem.”

“No, they do not.”

As Alric and Auldian spoke, Kyrin’s mind wandered to Creteloc. When Kyrin first fled from the Shadowmere, she found herself in Paramide Dimension. She was injured and lost, and not sure where to go. She couldn’t find any cities, and her supplies had already run out.

She thought she’d checked around carefully before falling asleep, but a dark form appeared from the trees. She immediately stood up to attack, but heard only a slight chuckle. The evil being that stepped out of the shadows immediately terrified Kyrin. With her dark features and glowing red eyes, it was hard not to be afraid of Creteloc, one of Daemionis’ Priestesses.

Creteloc brought Kyrin before her god as a sacrifice. In fear, she cast on him, and he was pleased that his loyal follower had found one of the true magic users.

Magic had faded from the dimensions, and it was a rare prize to have one as powerful as Kyrin come into his presence. They worked out an agreement that Daemionis would watch over Kyrin if she agreed to be his.

Kyrin lived with Creteloc for a few short months, and learned the ways of Daemionis. Most of his followers were the night walkers, the Assassins and rogues of the lands, including Creteloc. Her dark ways were intriguing to Kyrin, and she adopted a lot of Creteloc’s mannerisms and learned a great deal from her about how to survive.

She wasn’t sure if she would even call Creteloc a friend. Creteloc had no friends, but she was as close as Kyrin had to one. Any time she got near Paramide, she went in search of Creteloc. She never

found Creteloc, but somehow Creteloc always managed to find her. Each meeting was brief and lacked in any personal interaction, but each time Kyrin grew stronger and learned more about how to stay alive.

Poisons were Creteloc's passion. Hired to kill the strongest in the land, she was sought out and paid great amounts for her services. She formed a type of alliance with the shadow elves, and Kyrin frowned when she realized how furious Creteloc would be if she saw her now, sitting at the table with a royal elf.

Kyrin knew that royal elves weren't to be trusted. She was ready for Auldian to turn on her and attack, but would wait for his move to do so. Creteloc had ingrained in Kyrin how evil was to be lived, but not displayed. She knew better than to give any indication to those she lived with that her true nature was darker than they could imagine.

She chastised herself for the altar in the woods. She thought it was far enough away that no one would find it, so she didn't bother covering her tracks. That's something else she hoped Daemionis hadn't seen, for he would tell Creteloc. She had to sacrifice to Daemionis to repay him for her life. She thought of no better way than by sacrificing the old hermit man who lived in the caves outside of Valhara.

He'd begged for his life, but his mind was too far gone to invoke Sithias, which would have been harder to explain. The feeble man put up no fight as she tore his heart from his chest and offered the rest of his body up to Daemionis. He never wanted a heart in the body of the sacrifice. He had no need for them.

The hatred Creteloc had for the royal elves was strong, and just the thought of them made Kyrin want to attack them. Alric seemed oblivious of their disgusting ways, but she would keep on her guard as long as they were around.

“Kyrin,” Alric said a little louder.

She jumped slightly and looked at him.

He smiled, “You were far away. Interesting thoughts?”

“Not really.” She glanced over at Auldian and saw he was still watching her. She knew that elves could often feel the presence of evils, and she wondered if he was on to her.

Auldian looked Kyrin in the eyes and spoke to her in a foreign language. Alric simply smiled, proud that Kyrin was able to speak to Auldian in his native tongue.

Kyrin’s eyes narrowed as Auldian spoke the words of the shadow elf. He did realize she was an evil, and was testing to see if she had befriended the soul enemies of the royal elves, the shadow elves.

She spoke more of the shadow elf language than that of the royal elf, but wasn’t going to fall for his test, “I’m sorry. I don’t know that much elvish.”

“You called me a royal elf.”

“Yes”

“You said that’s how you referred to the day walking elves.”

Kyrin just watched him.

“What other elves do you know?”

Alric smiled, “She can’t possibly know of the others. There haven’t been black elves in over five centuries.”

“Yes, how would I possibly know about them?” She wondered what happened to the shadow elves of Paragoy. It was something

she wanted to find out, and hoped that the Valharans hadn't destroyed them.

"I just thought maybe on your travels you had heard the stories," Auldian said. "Yestan thluk hoathin pos."

She tensed when he spoke the shadow elf words to her, and knew that he would be watching her for a reaction. Instead of appeasing him with a reaction, she smiled sweetly and then took a sip of wine.

"I think we're done here then," Alric said, standing slowly. "Think it over and let me know what you decide. The alliance can benefit both of our lands, but I do realize that distrust runs deep."

"Warranted distrust," Auldian said, standing also.

Kyrin watched Auldian carefully, ready to attack if he so much as twitched toward the weapon at his side. She had her flail tucked under her skirts, and was finding that to be a huge advantage of a dress. When your weapon was at your side, unhidden, it put enemies on edge. With it tied to her thigh beneath her skirts, she could have the advantage of a surprise attack.

"I will let you know," Auldian said before walking out.

Alric turned to Kyrin and he was smiling, "Would you stand down? He's not going to attack."

"You don't know that."

"Yes I do. There are twelve elves in Valhara, and thousands of us."

She started to leave, but noticed he wasn't moving so she turned to him, "What?"

"It's interesting that you speak their language."

“I’ve been around.”

“I’m starting to think there’s more to you than meets the eye.”

“You sound like I’m hiding things from you.”

“You are.”

She crossed her arms, “Such as?”

“I haven’t figured it out yet, but I will. I would expect as my indentured servant that you would be open with me about everything.” Alric knew this was the only way to get a response from her. She said nothing personal unless ordered to do so.

She clenched her jaw and watched him.

“Is there something you wish to tell me?”

“No”

“I wish you would trust me.”

Just the words made her start to get mad, “Why would I trust you?”

“I’ve done nothing to show you otherwise.”

“In 6 months I’ll be out of your hair, so there’s no reason to build a trust relationship. You’re my master until that time, and as such I will do as you ask, but I won’t divulge information that you can use against me in the future.”

With that, Kyrin stormed out of the room and headed for her bedroom. Alric sat alone for a bit and thought about what she’d say. He had never met anyone as untrusting, but he admitted he’d never met anyone like her at all. He wondered how she made it this far without trusting anyone. Sithias made it sound like she wouldn’t be able to trust even her deity.

Kyrin slammed her door shut and sat down on the bed to fume, “How does he expect me to trust him!? It’s absurd!”

She stood to tear the dress off and toss it into the corner before putting on her pants and tunic. Finn’s brother, Hicks, had made her a new belt, she figured as a peace offering, and it fit her better than the one she normally wore. She’d taken it off of a dead Shadowmere, and it was several sizes too big and fit improperly. The new one held her flail tighter to her side and didn’t bulk up and get in her way.

She had to reverse her thoughts about him though. She was shocked when he presented her with the belt, something he made, only two weeks after she tried to kill him. She hadn’t forgiven him for touching her lips, but she wondered at the completely illogical act of giving a gift to someone who attempted to end your life.

Kyrin’s skin broke out in goose bumps and the hair on the back of her neck stood up. She looked around the room quickly. The feeling was something she’d felt often before, and it usually preceded an uninvited visit from Daemionis.

“My Lord?” she asked into the empty room. His form finally appeared, menacing and fraught with malevolence.

He looked down at her as his lip curled up into a snarl, “I’m disappointed in you, Kyrin.”

Her heart threatened to stop in her chest, and she dropped to her knees, “My Lord? Why?”

“Are you becoming comfortable here?”

“No”

“Are you having feelings of loyalties to the humans of this land?”

“No, my Lord.”

“Don’t lie to me!” he roared.

Her voice was barely above a whisper, “I’m not. I swear.”

“I took a great risk allowing you into my fold, Kyrin. One such as you doesn’t deserve to follow me, but I saw potential. Are you proving me wrong?!”

She shook her head, “No.”

“I can read your thoughts, Kyrin. You have an attraction to this king.”

“I don’t though.”

“He has feelings for you too, and I will not have one of my followers mating with one of Sithias’ wimps!”

She was finding it hard to breathe. Never before had she had Daemionis mad at her, and she wasn’t sure how to fix it.

The floor rumbled beneath her as he walked forward and his massive hooves pounded against the wooden floors, “Are you my follower?”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“Do not cross me!”

“I won’t.”

“You’ve been lax and you know it. I demand a great sacrifice! I command that you repay me for the thoughts that betray you.”

“Tonight, my Lord, I swear.”

He growled, and pain erupted through her body. She fell back onto the hard wooden floor, thrashing in agony. A scream escaped her

lips as he watched her, scowling down at her as she silently begged for release.

A malicious smile crossed his cracked lips, and he laughed, fading from view. When he was gone, the pain disappeared and Kyrin slowly crawled to her hands and knees. She heard frantic banging against the bedroom door. There was lingering pain, but she forced herself to stand straight and opened the door.

Finn, Alric, and six Knights immediately ran into the room with swords drawn. She sat down on the chair, too weak to stand much longer, and fought to catch her breath.

Alric knelt down beside her, “What was that?”

“What?” she managed to choke out.

“We heard shouting, and the entire castle shook.”

She shook her head, “It wasn’t in here.”

“It was in here. Who was it? Tell me.”

Kyrin leaned over put her head against her knees. Bending helped lessen the fading pain, and she couldn’t handle looking at Alric as she lied to him.

“Was it Daemionis?” he asked her angrily.

“No”

“You’re lying to me. I heard shouting, but couldn’t make out the words! Only a god can do that, Kyrin. The ground shook, and it came from your room.”

“My Lord,” Finn said, putting a hand on his shoulder, “you’re scaring her.”

Alric leaned back on his knees and watched her for a moment. He began to calm when he saw that she was in pain, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she whispered, and finally managed to sit up.

“It was Daemionis and he hurt you!”

“Just leave it alone. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Let me heal you.”

“No! Just drop it, ok?”

“I can help you.”

Alric’s hands glowed and he moved them toward her, but she managed to stand up slowly, “I said no.”

He sighed, “What was he mad about?”

“Nothing that concerns you.”

“So it was Daemionis!?”

“I just need to rest.”

“Sithias can protect you from him.”

Kyryn sat down on the floor and rolled onto her side. They hadn’t been able to get her onto a bed. She thought they were way too soft and uncomfortable, so she slept on the floor with only a blanket beneath her.

“Rest for now, but this isn’t over,” Alric said angrily, and then walked out of the room.

When the room emptied out, Kyryn got up and pulled on her boots. She tied her hair up and then looked out the window into the dark night. The window opened silently and she was soon flying through the trees, aided by the boots Creteloc gave her.

Daemionis was mad, madder than she'd ever seen him, and she knew that only a large sacrifice would appease him. She couldn't be on his bad side. She couldn't take the pain, and she knew that Creteloc would be furious with her when she found out.

The woods were silent as she ran through them, heading for her target just outside of Valhara's land. She had to do this quickly, and she had to do it in the name of Daemionis.

Kyrin slowed outside of the small village. No one was moving around, and no sounds could be heard. They were sleeping, and if Alric was right, there were no Warriors left. The women would be sleeping with their children nestled beside them, and had no idea the wrath that was about to be inflicted upon them.

She drew a 'D' in the dirt with the ceremonial dagger and then knelt in the middle of it and shut her eyes. The prayer was long, a prayer dedicating the lives of this village to him. She reminded him that the pain she inflicted was in his honor, and the fear the villagers felt in their hearts would be the fear of him.

Once done, she stood up and began to slowly rub her hands together. Only once before had she used such powerful magic. Its forces were so strong that it would cause a disturbance to the good around her, and she normally wouldn't risk it. She wasn't even sure if Daemionis knew she had it in her to do, but she was too afraid of his anger to hide it any long.

Alric sat bolt upright in bed when his heart constricted in his chest. He stood slowly and looked around the room. He felt as if there were evil there, hiding in the shadows and waiting to attack. Even awake, the feeling was strong, and he immediately left his room

and ran down the stairs. There was an unnatural stirring among the castle's inhabitants and all suddenly felt on edge and nervous.

Finn burst through the front doors with the Knights behind him, all battle ready. They spread out through the castle, looking for signs of an attack.

"My Lord, what's happening?" Finn asked, running up to Alric.

"I don't know," Alric said, looking around.

Once the castle was cleared, the Knights met in the foyer and faced Alric.

"Check the city. I can't shake the feeling that something is happening," Alric said.

Finn nodded and called out orders to his troops, "Have you checked on Kyrin?"

"No, let her sleep. I don't want her in on this."

"Yes, my Lord," Finn said, and then ran out of the castle.

The power coming from her was incredible, and she walked slowly through the village, ignoring the screams and pleas from the people. She threw her hands in every direction, sending out blazes of purple lights that caused houses to explode and people to fall instantly dead. Children were crying over their dead Mothers, and women were carrying their injured children, trying to find someone to help them.

Old men came at her with swords, but their frail bodies were no match for the magic she inflicted on them. When no building was left standing, and the last of the crying faded into deathly gurgles, Kyrin stopped and looked around.

Rubble and ash scattered the streets and blood was splashed across every surface. The village was unnaturally silent. No sound at all could be heard as she smiled, “For you, my Lord.”

A deep, harrowing laugh suddenly echoed through the death filled streets.

She felt as though he was appeased and finally pleased with her again. When the sound of horses coming broke the silence, she turned and fled into the trees, back towards Valhara. The elation fueled her and she made it to the castle in record time. She stopped in the orchard and looked out from behind a tree. Knights were surrounding the castle and patrolling the ground in threes.

Kyrin wasn't sure how she was going to get back into the castle unnoticed. Surely, they would know by morning that she was gone, and she needed to be sound asleep when news of the attack made it to Alric's ears.

She looked down over her clothing. Her shirt was covered in blood, and her pants were caked in thick ash. Kyrin slipped off her tunic and shoved it underneath one of the old apple trees, concealing it within the roots. The lighter shirt beneath it showed off her feminine curves, so she never wore just it, but she didn't have a choice. She then reached into a puddle of mud and began to smear it on her pants, covering the ash.

Once she washed her face and hands in the same mud puddle, she was ready. Kyrin waited until Finn walked past, and she ran at him, “Finn!”

He spun, wide eyes, “Kyrin! What are you doing out here?”

“I’m helping,” she said, pretending to be out of breath. “I searched through the orchard for intruders and found none.”

“I didn’t even know you were out here with us. That’s dangerous!”

“I can search an orchard alone and not die,” she snapped.

“The rest of us are out in groups for a reason! Now get back inside where you belong.”

Irritated that he was treating her like a damsel, she walked into the castle and slammed the door shut to her room. Once inside, she smiled and then began to get out of the dirty clothing. She tossed it into the fire to hide any evidence that the dark-red pants were stained with blood.

The next morning, she awoke to a knock on her door. She yawned and stretched, then called for them to come in. It was lucky she never slept undressed. She was often woken up by the servants bringing breakfast.

This morning though, it was Trox and Alric.

She watched them carefully, as Trox had never been in her room before, and she wondered if they suspected the village attack was her.

“Good morning,” Alric said, sitting down beside her.

She nodded and watched Trox.

Trox smiled at her and sat down also.

“There a problem?” she asked them.

“Trox and I are worried about what happened last night.”

“What do you mean?”

“Daemionis’ visit,” Trox said. “He was obviously angry and you were in pain when he left. We’re concerned for your welfare.”

Kyrin relaxed some. They didn’t seem to know that she had taken out one of Qualsax’s villages in the middle of the night, “It’s nothing I can’t handle.”

“Still, you’re in my care, and it’s my responsibility to see to your welfare,” Alric said to her.

She frowned, “I’m not in your care. I’m in your servitude, and my welfare is none of your concern.”

“On the contrary. I take care of everyone in Valhara.”

“Not me. I take care of myself, and I don’t need your protection or your pity.” Kyrin was very careful not to show any loyalty or to give any indication that Alric was interested in her. She knew that Daemionis would be watching and the sacrifice she performed the night before would be short lived if he thought Alric was taking over.

“In Valhara you are under my care, like it or not. As my indentured servant it’s my responsibility to make sure you are taken care of too. It’s concerning us that Daemionis was so furious with you and caused pain.”

“I’m not afraid of a little pain.”

“I didn’t say you are. I simply feel like we need to enlist Sithias in the matter and as such, we’ll need you to be there.”

Her eyes narrowed, “I have no loyalties to Sithias, nor do I ever wish to be in his presence.”

“He can help you.”

“Why would he help me? I’m a follower of another god, a loyal one.”

“He is a good god. It’s in his nature to help those in need.”

“It’s not my fault that he shows such weaknesses.”

Alric stood up and towered above her, “Do not refer to Sithias as weak.”

“Then don’t push him on me!”

“As one of his Holy Knights it’s my job to ensure those in his lands are cared for, and that they are followers! As you are bound to me by a debt, you will do as I ask in this matter.”

“No, I won’t! You cannot force your god on me. Bring me before him and I’ll be forced to destroy him.”

“You cannot destroy him. He is all powerful.”

“Not if he shows the weakness of compassion.”

Alric immediately lifted his hand in anger, but when she ducked away from him, he lowered it, “Watch what you say around me.”

Frantic knocking sounded and Trox stood to see who it was. One of the Knights said that Lord Qualsax was requesting an immediate audience, and that he’d brought many of his Warriors along and into Valhara.

Alric turned, shocked, “They’re here?”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“Where is he?”

“He’s waiting for you at the crossroads in Valhara.”

Alric scowled and stormed out of her room. He would deal with her later, but realized he had to calm his temper first, or he risked hurting her. He didn’t take lightly when his god was criticized, but

he knew that to make an impact, he had to calm down and show Kyrin how civility could prevail.

His horse was ready, and he kicked it into a gallop, along with all of the Knights. The city was alive with citizens coming out to see what was going on. Never before had Lord Qualsax ventured past his lands, and they knew that Alric wouldn't be pleased that he was now standing inside of Valhara.

They rode up and stopped at the crossroads, where Lord Qualsax stood with over a hundred of his Warriors. He was tall and thick, with black hair and a long, pointed goatee. His armor was also black and was dented and obviously well used. His helm was at his side, under his arm, and he scowled as Alric approached.

“Why are you here?” Alric asked. He stood a few inches taller than Qualsax, but didn't take that to mean he was weaker.

“You know damned well why! How dare you attack a peaceful village while they sleep?”

“We did no such thing.”

“Of course you did! You knew the Warriors were out. You had scouts in the area. I thought your god wouldn't allow you to kill innocents,” he said angrily.

“Proof we didn't do it. We wouldn't defy Sithias by slaughtering innocents, and I'm insulted by the implication.”

A smile crossed his lips, “If it wasn't you, then it had to be the evil one you're harboring.”

Alric simply glared at him.

“Genessa told us about your houseguest. She told us of her evil ways, and I'm surprised you allow her to walk free among the good people of Valhara.”

“She is not an evil. Genessa doesn’t know what she’s talking about.”

“Oh I think she does. She was able to give quite intricate details about the evil deeds of the young demon.”

Alric studied him before speaking, “When did this attack occur?”

“Of that we aren’t sure, sometime last night. No call for help was sent out because you were underhanded and conniving!”

“We did not attack you! Neither did Kyrin. I happen to know she was by the castle last night patrolling the orchards.”

Qualsax grinned evilly, “She has you under her spell. Evils can get into your skin, and you wouldn’t even know it. She massacred those women and children last night in the name of her god, and I demand revenge!”

“She did not! She was here with us last night.”

“The ugly being has you fooled! Her hideousness alone should tell you she’s an evil. Bring her here and let me question her.”

“You cannot question her, but I will bring her here so you can see that Genessa is lying to you.”

“She’s not lying. She told me that under torture,” he said, smiling.

“Finn, bring Kyrin here,” Alric said. He let no emotions cross his face about Genessa being tortured.

Kyrin looked up from beside the bathtub when she heard the knock. She went to the door as she brushed her hair and let Finn in.

“Let’s go,” Finn said, taking her arm.

“I’m not dressed!” she gasped as he hauled her toward the door in her nightgown.

“You’re covered.”

She struggled against him, not wanting to be seen by anyone in the soft white nightgown she was provided when she arrived. Her hair was down and her flail was sitting beside her clothing, “Let me go, Finn!”

“No, Lord Alric has called for you.”

“You didn’t allow me a weapon.”

“You don’t need it.”

She continued to try to get away from him, but he was mad and hauled her onto the horse when he mounted it. Kyrin’s eyes grew wide when she saw how many towns people had gathered, and she even debated casting on Finn to make him let her go.

Finn stopped his horse outside of the temple and then took her arm and dragged her toward Alric. She was still struggling, frantic to get away before someone saw her with her hair down and wearing the nightgown.

She’d seen too many women sold after being pulled from their homes while they slept. They were often still in their nightgowns with their hair down, which was easily cut to prove they were available for bids.

Finn hauled her up to the front and then stopped beside Alric. Kyrin stopped fighting and looked over at the angry looking man before her. He was smiling at her as he ran his eyes down her. He had the same look in his eye that Mika did the night she escaped, the night when Mika decided not to wait the year for her to be of legal age to marry.

“Did you bring this one as a distraction?” Qualsax asked, focusing in on her breasts.

“No, this is Kyrin,” Alric said to him. “This is the one you claim to be evil and vile enough to slaughter a city.”

Kyrin gasped and looked at Qualsax. She wondered if she’d left some sign that she did it, and he was there to collect a debt for the murdered.

“This cannot be Kyrin. Kyrin is ugly and scarred, evil...”

“This is Kyrin and she is nothing of the sort. She was with us last night when your city was wiped out.”

“I know what you’re doing though,” he said, running his cracked tongue along his lips. “I’ll take her in payment for what Kyrin did.”

Alric roared, “You will not talk about her like that!”

Kyrin couldn’t breathe. Her worst fears were being realized as the bidding process began.

“I’ll take her into my bed, and if I choose to keep her, then I will consider repayment complete.”

Finn let go of her and reached out to take Alric’s arm, to keep him from advancing on Qualsax, “My Lord...”

Kyrin saw the Knight beside her and immediately knew she had to stop this. He was watching Alric, not his sword, and when she unsheathed it, he barely had time to react before she ran at Qualsax. No one was watching her, and when her foot connected with his stomach, he flew back, landing hard on the ground of the enemy town.

She landed beside him and immediately brought her foot to rest against his neck, with the tip of the sword poised over the small

band of skin on his abdomen that was exposed between his armor. The Qualsax Warriors backed away. They knew that any movement could send the sword plunging into his stomach, and the look on her face let them know she was a fraction of a second from doing it.

The top-ranking Qualsax snarled at her and put his hands out, “Don’t do it, Baby Girl. You won’t hurt him.”

“Wanna bet?” she asked, and sent the tip of the sword into his flesh.

“Stop!” he bellowed.

“Get back.”

He glared at her and took a step back, “Let him go.”

Her eyes narrowed as she lowered her foot and cut off his airway, “I won’t go with you.”

“Kyrin, no one’s taking you from Valhara,” Alric said from behind her. He was still shocked that she had attacked when violence wasn’t necessary. His concern deepened when she actually showed signs that she was going to kill him.

Kyrin didn’t take her eyes off the Qualsax Warrior, “I didn’t kill your puny little village, but if you doubt my abilities, I can prove myself to you with your King.”

“It breaks the laws of the land to kill our king!”

“I don’t care about laws. I won’t be his bride, so either he can die, or I will... and I choose him.” The Qualsax King was losing the battle to breathe and slowly slumped down, unmoving.

“You’re killing him!”

“That’s the idea.”

“Kyrin, let him go,” Finn said sternly.

“No one is going to take you from Valhara,” Alric said again. “He’s not going to take you, and you aren’t going to be forced to marry him.”

She turned pitch-black eyes to him, “You swear to Sithias on that?”

“Yes, I do.” Alric held his voice calm, when his insides were tightened and part of him wished she would finish of the enemy king.

Kyrin looked down at the lifeless face of Lord Qualsax and stepped off of him. The Qualsax Warriors moved to attack her, and she dropped defensively.

“Enough,” Alric ordered. “Get your King out of here and leave my city.”

To save their king, they did as he asked and rushed him back to the Priests in their town. When lookouts shouted that the Qualsax were off of Valhara land, Alric walked up to Kyrin and took the sword away from her. He turned and handed it to the Knight it belonged to, and then faced Kyrin.

He walked up beside her and whispered harshly, “I’ve told you, you won’t be sold into marriage. I’m tired of being ignored about this, and I’ll expect in the future that you’ll believe me when I speak to you.”

She finally stood up straight and nodded, not meeting his eye. She’d angered her master and felt trapped between his wishes and that of her god.

“Now get back to the castle, get dressed, and then report to me for punishment.”

Finn took her arm and began to haul her back to the castle. Nothing was said, and she was dreading a punishment. She had only seen Alric hand out two punishments before, but didn't think he would banish a perfectly good slave.

Once in her room, she dressed quickly and tied her hair into a braid. Her stomach was in knots when she opened her door and nodded at the two Knights by her door. They walked her up to the King's bedroom and one of them knocked.

Alric opened the door and stepped aside so Kyrin could enter. He reached to her side and removed the flail from her belt, and handed it to the closest Knight before shutting the door behind them.

Kyrin walked into his room and then turned to look at him. It was the first time she'd seen him in casual clothing, and he sat down in a chair beside a wide fireplace and motioned for her to sit next to him.

She sat down and faced him.

He sat back, "We need to come to an understanding."

Kyrin nodded.

"The people in town are afraid of you. They wonder why I keep you in the castle when you demonstrate the tendencies to be dangerous and unpredictably violent."

When she didn't say anything, he continued calmly, "I see that you still don't believe me that you aren't going to be sold into marriage. I am also getting frustrated with your lack of trust or faith in me. I see it in your eyes when I tell you that I have your best interest at heart, that you don't believe the words as I say them."

She shifted nervously and watched him.

“I’ve grown attached to you, and it’s hard for me to see the way you look at me, as if I’m about to turn on you.”

“What is the punishment then?” she asked him.

He smiled, “Your punishment is that you are going to trust me.”

“How so?”

“Go change first. I want you to stop looking like a homeless girl on the run from danger.”

She was shocked at how close he came to the truth, “Change into what?”

“Go into the dressing corner. There’s a dress for you, and I want your hair down.”

She nodded and then hesitated before walking behind the dressing gown.

Alric sat in his chair and watched her. He hadn’t realized before that the mirror by the fire gave a partial view from behind the dressing curtain. He knew it was intrusive, but was having a hard time pulling his eyes away from the soft look of her skin. She put out such a hard, angry front, that he sometimes forgot that she was still a young woman behind the façade.

In the past, the tailors had been conscious of her modesty and had made dresses that were not revealing and had high collars and loose fitting bodies. This one was in contrast to those, and after she slipped it on, she winced. The body fit tightly against hers, showing off the curves she hated so badly. The neck was lower and showed cleavage, no matter how hard she tried to pull it up.

Kyrin avoided looking in the mirror as she untied her hair and smoothed it between her fingers. It fell softly past her shoulders and down to lay against her skirt.

When she walked out from behind the curtain, he smiled, “So you are a woman.”

She didn't look at him, but watched out the window.

“Come here,” he said, and his voice was light and amused.

Kyrin finally looked over at him and walked toward him, taking his hands when he put them out.

Alric knew what he was doing was risky, and he wanted her hands separated just in case she'd been hiding any magic from him. He doubted it, but wasn't going to risk it after seeing how fast she turned on people.

He pulled her up against him and looked down into her eyes, “You aren't going to attack me.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“You aren't going to hit me, or fight against me, is that understood?”

Kyrin nodded slightly.

“You're going to trust me that I'm not going to hurt you.”

Before she could even protest, he'd pressed his lips against hers. Her eyes grew wide and she tried to pull away from him, but he wrapped a hand around to the small of her back and held her in place. Her stomach tightened as the feel of his closeness engulfed her, and she began to panic.

Alric broke the kiss and looked at her, “Did that hurt?”

“No, but...” she started, but he kissed her again. His tongue danced across her lips, and she had an internal conflict. She wanted to bite his tongue, to stop the feel of what he was doing, but he was her master, and she had agreed to do as he asked.

Kyrin had often seen newly purchased brides forced to endure the touching lips, and the thought made her skin crawl. This seemed different though, not repulsive or wrong.

Alric stepped back and smiled, “Now we’re going to go for a walk. I want you to let the townspeople see you how you are.”

“What?” she gasped, taking a step away from him.

“They see you dressed as a man, fighting as a warrior, and they are terrified of you. I want them to see that you are a beautiful woman and not one to be feared.”

“Why would you do that to me?”

“I’m not doing that to you. I’m doing it for you. Do you want to be feared?”

Her answer shocked him, “Yes!”

“Why do you want to be feared?” he asked, lightly brushing the back of his hand along her neck.

“Please, don’t...”

“Why?”

Her words were a whisper, things she was told by everyone from the Shadowmere to Creteloc, “Trust no one. Let no one near enough to you to hurt you. Attack without thought or reason. If you learn to trust, you will learn the meaning of humiliation. If they fear you, they will not try to get close.”

“Who told you that?” he asked her.

“No one told me that. That’s what I’ve learned.”

“Out on your own, you learned that?”

“Yes”

“It’s wrong,” Alric said to her. He then took her hand and started for the door, “Time for a walk.”

She followed him as her mind swam. She hated the flutter of her stomach when he pressed his lips to hers. She hated how the dress made her feel and how the thought of being paraded through the town put her on display.

Neither spoke as they walked the short distance into town. Many of the townsfolk came out to say hello to them, and all were cordial and friendly. Alric spoke to them about family members and upcoming events. Kyrin followed along silently and tried not to look at anyone.

“Emerisa!” Alric said pleasantly. “How are you feeling?”

“Lord Alric,” she said bowing. “I’m feeling fine, thank you.”

Kyrin looked over at Finn’s wife and gasped. She was pregnant and out in broad daylight among people from the town.

“Getting big too, I see,” he said, admiring her growing middle.

She nodded and rubbed her tummy, “This’ll be a boy, I’d wager.”

“Finn mentioned you’ve been sicker with this pregnancy.”

“Yes, this baby had me very sick for a while. The Priests helped though and it’s much better.”

Kyrin couldn’t help but gawk. Men didn’t speak of such things, and Emerisa shouldn’t be out in public with an obvious pregnancy.

“Are you ok, Kyrin?” Emerisa asked her.

Kyrin looked quickly around and then whispered, “You can’t be out here.”

“Why not?” Emerisa was ready for this, as the entire encounter was well planned out.

Kyrin couldn’t even look squarely at her. Her shame was too great, and she didn’t want to add to the disgrace by looking at the pregnant bulge, “It’s... you have to get back inside.”

Emerisa smiled, “The baby is kicking, would you like to feel it?”

Kyrin gasped, “Do what?”

“I would,” Alric told her. He stepped forward and put his hand against her belly. He felt for a few moments and then nodded, “I agree. It’s a boy. He has quite the kick.”

“Oh good, Finn’s home,” Emerisa said, watching down the street.

Kyrin looked quickly and began to panic. He would punish her for showing her humiliation to the townsfolk, and she had to protect her from the vile thoughts of the man who’d bestowed the shame on her.

“Stay back, Finn,” Kyrin said, stepping between them.

He stopped and frowned, “Why?”

Emerisa thought quickly, “Finn, Lord Alric was just feeling the baby kick. He thinks it’s a boy.”

Finn smiled and walked around Kyrin, “Nope, it’s a girl. I’d swear by it.”

Kyrin turned quickly to Emerisa, “I can help you die.”

Emerisa hid the brief fear, “I don’t want to die though.”

“It’s better than what he will do to you. I told you not to be out here!”

“Fresh bread this morning, Emerisa,” a woman said from behind them. Kyrin looked over and frowned when this woman was also pregnant.

“My god, Stephania!” Finn laughed. “When is that baby coming out?”

“Hopefully soon... or not soon enough, I’m not sure which,” she said happily and then handed the bread over to Emerisa.

It was all too foreign. Kyrin had been to hundreds of dimensions and each shared her view of the vile act of becoming pregnant, and the humiliating and shameful act of carrying a child and delivering it. It was hidden away in dark houses, houses where all of a sudden the curtains were drawn, and no one was allowed in.

“You ok, Kyrin?” Finn asked, watching her.

She was staring awkwardly at the two pregnant women who were talking.

“Kyrin?” Alric asked her.

She backed away. What kind of dimension was this? What kind wasn’t plagued with the drought, and didn’t fear the now dimension shifting Consortiums? How can they not share the views of the rest of the universe? It was confusing, and she felt the world closing in around her.

Everything from the awkward moment when their lips met, to the warning from Daemionis about how close she got to those from Paragoy Dimension came crashing down on her.

Alric and Finn rushed to Kyrin when she collapsed. Alric felt her neck, “She’s alive.”

“I think she fainted.”

“Maybe this was too much,” Alric said, picking her up.

“Maybe, she has to learn though, and she didn’t believe us.”

“She’ll be ok,” Alric said, smiling. “I’ll lie her down and get her a cool rag.”

Finn nodded and watched the King walk off, carrying his young charge. Finn couldn’t help but smile. Everyone in Valhara knew the King was falling for the strange girl, everyone but the King.

Chapter 8

Alric strengthened the kiss and wrapped his hand to the back of her neck. She didn’t fight him anymore, and he knew she was finally realizing that he wasn’t out to get her.

When he moved back, she blushed slightly and pulled away from him.

“See, no pain and I’m not whisking you off to bed,” Alric laughed.

“Why would I go to your bed when I have one?”

“Don’t mind that.” He walked over to get a glass of wine, “Back to our earlier argument. It’s just time.”

“My room is fine... it’s more than adequate.”

“There’s no reason for you to be down with the servants. That suite is empty.”

“It was Genessa’s suite.”

“Yes.”

“So it’s set apart for your wives.”

He shook his head, “One wife.”

“I won’t marry you.”

“I don’t want to marry you, so stop worrying about it. The rooms were made for a lady, and yours were made for a servant.”

“Which I am, and indentured servant.”

“You’re the only one that makes that distinction.”

“Not true. Every day when you order me into a dress and force me to stand here while you put your lips to mine, or make me eat with a fork, or learn to dance, is done under direct order,” Kyrin reminded her.

He couldn’t help but grin, “Oh right... well... sometimes you’re too stubborn to do what’s good for you unless it’s an order.”

“How is this good for me?”

“I’m making you less afraid of me.”

She glared at him, “I’m not afraid of you.”

“Ok then, I’m making it so you trust me.”

“Good luck with that.”

“Hey, it’s working, mostly. You don’t try to attack me anymore when I kiss you.”

“I don’t want punished for assaulting you.”

“That or you like it.”

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

“Well,” Alric said, sitting against the desk in his room. “We’re done for today. I’ll make a lady of you yet.”

She turned on her heels and headed down to her room. Alric didn’t explain why he let her go early, but he got the feeling again that something was wrong. He had a sinking in his heart, and a dark pal had fallen over his thoughts.

Kyrin was furious. She felt like Alric was on the verge of making her his wife and every day he seemed to move her one more step into being what he considered a proper lady. She got to her room and then walked in and slammed the door shut.

A soft voice came from the deep shadows of her room, and Kyrin spun toward it.

“Creteloc?” she asked almost breathlessly.

Even though she stepped out of the shadow, she remained shrouded in darkness, “Daemionis sent me.”

“Is he mad?”

“Not at you. The humans here are taking advantage of your innocents, and it concerns him.”

“Like what?”

“The training sessions are becoming too personal.”

She nodded, “I wondered.”

“You know not the ways of men, and we’ve kept it that way to keep you safe. This Alric is on the verge of overstepping.”

“What can I do though? I have five more months to go.”

“That is why I am here.” Creteloc moved to look out the window, but her movement made no noise in the room.

Kyrin gasped, “Are you going to kill him?”

Creteloc smiled, something she rarely did, “No, but I’m not above that.”

“I don’t trust him, if that’s what you’re concerned about.”

“You are starting to. Daemionis’ main concern is that Alric has fallen in love with you and will do what he can to keep you here.”

“I won’t marry him.”

Creteloc turned toward her, “You don’t understand ways of the flesh.”

“So?”

“It will interfere with how you see him.”

“I don’t see how. I don’t trust him and as soon as my servitude is over, I am leaving.”

“Leaving here?” Creteloc said, silently moving across the floor. “There is water, food, and safety here. The Shadowmere cannot come into Paragoy yet.”

“So you think I’ll stay because it’s easy to live here?”

“Yes, I do.”

“I’m not weak enough to stay here just because there’s unlimited water and food.”

Creteloc looked at her and her eyes glowed red, “Why not? I would stay if it served me in such a way.”

“I don’t like it here. The people are odd and delusional about the real world out there. They think they are the only world and there are no other dimensions.”

“I realize that it’s the dimension shifter’s way not to divulge the truth to such a dimension... but you may have to, to explain where you came from.”

Kyrin frowned, “I’ve managed not to tell them where I come from. Why change that?”

“Because, you love him and you want him to understand you.”

“Don’t insult me!”

Creteloc ran her hands along the rack of clothing, “You’re old enough now that your body will respond to him. It’s out of your control.”

“So tell me. I’ve been patient and waited... Why are you and Daemionis so afraid that I’ve grown? You both mention how bad it will be when I discover feelings of the flesh, but I don’t even know what you mean.”

“In due time, Kyrin.” Creteloc swept out the door, and Kyrin watched, knowing it wasn’t her place to stop her. It was dark in the castle, nearing midnight, and she knew Creteloc was going to talk to Alric.

Alric walked up the stairs, slowly scanning the entire castle. Sithias agreed that an evil presence had invaded Valhara, and he sent scouts out to check every village under his command and had found nothing. The evil was still present. He just couldn’t find it, and it had him worried that bad things were coming.

Once in his room, he slipped his belt off and laid it, along with his sword, down beside his bed and then sat to pull off his boots.

He stood suddenly when a shadow moved across the window in his room. In an instant, he had his sword in his hand and was looking hard into the dark corners of the room.

“Pos tieth e sabia, Wipshe d' Valhara.” He spun and faced where the voice had come from. A figure appeared from deep in the shadow of his room. All he could see was that the form was almost 6 inches shorter than he, and wore a black cloak that obscured any sign of a face. He looked hard and was sure that red eyes glowed from beneath it.

“Who are you?” he asked, readying his sword.

“Have you ever met true evil?” she whispered, circling him slightly. Even passing close to the bed, the sheets didn't sway and no sound gave away her movements.

“Apparently I have now.”

“Yes, dear Boy, you have.”

“So who are you?”

The cloaked figure turned to him, and the hairs on his neck stood up. He felt cut off from Sithias, something he'd never experienced before, “I am Creteloc, Priestess to Daemionis and watcher of Kyrin.”

Alric nodded, “Very well... what do you want?”

“Only to let you know that we're watching, and we know.”

“Know what?”

“That you love her. We won't stand by while you corrupt her and try to turn her to the good side. Sithias is a formidable enemy, but we won't hesitate to interfere.”

“I care about her, just as I do every other person in my Kingdom.”

“I’m not as naïve as she is, dear King.”

“Meaning?”

“You love her, don’t deny that. She is beautiful, and interesting to you. However, she belongs, body and soul, to Daemionis, and he doesn’t share,” Creteloc said as she stared at him.

“You’ve mistaken what I’m doing here.”

“Am I? You kiss her.”

“To make her trust me. She has to understand that not everyone that touches her wishes to hurt her.”

When she smiled, her teeth shown like daggers beneath the dark hood, “If you say so.”

“She has to learn to trust.”

“No she doesn’t. Trust leads to betrayal, nothing more.”

“Then you are as naïve as she is.” Alric watched her, still tense, “So what are you here to do? Kill me?”

“No, Daemionis is learning from Kyrin’s interactions with you. What I’m here to do is issue you and Sithias a warning that any interaction with Kyrin is to be business.”

“What is his interest in her? She’s obviously not a born-evil.”

“That’s none of your concern,” Creteloc told him. “You will watch what you say around her. We’ve protected her from things for years, and I will not have you undo that.”

“Protected her from what!? She was almost dead when she arrived here.”

“Death isn’t what we protect her from.”

“Then what do you?”

“Carnal knowledge.”

He frowned, “Why would you do that? She’s old enough to know such things and knowledge may help alleviate her fears.”

Creteloc circled him again, “To stay loyal to Daemionis, she must not find another. We keep her pure so her thoughts stay with him.”

“That’s insane! She’ll learn eventually, even with your misguided attempt at protecting her. Tell me why he is so interested in her. It doesn’t make sense.”

“She will not learn. The great Daemionis will not lose her! Her thoughts are clearly on him and only him. She does his bidding and lets no other come between what she is to do. If she understood...”

“I’m not going to stand here and have you tell me this!”

Creteloc appeared at his side and ran a light finger along his chest, sending a warning shiver down his spine, “If she understood what we do... about desires and sensual gratification... then her mind would seek out a suitable companion, and Daemionis will not stand for that.”

“Blocking natural information from that girl to keep her loyal to Daemionis has only kept her in unnecessary fear!”

“You say that like fear is a bad thing.”

“It is.”

When she disappeared, Alric spun, looking closely around his room for her. There was no sign of her, the door was closed, and the windows were shut tightly. He ran from his room and out to the Knights.

“Get the castle on alert and lock it down. I want every window checked, and every door locked!”

The Knights ran to follow his orders as he descended to Kyrin’s room. He didn’t even knock, but walked in, “Where is she?”

“She doesn’t tell me where she goes or what she does,” Kyrin told him.

“You allowed her to come into my home!?”

“No one allows Creteloc to do anything.”

“There’s an evil in Valhara, and she came here because of you!”

“I didn’t ask her here.”

“Come here,” he said angrily, and then grabbed her arm and pulled her from the room. She watched closely as Knights swarmed the castle and checked behind every door.

“They won’t find her.”

“We have to try,” he said, and then hauled her to Trox’s room and knocked.

Trox looked up from a stack of books when they walked in. Kyrin looked around curiously at the columns of books and bubbling potions along the walls. The small bed was pushed up against the far wall beneath the window. An eagle stood in his windowsill and screeched at the intrusion.

“Is there a problem?” Trox asked, looking over his glasses at them.

“I was just visited by an evil,” Alric said, pushing Kyrin down onto a chair. “She came as a representative of Daemionis.”

“Interesting, an evil you say?”

“Yes, and I lost the will of Sithias in her presence.”

Trox nodded, “Sithias’ will cannot be around something so dark. Was she a rogue? Thief maybe?”

They both looked at Kyrin, but she didn’t reply.

“What is her profession?” Alric asked her.

“Answer the King!” Trox yelled.

She looked Alric in the eye, “I’m more afraid of her than I am of you.”

His face softened, “We can protect you from her.”

“I don’t need to be on Creteloc’s bad side if you won’t force me to talk about her.”

“What did she say to you?” Trox asked him.

Alric glanced at her, “I’ll tell you about that later. She came because of concerns for Kyrin’s welfare though.”

Alric sat up suddenly and looked out the window, as if listening to something. Kyrin watched him carefully, and Trox fell silent and lowered his eyes.

“Sithias wants to talk to you, Kyrin,” Alric said after a few minutes.

She frowned, “No.”

“He won’t hurt you.”

“I’m not afraid of him! I’m not going to face your god.”

Alric stood, “We’re going to the temple now.”

“No!”

“You brought evil back into Valhara, and you have to face him over it.”

“Over my dead body,” she said, standing suddenly.

“I’m not fighting you over this, Kyrin. We’re going to talk to Sithias.”

“I said no.”

“Trox”

She turned to Trox, just as he put a rag over her face. Before she even got a hold of him, she began to descend into darkness.

Alric watched her sink to the floor and then picked her up, “How long do we have?”

“Half an hour is all,” Trox said as they both walked out of the castle. They hurried on horseback to the temple. The Priests were waiting for them and helped Alric off of his horse, still carrying Kyrin.

When Alric was in the back room of the temple, he laid Kyrin down in the center of the large cross that was painted on the floor. He then knelt down and lowered his eyes before starting a prayer to Sithias.

Sithias appeared suddenly and looked down at Kyrin, “This is the girl?”

“Yes, my Lord,” Alric said, looking over at her. “She should be awake soon.”

“She’s the one that brought an evil into my lands?”

“I don’t think she summoned the demon’s Priestess, but I do know the Priestess came here over concerns for Kyrin’s well-being.”

“The evil has gone.”

“For certain, my Lord?”

“Yes. Her presence was too strong and the disturbance too great for her to be here, and me not know it,” Sithias said, still watching the girl sleep. “Tell me what was said when you spoke to the evil one.”

Alric went over the conversation, and just when he finished, Kyrin began to stir.

Sithias moved to stand above her and when she opened her eyes, she was looking into the kind face of the deity of Holy Knights.

“Please do not be afraid,” Sithias said when Kyrin sprung to her feet. He stepped away from her slightly, and she looked around for a weapon. Sithias seemed intrigued by her behavior and watched her for a moment before speaking, “I just wanted to meet you.”

Kyrin saw the outline of a door and lunged for it, but Alric stepped in front of it, “You can’t leave yet.”

She turned to face the deity, and her hands twitched at her side as he studied her.

Finally, he smiled, “You are of concern to me.”

She watched him silently.

“I don’t believe Daemionis will punish you just for speaking to me,” he told her, as he glided along air and circled her.

Alric thought for a moment and then turned to his god, “Maybe start with a question.”

“Why is the Shadowmere Consortium looking for you?” The words were unfamiliar to Alric, but he kept quiet and watched the shock on Kyrin’s face.

Kyrin swallowed hard and looked for another door.

“They are quite intent on following you, and I’m surprised that you do not choose to stay here, so as to keep away from them,” Sithias said.

When she didn’t say anything, he smiled softly, “The Clemency Consortium is also looking for you if I am not mistaken.”

Alric watched her closely, and she was starting to panic.

“I am not going to turn you over to them. Their practices are barbaric and I wouldn’t inflict those on you,” Sithias told her. She fought against his kind words and thought of the punishment Daemionis would dole out if he found out that she was in the presence of another’s deity.

“With the plentiful resources here, such as water and food, I would also expect that you would want to stay. If it’s Daemionis that keeps you shifting, then I can protect you from him.”

Kyrin made another break for the door, but Alric stepped in front of it and shook his head, and then pointed at Sithias.

“You are on the run, dear Kyrin, from some of the most dangerous men I’ve ever seen. You worship a dangerous god, and you live where women are treated like property and humiliated for the amusement of the men. What draws you back to such a place?” he asked her, still floating through the air.

“You are more than welcome to stay in Valhara,” Alric told her. She jumped for his sword, but he stepped on the sheath to stop her, “You won’t have to fight for your life here. When you came to this land, you were full of wounds and almost dead. You can’t keep living like that. Eventually, someone will kill you.”

“I wish for you to marry Alric,” Sithias said suddenly.

Alric looked up with wide eyes, “My Lord?”

Sithias smiled, “I have a feeling about this one. She is hiding something from us, and I believe it’s something we can use to protect ourselves. The Consortiums haven’t made it here yet, but some day they will, and she is our best bet at fighting them.”

Kyrin was breathing hard and staring at Sithias, seething. She wanted to yell, to tell the god he was wrong, but knew any interaction on her part would earn her a punishment from Daemionis.

“That’s going to be more complicated than you’d think,” Alric told him.

“I understand she is innocent in such things as marriage and relations, but who better to teach her, my Holy Knight?”

“It’s deeper than knowledge.”

“That is my wish.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Alric said, lowering his eyes.

“From her actions, I suspect our visitor to be an Assassin, one that’s a high-ranking member of Daemionis’ fold.”

Alric nodded.

“You find strange company, dear child. If I were you, I would be careful who I associate with.”

When Sithias disappeared, Kyrin rounded on Alric, “That’s it! The servitude is over. I’ll now go back to where I belong.”

“Please, listen to me...”

She stormed out and ran for the castle to get her things. When she ran through the doors, she immediately headed for her room and

began throwing her things into the small pack they came from. She tore off her clothes and put on the dirty and worn clothing she had in her pack. She wanted nothing that Paragoy had given her and hoped to be long gone by the time the Consortium figured out she was back in the dimensions.

“I’m not going to honor your servitude as over,” Alric said from the door.

“It’s over!”

“No, you are soul-bound to me for another five months, and I demand that time.”

“You just want me to stay here and be your wife.”

“I’ll talk to Sithias about that. What I want right now is for you to stay here in Valhara where it’s safe. I didn’t know you were on the run.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It does matter! Sithias said you are safe here for now, and I’m invoking the debt to keep you here another five months.”

“Daemionis will hear about this.”

“I’m sure he will.”

“He won’t allow you to keep me.”

“You’re indebted to me. He’ll see that.”

She turned to him and realized he was right. Daemionis would hold her to her servitude, “Fine... but I stay as an indentured servant...”

“Ok”

“I work, I live with the servants, and I stay away from you.”

“I can use you in any capacity I see fit.”

“As long as it’s a job you have servants do. I’m not afraid of hard work, and I will expect no more of this comfort and luxury.”

“If that’s what you wish.”

“It is,” she said, crossing her arms.

“Start in the morning by cleaning out the Knight’s quarters. I want it scrubbed, and the beds made.”

She nodded and watched him leave, and then fell to her knees to talk to Daemionis.

Alric decided to work her, to try to calm her and let her know that he wasn’t going to force her into marriage. He wasn’t going to talk to Sithias about the request. He knew his god was right, and it was his job to figure out how to do it. Instead of having her leave, Alric figured keeping her around for five months as a working servant was better than nothing.

Early the next morning, Kyrin woke with the dawn and headed out immediately to begin cleaning the Knight’s quarters. Normally, the Knights would still be eating just outside of their sleeping quarters, but she found the building empty, so she started to make the beds.

Hard work kept her mind busy. She tried not to think of what Sithias had requested of Alric. Daemionis hadn’t come to her when she asked for him last night, so she wasn’t sure if he was too busy, or if he was forsaking her for being in the presence of another deity.

“You’re up early,” Finn said from behind her. The sudden voice made her jerk, and she stood and turned toward him, ready to attack, “Calm down, Kid. I just wondered who was in here.”

“The Knights left early so I started to clean,” she explained as she turned to start on another bed.

“Yes, they’ll be busy for a while.”

“Why’s that?”

“Qualsax has angered the mountain Minotaurs, and they have been attacking outposts.”

She raised her eyebrows, “You have Minotaurs? Nice.”

“Not nice. They attack at night when no one’s expecting it and even though Qualsax started this, they are heading for Valhara’s land.”

This made her heart pound, “How many of them?”

Finn moved forward, “Have you encountered them before?”

She nodded and finished the bed she was working on.

“Don’t leave here! I’ll be right back.”

“What’s...” she started to ask, but he was already gone. She shrugged and started on the next bed. It was less than twenty minutes later when Finn returned with Lord Alric and the four top ranking Knights.

“Stop making the beds,” Finn said, walking up to her.

She turned around and saw them, “What now?”

“You said you’ve encountered Minotaurs before?”

“Yes”

“A lot of them?”

“Why do you want to know?”

Finn looked at Alric, who walked up to her, “We are inexperienced with them. Rumors are that there are hundreds that came out of the mountains to retaliate against Qualsax, but they don’t honor boundaries and are headed this way. Do you know how to kill one?”

“Hundreds?”

“Yes”

“You can’t kill that many with your forces.”

“We have to try,” Finn said. “Tell us what you know.”

She thought for a moment, looking over them as they watched her, “If they are a menace, how do you not know how to kill them?”

“To be honest, we’ve not even seen them before. They keep to their mountain caves and normally leave us alone. I don’t think there’s been an encounter with one in almost 600 years,” Alric explained.

She sighed, “Fine, I’ll tell you what I know. Take it from me though, there are too many for you to handle.”

“Just talk...”

“Minotaurs are half man, half bull. They stand about 7-feet tall and are extremely powerful. They have thought and reason. They may not be intelligent, but they can work around adversaries, and they will know how to fight.”

“Do they have a weakness?” one of the Knights asked her.

“Every creature has a weakness. The mistake with the Minotaur is to go for the head or heart. The top half is a bull, and much harder to get by. Their skin is tough and protected by thick, black fur.”

“So we go for the bottom half, the human half,” Alric said.

“Yes, they will only send males, and they have the same weaknesses that you do.” She couldn’t help but grin.

“Wait... you’re telling us...”

“I’m telling you to use their weaknesses, from their breastbone to their knees. You get off gut shots, groin shots, and take out hips and knees.”

“But we have to take out hundreds,” Finn said. “How can we mass exterminate them?”

“You can’t. Minotaurs are too strong for that. I’ve seen one Minotaur take down four experienced warriors.”

“There has to be a way.”

“There isn’t one. Your best bet is to run.”

“We can’t run,” Alric explained. “We have a fortress in the mountains, but not all of the kingdom can go there. We have villages on the border of Qualsax that could be attacked as soon as next week.”

“Run”

“We can’t run,” Finn said angrily.

Kyrin started on another bed, “Then prepare to be wiped out. You can’t fight that many Minotaurs.”

“Will they have weapons?” Alric asked.

“Yes, hammers, axes. Their weapons are crude but efficient, and they wield them with a lot of strength.”

“So they are stronger than a man?” Finn was getting irritated that she was still making beds while they fought to save the lives of the people in their Kingdom.

“Yes”

“Maybe we need to call Auldian and enlist the help of the elves,” Finn suggested.

Alric shook his head, “They won’t tangle with the Minotaurs. That would only bring the Minotaurs into Minathim.”

“Kyrin!” Finn yelled.

She jumped and turned around with wide eyes, “What?”

“Our people are about to be attacked.”

“Yes, I heard.”

“Help us.”

“I am! I’m telling you to run.”

Angry, they left her to clean and went to the war room in the castle to decide on a plan. Once seated, Alric leaned forward, “If she’s right, we may have to evacuate to Fortress Ophang.”

“We can’t get everyone there. Who do we decide gets to live?” Finn asked.

“Obviously the King will go,” one of the Knights said.

“No,” Alric told him sternly. “I will not hide while my people face the Minotaurs.”

“We need our king safe.”

“It’s out of the question.”

“Sir,” Finn said, turning to him. “If this turns out disastrous, you are the only one that can help the people recover.”

“Enough! I am not abandoning my people while they get attacked. Start moving the women and children into Ophang. Keep anyone old enough to wield a weapon.”

Kyrin moved away from the door when they all stood up. She ran down the stairs to the Knight’s quarters, so they wouldn’t realize she’d been listening in on their meeting. She knew that they had no chance at all to defeat the Minotaurs.

Once safely in the Knight’s quarters again, she sat down to think. She was shocked that Alric wouldn’t go to safety, but put his life with the life of those in his Kingdom. Kings were above reproach. They were selfish, greedy, and better than their people. Why was Alric acting like his life was no more valuable than the rest?

Hoping to avoid getting yelled at again for her lack of help, Kyrin left the castle grounds quickly and ran to a lake up above where the orchard ended. She thought she’d get in a good swim while the Valharans fought in vain to save their people.

When she made sure no one was around, Kyrin stripped and then ran into the warm water. She dove down and looked around at the sandy bottom of the lake with its ugly gray fish and slimy green plants.

Alric watched her from behind a grove of trees. He saw her run off and thought she may be making a break for it before the Minotaurs arrived. She was their only hope to defeat them, and he wasn’t satisfied with the option she gave them to run. She’d fought them before, there had to be a way.

What he hadn’t expected to find was her swimming naked in the lake that fed into the irrigation ditches around the town. He

couldn't help but watch her as she relaxed back in the water and floated with her hair swimming around her.

He wished she was more comfortable around him. The few times she was in a proper dress he marveled at her beauty and her flawless form, but the next time he saw her, she was dressed like the Knight's Pages around the castle. She hid herself beneath men's clothing, all out of fear from something not even in this world.

It was wrong to watch her, hiding behind a tree like a thief about to steal, but he couldn't tear his eyes from her. Here he stood, the King, watching the naked girl swimming while his town prepared to be systematically wiped out.

Alric had to remind himself that she was an evil. He kept thinking she was going to come to their rescue and offer to help, but her current swim proved him wrong. Evils were out for themselves, period. They did what would benefit them, and no one else. He'd heard of evils that had a single loyalty, and would do whatever was in their power to defend and protect themselves and the one they were loyal to, but that was rare.

His guilt finally took over, and he tore his eyes away from her and returned to the castle to help with preparations. Scouts had informed them that morning that the Minotaurs were nearing Qualsax's land, and the destruction would begin. They weren't sure if the Minotaurs would hit Qualsax castle with full force, or if they would split their forces and move faster through the land.

When Kyrin arrived back at the castle, the Knights were gathered and preparing their weapons for a battle she knew they couldn't win. Alric was there too, and though his armor was shinier and in better shape than the Knights, it had obviously seen battle.

After picking an apple, Kyrin sat down to watch them get ready. Finn glanced at her often, and she knew he was expecting her to

come forward with some newly remembered knowledge on how to massively exterminate the Minotaurs, but there was none.

No one paid much attention to her as she finished the apple and tucked the core into her pocket. When she left, she hoped to find a remote dimension that she could plant the seeds and have her own apple orchard, as she'd grown quite fond of the sweet fruit.

One of the scouts rode up on his horse and dismounted quickly before Alric. The Knights gathered around, and a commotion sounded. She watched them carefully and finally figured out that the Minotaurs were closer to attacking than originally thought, and they were beginning to realize that they couldn't evacuate in time.

Finn looked once more at Kyrin, hoping she would have an idea, but she just watched them and leaned back against one of the apple trees.

She leaned forward when one of the Knights stepped back from the others. He looked more worried than the rest, and she got the impression that he was about to storm into battle alone.

Alric broke off from the others, and Kyrin listened in on the interaction.

"We're doing all we can, Xan," Alric said as he put his hand on the Knight's shoulder.

"My wife, Sir... she's having the baby today."

"I know, and I've sent the Priests to see if they can help her evacuate."

"She can't. Last time she almost died."

"We're trying, ok? The Priests know best how to help her to the Fortress."

“I didn’t want more children... but she begged...” The Knight was nervous and worried. Kyrin was still confused by Finn’s actions toward his pregnant wife, and couldn’t stop watching them.

“The Priests can help her. I promise you.”

“She doesn’t want to evacuate. She’s afraid if she moves too much it could hurt the baby. I tried to tell her that if she stays she’ll be dead, but she’s too concerned that the move will hurt the baby.”

“Would you feel better if I go see if I can get her to evacuate?” Alric asked.

Kyrin gasped at the offer.

“Sir...”

“I can get there and help the Priests evacuate her. I’ve delivered babies before and if she’s close, I can assist,” Alric said. “Sithias will guide us.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Xan said, and bowed deeply.

Alric called for Finn to take over, and then rode off into the city on his horse. Kyrin wanted to go watch, to see what Alric would do, but she had no desire to get closer to the Minotaurs that were coming in from the direction of the city.

[Chapter 9](#)

Kyrin continued to watch preparations, but her mind was far away in the city. She couldn't help but think about Alric's selfless act to save a pregnant woman. A new feeling emerged and she tried to push it aside, but it grew stronger. She started to panic when she realized that she had feelings for Alric, feelings that could get her punished by Daemionis.

When the sound of the battle horn rang out through the valley, the Knights rushed to their horses. The Minotaurs had been spotted by the outlook high on the mountain. Kyrin stood quickly, not sure why she was even contemplating going with them. This wasn't her fight and she fully planned on shifting out of Paragoy Dimension the second she saw a Minotaur.

She felt a panic when she realized that Alric was in the town alone, and the Knights weren't going to make it before the Minotaurs cleared the city streets. She didn't care about the townsfolk. They weren't her concern. The alarm she felt was for Alric.

Kyrin knew she could make better time with her boots of speed that Creteloc gave her. The horses had to stick to the winding roads leading into town, but she could go through the trees. Without another thought, she flew into the forest toward the town of Valhara.

The smell of the Minotaur hit her first, a familiar scent that brought terror into her. She ran harder. She had to get to him. He had no way to defend himself against that amount of Minotaurs, and she hoped her flail would aid him. When she hit the town, the people she passed were surprised at her speed and watched in shock as she headed for the crashing sounds coming from the front gate.

She knew Alric would be there. He wasn't smart enough to run. He would face them head on instead of leaving the townsfolk to fend for themselves like most Kings would have.

When she got there, the Minotaurs were already past the gates and flooding into the city. Alric stood alone before them with his sword drawn.

The front Minotaur walked forward and looked down on the small human. Alric stepped back defensively, and the fight between them began. The Minotaur was too big, and his natural defenses were too strong. Kyrin flew at them, and arrived just as Alric fell unconscious at the massive hooves of the Minotaur.

He had blood pouring from his head, and she couldn't tell if he was breathing. The Minotaur smelled deeply and crouched down, ready to devour the flesh of the King.

“No!” Kyrin screamed, and brought her hands together in a clap above her head. Red balls of light began to swirl around her, gaining speed and splitting rapidly until she was engulfed in their light. Hundreds of orbs whirled around her faster and faster as her anger grew.

The Minotaur stood up from Alric and watched her in horror as her black eyes met his.

“Nosfomora,” she whispered, and her hand shot out toward the lead Minotaur. Orbs began to fly off of her toward the now running enemies. Her other hand flew out toward the Minotaurs on her other side, and red orbs shot from it also, chasing down the Minotaurs and sending them to the ground in a lifeless heap.

She fell to her knees and lowered her head when the Minotaurs were dead. Such power drained her, and she was exhausted and afraid of what she'd just done. When she finally made it to her feet again, she leaned against a fencepost and then spun at the quiet sound behind her.

Her breath was knocked out of her when she saw that the Knights had arrived and seen her magic, along with almost every towns person. She took a step back when Finn met her eyes.

A crack of thunder sounded, and the gathered crowd began to rush backwards when Daemionis appeared behind her.

His scaled green skin was in harsh contrast to the bright light of day around him. His gaze sent terror into the hearts of Valharans as he took a step toward Kyrin. She looked up at him, and her eyes were pleading for him to help her. She'd broken the laws of magic in front of Knights, who devoted their lives to honoring the laws and enforcing them.

Daemionis reached down and picked up a Minotaur in his hand, and then grabbed Kyrin and they all disappeared with a flash of light.

Kyrin looked over when Creteloc walked into the caves, "Did you get it?"

"I told you I would," she said matter-of-factly. Creteloc held out a black leather vest, and Kyrin slipped into it.

"You said this is shadow elf made?"

"Yes, it won't impede your fighting, but will help if you are hit."

"Did Daemionis confirm that the Clemency Consortium doesn't know what I did in Paragoy?" Kyrin asked her.

Creteloc walked past her and began to stir a poison that bubbled in the fire, "They have no idea. Paragoy is not within their grasp yet."

“And Sithias?”

“Sithias contacted Daemionis to ensure you weren’t being punished for the use of magic.”

“Why does he care?”

“We aren’t sure, but believe that Sithias wants your power for his own.”

“Good luck, I’m not going back there.”

“Why is that, exactly?” Creteloc asked her. “You had food and water, shelter, yet you did as you wanted, and they were clueless as to your true nature. It seems to me like such a land, would be benefit you immensely.”

“You know why,” Kyrin whispered, and then sat down to re-pack her tiny bag.

“Ah yes, the King. I knew it would happen soon enough.”

“What?”

“You grew up, Kyrin. It’s natural to seek out a mate.”

Her nose wrinkled, “That’s not it.”

Creteloc smiled evilly, “Yes, it is. We’ve kept matters of the flesh from you, but you are a woman, and it’s raising its nasty head.”

“What do you mean?” Kyrin asked, watching her.

“It’s not my place to teach you.”

“Whose is it?”

“No ones. When Daemionis decides you can have a mate, he will let us know.”

“No!” Kyrin whispered. “He cannot make me marry.”

Creteloc began to fill vials with the bubbling purple liquid from the fire, “When the time comes, he will help you with that also. Daemionis won’t allow you to become the possession of another.”

“Well, he’ll have to find me first.”

“You’re leaving?”

“Yes, I’ve been here for six months, and I’m ready to go.”

“Wanderlust”

“I don’t have Wanderlust.”

“You do. It’s in your blood. Are you going to seek out Paragoy?”
Creteloc asked.

“No, and even if I wanted to, I don’t remember how I got there. I was running from the Shadowmere and have no idea the path of dimensions I took to get there.”

“I would still think you would try.”

“You seem pretty intent on getting me to live in a land full of the good.”

“Your corruption would be good for them.”

Kyrin laughed, “You want me to bring evil into their land! That’s your plan, isn’t it?”

“No land should be without it.”

“Thank you again, Creteloc,” Kyrin said as she adjusted her belt over the new black leather vest.

“The Clemency Consortium will be out there.”

“I know, and I’ve avoided them for this long. I’ll be ok.”

“I’d hate to see Daemionis’ magic user disappear.”

“I won’t.” With that, Kyrin walked out with her tiny bag her only possession and quickly left Paramide Dimension, landing directly in Kyrstalis. Creteloc had given her a cloak to help conceal her identity while she traveled through Kyrstalis to the dimension at its furthest west borders.

The stench of death and decay filled her senses the second she appeared in the cemetery. The dry grass crunched beneath her feet as she made her way quickly across the city. The Shadowmere would never stop looking for her, and she felt exposed and vulnerable on their home turf.

Too easily she found the portal and then breathed a sigh of relief when she walked through and appeared in the dimension with the river of death. She ignored the bodies floating along with the current as they reached out for her, teasing her to come help them.

She knew better. The first time she’d been in that dimension, she saw a Priest of Kynekke reach down to help one of the bodies. His eyes had grown wide and lifeless almost immediately. He was then pulled into the water and screamed soundlessly as he was pulled beneath the surface.

Skirting as far away from the water as possible, she walked quickly toward the dimension she wanted. She knew the dimension connections within four dimensions from each direction off of Kyrstalis. After that it was all unknown, and she headed out to see if she could find safety away from the Consortium’s vigilant eye.

Chapter 10

Kyrin crouched down underneath the low bridge. The bridge rumbled with the footsteps of the Shadowmere Apprehension Crew as they marched toward the east. She'd barely managed to jump into the murky, slime covered water and ducked under the bridge when she saw them coming.

The crew was getting bigger, and she felt the fear return when she realized that it would be harder to get away from them, the larger they grew. When the last of them crossed the bridge, she peeked out from behind the reeds and watched them disappear over the horizon.

Careful not to make a sound, Kyrin crawled out of the slippery water on the opposite shore and then sat on the dead grass to remove the leeches from her skin. The slimy creatures were hard to grasp, but she managed to get all of them off. Leaving one attached to your skin could cause fever and hallucinations, so she was meticulous about removing them.

Chapter 11

The roar of laughter filled the inn, and Kyrin glanced over from the dark corner to watch them. She had killed one of the Shadowmere that had coins on him, and she took the opportunity to get some food and water at the busy inn.

The patrons were growing restless as the elven wine was passed around, but she refrained. She didn't need her reflexes dulled when the Shadowmere could be anywhere around her.

She tore off a piece of the stale bread and dipped it into the thick, partially rotten stew she was eating. She gagged it down, not sure when she would be able to eat again. She couldn't afford extra food and water, but hoped to find a dimension soon with something in it to drink.

Her mouth watered at the thought of the juicy apples that would be sitting, untouched, in the Valharan orchard. Eating the last of the stew, she looked around again and caught sight of one of the wenches sitting beside a ranger. They were kissing passionately, and his hands were roaming all over her as their lips pressed against each other.

Kyrin touched her lips softly, and had to admit she missed the soft kiss Alric gave her when trying to gain her trust. She'd been thinking more about him lately as loneliness set in. She missed his company and how he was amused at her actions and words.

It didn't matter. She'd been gone from Paragoy for a year, and she knew that by now, Alric would have written her off as dead and more than likely had a wife to keep him amused. She would always remember his kindness and selflessness though, and she thought of it often at night before falling to sleep under foreign stars.

Kyrin reached down and unwound the bandages from her hand. She had a run-in with one of the Dieb Consortiums, and though she'd won, he managed to get a good dagger cut off on her hand. The wound was inflamed and smelled bad, so she knew there was an infection forming.

Picking up the wine one of the patrons had given her, she dumped a small bit over the wound, hoping to kill off the gangrene that was

surely to set in. She winded it again with the same bandage, and then stood slowly and adjusted the hood to cover her face.

Chapter 12

She cut his throat and then peered into the dark around her as his deathly gurgles filled the streets. It was dangerous work killing one of the Clemency Consortiums, but he recognized her and was going to return her to Kyrstalis for a trial.

The streets were empty because of the late hour, so the fight had luckily gone unnoticed. She immediately began going through his things. After pocketing what little coins he had on him, she pulled his backpack from beside him and wondered at how light it was. She assumed it had to be empty, so she threw it over her back and then ran off into the night.

Two dimensions away she finally felt comfortable enough to stop and rest. She was covered in sweat, and her mind kept returning to the warm baths she got in Paragoy. Four months ago she decided to find it again. She knew Alric wouldn't be happy to see her. She'd used magic in his Kingdom. With its food and water plentiful though, she figured she could stay in the mountains and never be seen by those from Valhara.

Her hope was to see him once in a while to make sure he was ok. When she had an established place to sleep, she could stay there indefinitely and live off of the plentiful land.

Kyrin sat down beside a dying bush and pulled her new backpack from her back. She opened it to put her things inside, but found it already full. As she pulled heavy items out of the pack, it didn't lighten in weight, and she laid each item out on the ground beside her.

Once empty, she looked over the items and realized that the backpack had to be enchanted. She smiled. It was a weightless backpack, and now it was hers. His items were useless, so she left them on the ground and filled the backpack with her few belongings.

When she grabbed the silver chain with the green amulet that she had pulled off of a Qualsax Warrior she'd just killed, she ran her fingers over it. He had been an easy kill, already wounded, but the amulet bore the emblem of the Qualsax, and she studied it. Her mind wandered back to Alric, and she wondered if he'd survived the Minotaur attack, and if he was even still alive.

From the sounds of it, Qualsax was also under Minotaur attack, so there was a chance they were wiped out. She hoped her magic had spared Valhara so Alric could be taken to the temple and healed. Figuring the amulet wasn't going to whisk her away to Paragoy, she put it in the backpack and then started off across the mostly desert dimension.

Chapter 13

There was nothing in this dimension but sand. Everywhere she looked was sand and wind blowing sand. A dust storm was

heading her way, but she saw no way to get away from it. As she lifted her shirt away from her chest to tap out the sand, she saw the portal key and smiled.

“It’s about time,” she mumbled, and picked up the small locket.

She was glad to see no sand in this dimension. As the door shut behind her, she glanced down at what used to be a stream. It was now dry and the dirt beneath was cracked. As she looked around at the dead trees, she remembered being there before. She’d been to so many dimensions though. She wasn’t sure when she’d been here.

Wondering if she could find life, she began to follow the dry streambed as the suns rose above her. Heat from the day was getting worse, and she was completely out of water since the night before. She hoped by following the streambed, she could find some type of water, but so far nothing had appeared.

A small clearing emerged and she looked down at the dry, cracked outline of a ‘D’ drawn into the dirt. It was starting to come back to her, and her heart raced. She was in the dimension that led her to Paragoy over 2 ½ years ago. She’d been away for two years and had been actively searching for it for almost nine months.

Her feet moved faster as she ran along the dry stream, across the field of dead weeds. She hoped she could find the portal again. Portal keys came and went, and it could take years waiting to find one you had previously seen.

Trying to retrace her steps from memory, she ran through the tall weeds and across the dry streambed, toward the dead trees that were home to the portal to Paragoy. When she reached the trees, she looked around carefully, praying to Daemionis to help her find the key.

She found the spot of the portal, because there were the bones of a Shadowmere beside it. She knew that Waymen would require a

death because of her escape, and this man had been it. With nothing else to do but wait for a key to appear, she began going through the Shadowmere's things.

He'd been picked clean. The Shadowmere weren't loyal enough to leave the dead alone, so they had already taken anything of value off of him.

When the moons began to rise over the trees, she leaned back against the armor of the Shadowmere to wait out the night. She was afraid to sleep, afraid she might miss the key if it appeared.

Chapter 14

She was weak with hunger as night fell on the fifteenth day waiting for a portal key into Paragoy. The skeleton beside her was her only company, and her only source of food. Twice in the last two weeks a small rodent had scurried to the bones to check for one tiny morsel of food, and both had become her dinner.

This dimension had rain every few nights, just enough to keep her from dying of thirst. It was more like a mist, but she'd managed to gather enough to keep herself alive. However, there wasn't enough to stop the burning in her throat or to stop her cracked lips from bleeding.

She was starting to lose hope, and knew that waiting this long in a dimension was asking for the Shadowmere Consortium to find her. She heard them come by once, but they didn't recognize the

dimension and passed by her without noticing her tiny form hidden beneath the rotted logs of a fallen tree.

Kyrin twirled her flail in her hand, trying to stop the boredom that threatened to drive her insane. She'd piled the dead Shadowmere's armor into a heap and leaned back against it to settle in for the night when a ring caught her eye. The ring shone bright in the moonlight and her heart raced.

The second she touched it, the portal opened and beyond it, she saw the mountains of Valhara. Not waiting to make sure the way was clear, she ran through and then fell against the leaf-covered ground and looked behind her to see the portal close.

It was an autumn day in Paragoy, and the cool air felt good against her burned skin. Sitting with little shelter waiting for the portal had exposed her to the suns of that dimension, and her face and hands were burned and blistered.

Adjusting her pack, she climbed down the sheer face of the cliff and ran over to what Alric had called the Borianana ruins. There was no snow this time of year, so she scanned around her and found a stream flowing quickly down beside the ruins. It was deep enough her entire head was submerged as she plunged it into the cold water and drank deeply.

When she sat up, she looked around the ruins. The last time she was there, she was unconscious when she was carried into Valhara, but she was sure she could find it given the time.

Footsteps approaching startled her and she quickly disappeared into the shadows beneath rubble from the ruins.

Two Knights came into view, and they stopped to rest at the small stream. She watched them, knowing they would lead her back into the city where she hoped to catch sight of Alric or find if he was even alive.

“Think we’ll ever stop this?” one of them asked as he removed his helm and splashed cold water across his face.

“No, he’s never going to stop looking for her,” the other answered.

“Well I’m getting tired of scouring the mountains looking for a long-lost girl.”

Kyrin managed to maneuver a little closer as they spoke.

“I’m not. She saved Valhara from the Minotaurs.”

“Yeah, well she saved Qualsax too.”

“So!? We didn’t have a single death that day because of her. Sure he wants to find her. He owes her a great debt, and he’s afraid her deity killed her for helping us.”

“She is an evil though.”

“Again, doesn’t matter.”

“Yes it does. She’s not only an evil, but a powerful magic user. If she can take out over 300 Minotaurs, then she can kill off every Valharan within a day’s travel of the castle.”

“Welp,” he said, standing up. “We’d better find her or we’ll be searching all of the lands for the rest of our lives.”

Once they were gone, Kyrin moved out of the rubble and brushed herself off. She began to follow behind them, hoping they would eventually lead her into the town. She was shocked to learn that Alric was looking for her, even after two years. It was great to hear that he’d survived the skirmish, and she looked forward to seeing him.

A sudden thought made her freeze though. What if they had mistaken Alric’s search for her? What if he actually was searching for a criminal that he wished to kill as an evil? The Knights didn’t

speak of her again, or of their mission, but she followed far behind them making sure she wasn't seen.

It was three days later when they reached the outskirts of Valhara and Kyrin disappeared into the orchard. The first thing she did was pick an apple and sink her teeth into the sweet flesh of it. She watched carefully around her as she filled up on apples, and slowly made her way to the castle at the end of the orchard.

She didn't run into anyone else in the trees, and as she neared the castle, the sun began to set behind the mountains. Everything seemed just as she'd left it. Four Knights stood at the door though, as opposed to two from before.

Kyrin sat back and watched, studying the Knight rotation and paths, trying to find a way into the castle. She needed to confront Alric alone. If his intention was to capture her for her use of magic, she had to be able to get away fast. She had the poisons to do it, but it wouldn't work if the castle was alerted.

As midnight approached, the Knights readied to lower the portcullis and block the doors to the castle. It was when they were preparing that she found her chance. Aided by her boots of speed, she flew past them and disappeared underneath the stairs where the maids kept cleaning supplies.

She fought to calm her breathing as she heard the thud of the portcullis lowered into place. Once the portcullis was closed, the Knights made one more round through the halls and then only a scant few were left for the night.

When it was safe to ascend the stairs, she ran up them and didn't stop until she reached out to open his bedroom door. She stiffened though, and wondered if she would find him alone.

She'd paid more attention to relationships since she left Paramide, and she'd learned a lot. Before, she paid no attention to when a

man and woman were together, and she still had a lot of questions, but she did realize that they normally slept in the same bed.

Deciding she had to know, she slowly opened his door and stepped into the king's bedroom. She shut the door silently behind her and then walked up to the bed. When her eyes adjusted, she saw it was empty and perfectly made. A sound in the hallway made her spin, and she quickly crawled under the bed.

Two sets of feet entered, and all she could tell was the color of their boots. They were moving around the bedroom, and she started to wonder if there was a problem, but finally Alric spoke.

“Sithias was right. We have to stop it immediately.”

“How though?” Trox asked. “They know we’re honor bound and use that against us.”

“We’ll find a way. First, they brought down the Minotaurs, and now they are trying to cause a rift between Valhara and the elves.”

“It’s too bad Kyrin scared the Minotaurs badly enough they all went back to the mountains. It would be nice to be rid of Qualsax all together.”

“We’re not that lucky. I’m tired of sharing borders with such an uncivilized group of humans.”

Alric sat down on the bed, and Kyrin found herself squished and trapped by the bed.

“We just have to be persistent,” Alric told him. “They will mess up eventually and will get what’s coming to them.”

“Good night, my Lord,” Trox said, and then left, shutting the door behind him.

When Alric stood up to get dressed, she was able to slip out from under his bed and behind a couch sitting under the window. Alric

changed out of his clothes and slid into bed in only a nightshirt. She debated when to appear, and finally decided she wanted to wait until he was asleep, so she could watch him sleep. Kyrin wanted to make sure he was ok, and that nothing seemed amiss.

His breathing softened finally and fell into the rhythmic pattern of sleep. She slid out from behind the couch and stood silently. The moon fell across his bed, and she watched him. He hadn't changed at all. She shut her eyes and inhaled, savoring in the smell of him that she remembered.

Kyrin couldn't wait any longer to talk to him. She pulled her flail out from its place on her side, just in case, and sat down beside him in bed.

Alric's eyes flew open and he sat up and jumped to his feet, ready to fight whoever was in his room. When he saw her, he froze, unable to move. He wondered if he was in a dream, or if he had died and Sithias had granted him one last view of her before taking him to paradise.

"Kyrin?" he whispered softly.

She nodded, "It's... good to see you again, Alric."

He turned and lit the lantern, lighting up the room before turning back to her. He half expected her to be gone in the light, but she was still sitting on his bed with her flail lying across her lap.

"My god, Kyrin," he said, and moved to her quickly. He pulled her off the bed and wrapped his arms around her, "I've been so worried about you."

Even though she'd dreamed about being near him, she tensed and backed out of his arms, "I'm ok."

He looked her over, "You have injuries."

“How are you?”

He smiled, “Thanks you to, I’m good. In fact, thanks to you, Valhara is still standing.”

She nodded and looked out his window, “Nothing has changed.”

“Where have you been? I’ve looked everywhere for you.”

“Daemionis took me to his home, and then I’ve just been wandering.”

“You mean running,” he said softly.

“Maybe”

“When did you decide to come back?”

“About 10 months ago.”

“What took you so long?”

She turned toward him and leaned back against the windowsill, “Are you afraid I’ll use magic on you?”

“No”

“You aren’t afraid of me at all?”

He took a step toward her, “No. If you wanted to hurt me, you had plenty of chances. I just wonder why you kept it from me.”

“In my world, magic is illegal.”

“Why?”

“Magic pulls forces against nature and was deemed evil.”

“Well, that’s true... but here it’s not illegal, just forgotten.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

“I’m just glad you came back. I asked Sithias about you, and he thought you probably wouldn’t return.”

“I wasn’t going to, but…”

“But what?” he asked, and then took the risk and gently laced her hand in his.

“When I left, I wasn’t sure if you were alive, or if you were hunting me down for using magic.”

“You know me better than that. I told you that magic isn’t illegal here.”

“People lie,” she told him, looking into his eyes.

He smiled, “Mostly you.”

She laughed, “True.”

“Are you going to stay?”

“I haven’t decided yet. I guess I’ll see how things go.”

His smile turned to a grin, and he stepped closer to her.

“What?” she asked, tensing. He took her other hand in his and held them at her sides.

“I’ve waited too long.”

“For what?”

He answered her with a soft kiss. She tried to move, but he held her hands tightly, making sure she couldn’t get them together. Even though she’d longed for the feel of his lips again, she started to panic when the flutter in her stomach started.

The kiss turned more passionate as he leaned against her, pressing her body into the window at her back. He wanted to reach up and hold her head in his hands, but knew he was safer with her hands at her sides.

Finally, he pulled back and smiled at her, "I still didn't hurt you."

She knew she was now sporting a deep blush, and wasn't sure what to say. Her mind pulled the only thing she could think of, "I'd better be off then."

"Where are you going?"

"I was going to stay at Boriana ruins."

"Why?"

"I'm not indentured to you anymore."

"So? Stay here with me."

"I'm an evil. You don't think that would cause problems?"

"No, I don't. I'm the King, and if I want evil in my castle, then no one can say anything about it."

"I didn't come here to ask for my room back."

"Why did you come back?" he asked, tightening his grip when she tried to get her hands loose.

"I just... wanted to see you."

"Well you've seen me. Stay here. In the morning, we can talk."

She looked toward the door, "Is my room empty?"

"No, it's not. Stay here in my room with me," he said, and moved back toward the bed as he pulled her gently.

“In here?”

“Yes”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not?” he asked, sitting down on the bed. She finally pulled her hands free and looked around the room.

“I guess I could sleep by the fire.”

“On the floor?”

She nodded and then sat down on a bearskin rug in front of the dead fireplace, “This is fine.”

“You know... I can behave.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning you can share the bed, and I won’t try anything.”

Irritated that she wasn’t sure what he meant, she slipped her flail into her belt and laid down on the rug, facing him.

He laid on the bed and rolled onto his side to face her, “Swear to me, you’ll be here in the morning.”

She smiled, “You’d trust that?”

“No, I guess not.”

“Good night, Alric.”

He nodded and watched her until she fell asleep.

Kyrin woke up, at first unsure where she was. She saw Alric's bedroom though and then looked around, but he wasn't there. She glanced at her arm and saw that the infected wound was healed, and her sunburn was gone.

She got to her feet slowly and noticed some clean clothes sitting beside the large bathing tub, which was full of warm water and bubbles.

Kyrin stripped quickly and sunk into the water. She'd dreamed of the feel of water, but had begun to believe she wouldn't feel it again. As she washed the soot and grime from her body, she kept a close eye out in case someone came in.

She was pleasantly surprised that the clothes were pants and a tunic, and she slipped them on and brushed her hair before tying it up. A knock startled her, and she grabbed her flail and moved back by the window.

“What?” she asked.

“Breakfast, my Lady.”

“Ok”

A servant came in with a smile and put a plate of bacon and eggs on the table along with fresh fruit and hot sweet rolls with mounds of honey butter. Another came with a pitcher of water and then both bowed and left.

Kyrin was starving, so she sat down and immediately dug into the food. It was so hot it burned her mouth, but she kept shoveling it in. Just before wiping her hands on her shirt, she smiled and then washed her hands in the bath water instead.

Once finished, she started out of the room with her backpack to see if she could find Alric. Two Knights were waiting outside of her door, and she frowned, “Am I being detained?”

“No, my Lady,” one of them said, smiling. “Lord Alric just wanted to make sure you had what you needed.”

“So you aren’t here to make sure I don’t kill the King?”

“Well we’d prefer if you don’t, but that’s not why we’re here.”

“Oh, well... where is Alric?”

“He’s gone into town for a few hours.”

“Where’s Finn?” she asked, starting down the stairs. She wanted to go pick more apples and fill her pack with them, in case she needed to make a hasty exit.

“Ma’am?”

“What?”

“He’s... well... Captain Finn died.”

She frowned and looked at him, “He did?”

“Yes, my Lady. He died last year.”

“How?”

“Qualsax Warrior attack.”

She had the sudden urge to go pay a visit to Qualsax, but planned on doing that later to get the revenge that Alric and Trox had spoken of the night before.

“So it’s true, you are back,” Trox said from the bottom of the stairs.

“For now,” she said, watching him. She still got the impression he didn’t like her.

“If you’re going to stay, we should make amends.”

“Why? Is there a law that if I stay for a while, we have to get along?”

He seemed amused by that, “No, I guess not. However, Lord Alric made it clear that you are a priority of his and as such, it would behoove us to at least try to get along.”

“Did she tell you where she has been?” Sithias asked, floating a few feet above Alric.

“She said Daemionis took her to his home, and then she just wandered.”

“It is time you know.”

“Know what, my Lord?”

“This world... my world, is known as Paragoy. There are many such worlds, each with their own gods and their own people and histories. A select few can travel between these worlds, and Kyrin is one of those.”

“Why didn’t she tell me this?” He actually wondered why Sithias hadn’t told him any of this before.

“There’s an unspoken rule among the Dimension Shifters that they aren’t to interfere when a dimension knows no other and believes theirs is all there is to the universe.”

“So when she’s gone, she’s where I cannot find her?”

“Yes”

“My Lord, when I spent two years trying to find her, why didn’t you tell me?”

Sithias smiled softly, “Would you have stopped? Or would you have continued, this time trying to find someone to show you how to leave this world?”

Alric sighed. He knew his god was right.

“I’m just surprised that she returned. She must feel some loyalty to you.”

“How do you know?”

“She’s an evil. Evils do only what is good for them, unless they feel loyalty to another.”

“She seems less nervous than the last time.”

“She may have grown up a lot in the last two years. Watch her and learn.”

“And the magic?”

“Encourage it.”

“Really?” Alric was shocked.

Sithias nodded, “It’s a rare and splendid ability. From what I saw, she’s a powerful magic user, and that power should be used and encouraged to flourish.”

“But magic is born of evil.”

“A common misconception, but one bathed in the truth. Watch her closely and see what she does with it.”

“If she starts to use it for evil, I don’t know what I would do.”

“We will deal with it at that time. It’s not a matter of if, but when. Evils are drawn to rage, and it’s hard to control that.”

He nodded, “I’ll watch her. What of her god?”

“I’m sure he knows she’s here. I’m sure he also knows you love her and will watch you closely too.”

Alric smiled slightly, “That obvious, is it?”

“It is hard to hide your heart from me.”

“What’s in her heart?”

“I’m not sure she can love yet,” Sithias said. “Only Daemionis can see into her heart and know how she feels. Any attraction is dangerous though, so I bid you to keep your eyes out and never take her for granted. Never treat her as anything other than an evil.”

“How do I do that?”

“By limiting your trust in her goodness. She may not possess any.”

“I will, my Lord.”

“You see the good in all, but that may make you blind to her true nature.”

Alric looked up and saw that Sithias was gone. He said a quiet prayer of thanks and then walked out into the temple.

“Is it true?” Dewell asked, walking up to the King.

“That Kyrin is back? Yes.”

“Is she well?”

“She had injuries, but they were small and I took care of them.”

“May we see her?”

He smiled, “I’ll think about it. She’s an evil. We know that now, a magic using evil... and Dewell?”

“Yes, my Lord?”

“I apologize for doubting what you saw. You tried to tell me that she knew magic, and I didn’t believe you.”

The Priest nodded, “It’s ok, my Lord. I realize how crazy it sounded at the time.”

“Until I find out what her intentions are and what her true nature is, I want the Priests to stay away from her.”

“Understood, Sire.” Dewell smiled broadly.

“What?”

“It’s good to have you back, Sir.”

“What do you mean?”

Dewell simply bowed and returned inside to the temple. Alric mounted his stallion and rode quickly to the castle. He was anxious to learn if Kyrin had stayed, and he wanted to talk to her again.

He met her on the road between the castle and Valhara. He stopped the horse and smiled down at her, “Going somewhere?”

She shrugged, “Not sure really.”

“Were you coming back?”

“I haven’t decided.”

He sighed, “Where would you go?”

“I don’t know.”

“Would you leave this world?”

She looked up at him, squinting at the glare from the sun, “You know?”

“Yes”

“I really don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“Start off by coming up here,” he said, and put his hand down for her.

She thought about it and then took his hand and swung onto the horse in front of him. He kicked the horse, heading away from the city and into the trees.

“Where are we going?” she asked after a few minutes of silence.

“I don’t know either. You seem to like to take off randomly, so that’s what we’re doing.”

She could feel him against her back and wasn’t sure what to make of the feelings she had, “Thank you, by the way.”

“For what?”

“For fixing my sunburn and the wound on my arm.”

“That was pretty bad, you know? You could have lost your hand.”

“Why did you look for me?” Kyrin asked him.

“You saved my life, and the life of my Kingdom.”

“So you wanted to thank me?”

“Mostly”

“What else?”

“I was afraid that Daemionis would hurt you.”

She felt like he was leaving something out, but decided not to press the issue, “No more problems with the Minotaurs?”

“Are you kidding? They’re scared to death to come out of the mountains again.”

Kyrin grinned and looked around the strange part of the forest.

“Now, let’s talk about you staying here.”

“I’ve never stayed in one place for long.”

“Well maybe it’s time to stop running.”

“What makes you think I’m running still?”

Alric laughed, “You are!”

“I’ll never stop running.”

“Are you afraid they will find you here?”

“They will, eventually. When they do then I’ll take off again.”

“Or you could prepare us and let the Knights do away with them.”

“Can’t happen. Running is my only option.”

Kyrin gasped when she felt Alric’s lips run softly up her neck.

“Please don’t do that,” she whispered.

“Why not?” Alric asked, brushing her hair away from her neck.

“It’s…”

“I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I’m not afraid you are.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

When Alric lightly flicked her ear lobe with his tongue, she shut her eyes and shivered, “ Please...”

He sat up, “Fine, if you can tell me why.”

“Because I don’t like it.”

“Yes you do,” he said, grinning.

Kyrin huffed slightly, but didn’t answer.

“You’ve grown up over the last two years and I suspect you aren’t as naïve about things as you were.”

“What makes you say that?”

“You didn’t try to kill me when I kissed you last night.”

“You had my hands.”

He chuckled and wrapped a hand around her waist.

“What do you want, Alric?” she asked, not looking back at him.

“That’s an oddly non-specific kind of question.”

“I mean what do you want me to do? Do you want me to stay and marry you? Do you want me to stay and find a home in the city? Do you...”

He cut off her words when he kissed her neck again lightly, “I don’t know what I want yet, but whatever it is has you in it.”

“How oddly non-specific.”

Alric's hand tightened around her waist and pulled her closer against him, "I want you to move into the Lady's chamber in the castle. I want you to be comfortable around me and let me treat you like you should be treated."

"Such as?"

"Such as... let me pamper you once in a while. Leave the flail behind..." His voice dropped to a whisper, "Let me love you."

Her stomach tightened, "No."

"Is love so bad?"

"Yes, it is."

"I thought we were over the selling you part and the wedding myths."

"You don't love me."

"Yes I do, and I suspect you love me too."

"I don't..."

"Yes, you do," he whispered into her ear. "You came back here to see me because you missed me. You came back afraid I wouldn't be looking for you because you don't have faith in me."

She frowned, "That's not true."

"I'm going to prove to you that love isn't something scary."

She just shrugged.

"You might like it."

"Love?"

"Yes"

“What part? The fights? The breaking up part? What about losing a loved one to death? Then with love comes disgusting and vile acts.”

He chuckled, “Do you even know what those acts are?”

“No, I don’t, and I don’t want to know.”

“You might like those too.”

“I doubt it.”

Alric stopped his horse at the edge of the lake, “Let’s go swimming.”

Kyryn nodded. She thought anything would be better than the direction this discussion was going. Once she dismounted, she walked over to the edge of the lake and looked along the crystal-clear water. She heard movement behind her and she turned just as Alric undressed and walked over.

“Ready?” he asked as he slowly walked into the water.

She’d only seen one other naked man, and was shocked to see another. Kyryn avoided looking at him and focused in on a tree off to the side of the lake.

“Kyryn, come in,” he said, laughing.

“I changed my mind. I’ll wait back at the horse.”

“Afraid to come in because I’m naked?”

She turned and her eyes narrowed, “No.”

“Then get in.”

Not to be outdone by a man, Kyryn quickly stripped and then dove into the water, coming up beside him, “There.”

“See, nothing in here will hurt you either.”

She swam out away from him and then sighed when she heard him follow her, “You’re running.”

“No I’m not, I’m swimming.”

Alric took her hand and pulled her up next to him, again trapping her hands at her sides. He reached out and gently began to kiss her.

The kiss was too intimate in the water and Kyrin immediately began to panic. She tried to pull away from him, to break the skin-to-skin contact, but he held her close and lightly ran his tongue along her lips.

“Calm down, I’m not going to hurt you,” he said softly as he looked into her eyes.

“Let me go, please.”

“No, I don’t want you to attack me.”

“Then stop attacking me,” she said almost breathlessly.

“Fair enough,” he replied, grinning. He let her hands go and swam out toward the middle of the lake.

Kyrin followed him, “Are you going to hold my hands every time you kiss me?”

“For a while, yes.”

“Why?”

“I don’t need turned into an ogre.”

She laughed, “I don’t have a spell for that.”

“I’m sure you can think of something.” Alric stopped and began to tread water.

She swam up close to him, “So you’re afraid of me is what you’re saying.”

“No, but you’re afraid of me, and I won’t endanger myself because of it.”

“I’m not afraid of you.”

“Yes you are. You’re afraid of men, of intimate contact, and of getting close to anyone... and I embody all of those.”

Without another word, she lunged at him and pressed her lips to his. He started to move back, but she wrapped her hand around to the back of his neck and gently reached her tongue out to touch his. She’d seen that a lot lately and had wanted to try it. The result was electric and she instinctively pulled her body closer to his.

He reacted strongly and pressed against her with a hand at her lower back. She finally pulled back and looked him in the eye, “See, I’m not afraid of you.”

“I stand corrected then,” he whispered.

She moved away from him, not sure where to go from there, and then crawled out of the water and slipped on her clothes. Alric chose to watch her before climbing out and getting dressed himself.

He wondered where this was going. He had to pay attention and stop things when they got too far. He wasn’t ready to teach her these things quite yet. Alric also had to be careful and watch his feelings for her. They were growing too strong, and she wasn’t yet able to handle it.

Once on the horse, they started for the castle, “So now that we’ve proven you aren’t afraid of me. I want you to stay in the castle in the Lady’s chamber.”

“Why? I liked my other room.”

“Because then you’re closer to me.”

“Why don’t I just sleep on your floor then?”

“Because I want you to get used to a bed, and I doubt you’re ready to share mine.”

“Then what? I’m not the Lady of the Kingdom, nor will I ever be. What do I do all day?”

“We’ll think of something. As long as I know you’re safe and not wandering other worlds, I’ll be happy with that for now.”

“I’m not agreeing to stay for long, but I’ll stay there for a little while.”

“Just please, don’t take off without telling me.”

“So I have to be accountable to you?”

“Not at all. Just as a common courtesy I ask that you not disappear.”

It was quiet for a few minutes before Kyrin spoke again, “I heard that the Qualsax got Finn.”

“Yes, they did. He was on a mission of mercy, bringing aid to a sick village when he was ambushed.”

Her eyes narrowed, “When was that?”

“About a year ago.” Alric wondered at the sudden silence, and then it dawned on him, “It’s not your responsibility to avenge him.”

She shrugged.

“Kyrim, no,” he said sternly. “I realize your upbringing dictates your actions and that your first instinct is to kill those who killed him, but we handled it already.”

“I don’t mind.”

“I know, and that scares me.”

“It does?”

“Yes. How you kill without penitence scares me. I can’t imagine killing even an enemy without feeling some sort of loss or some regret for my actions.”

“If I kill them, then they deserved it. Why feel regret for that?”

“Because of a conscience.”

“Maybe I don’t have one.”

“It’s in there somewhere. I just have to find it.”

“Where are Finn’s wife and kids?”

“Emerisa has family in Tenesia. She’s gone to live there.”

“By choice or did you kick her out when her husband died?”

“Stop trying to make me out to be a tyrant!”

“You do realize I can walk alone,” Kyrin said as they walked hand-in-hand toward the east.

“I know that. Maybe I wanted to walk with you,” Alric told her.

“You’re just afraid I’m going to shift out of here.”

“So can you just do that?”

“Sort of. I have to have a portal key.”

“Where do you get that?” Alric asked.

Kyrin looked around the area and then pointed to the skeleton of a mouse, “That’s one.”

“That dead mouse?”

“Yes”

“How do you know?”

“I just know. If I pick it up, then a doorway will appear that I can walk through.”

“Let me see,” he said, reaching down for the mouse.

She grinned and watched him pick it up, and then turn and look around. The portal was off to his left, but she knew he couldn’t see it.

“You were teasing,” he said, looking over at her.

“No I wasn’t. The portal is right beside you, but only shifters can see it.”

He shook his head, “I thought you were done lying to me.”

“It’s the truth.”

“Then go through it.”

“I don’t want to. I don’t know where that portal goes, and it can take years to get back.”

“Oh, then don’t go.” Alric tossed the mouse off to the side, and they continued toward the sunset.

It was silent as they walked, each deep in their own thoughts. When they neared the edge of the forest, a dirt road appeared and Alric turned to her, “Will you show me something magic?”

“Like what?” Kyrin asked.

“I don’t know, anything.”

She looked around, “I don’t see anything to kill.”

“Don’t you have something other than offensive spells?”

“I have a shield, but you won’t be able to see it unless you throw something at me.”

“If you have a magical shield, why do you keep getting injured?”

“It doesn’t work for sharp steel.”

“So what good is it?”

“Well, it’s good for blocking arrows, and I guess if I ever meet another magic user it would help block incoming spells too.”

“Have you ever met another?”

“No”

He reached down and took her hand when they started back. In the four weeks back in Paragoy, she’d grown more comfortable with

him, and he was learning to trust her more. She hadn't overused her abilities, in fact, he was finding it difficult to see any magic at all from her.

"Fine, cast the shield and let me toss something at you," Alric said finally.

"No"

"Why not?"

"I don't want you throwing things at me."

"But your shield will block them."

She looked over at him curiously, "Why are you so interested to see magic?"

"It's fascinating."

"Is it that or does Sithias want to see it?"

"I think he'd be interested."

"I'll tell you what. Next time I go sacrifice, you can come with me."

Alric stopped walking and frowned, "You do that here?"

"Of course."

"People?"

She smiled, "No."

"Are you lying to me or do you really stick with animals?"

"Don't worry, I won't sacrifice you next," she said, laughing.

“That’s not what I’m worried about.” It was starting to get dark and her talking about sacrifices was making him nervous. Since they found the altar with the heart years ago, everyone was afraid there was a necromancer around.

He ran to catch up with her and saw that she was still grinning.

“I love when I scare you,” she said, looking out into the dark.

“You don’t scare me.”

“Fine, I love when my ways scare you.”

“Which is…” A loud crack of electricity shook the ground and they both spun suddenly and came face to face with Daemionis.

Alric let go of Kyrin’s hand and drew his sword, but Daemionis was looking at Kyrin, “The Nosata have one of my Priests.”

She gasped, “Which one?”

“One you do not know. Retrieve him for me.”

She nodded, “I’ll leave immediately.”

“Wait!” Alric yelled, and both turned to him, “Is the Nosata one of the Consortiums?”

“Yes, they are the undead,” Kyrin explained.

“And you’re going after them alone?”

“Yes”

Daemionis walked slowly around Alric.

“I’m not ok with that. You said it can be years to get back to a dimension and you just got here.”

“I know now how to find the portal though. It’ll be faster this time.”

“If you return! You can’t take on a Consortium alone!”

“Yes she can,” Daemionis said. He then turned to Kyrin, “Return him to me in Paramide.”

“Yes, my Lord,” she said, bowing deeply. He disappeared, and she turned and ran for the castle.

“Stop!” Alric shouted, running after her. “You can’t do this.”

She ignored him and ran up the stairs to her room in the castle, where she began throwing things into the enchanted backpack.

“Kyrin,” Alric said, taking her arm. “Don’t go.”

She looked at him, “Would you turn down such a request from Sithias?”

“Sithias wouldn’t send me alone into the hands of a Consortium.”

“He knows I can do it. I know the Consortiums better than anyone.”

“You’ll be outnumbered... what? 100 to 1?”

“Or 800 to 1 with the Nosata, they’re not very big.”

“Stay here, please. Sithias can protect you.”

“I have to go and get him, Alric. No one else can...”

“Send Creteloc. This sounds like a job for an Assassin.”

She ignored that and started for the door, but he stopped her, “I could keep you here.”

“No you can’t and you know it.”

“Then take Knights with you.”

She sighed, “I don’t need the added stress of watching over your Knights on my mission.”

“Not to babysit! They can help you.”

“I’ll be back, ok? Trust me. Daemionis wouldn’t send me if he didn’t think I could do it.”

“Yes he would. He would send you for sheer entertainment.”

“He trusts me. No one else has been held captive by each of the Consortiums but me. I know their compound layouts. I know their ways and their...”

“Do you not see how dangerous this is? You just admitted to being a prisoner to each of them, and you’re running in to save one of Daemionis’ Priests alone?”

“I’ll be back,” she said, and he followed her out of the castle. She began looking around, trying to find a portal key to get out of Paragoy. When she didn’t find one, she started across the orchard, picking an apple to eat on the way. She had a sudden thought and opened her backpack, then filled it full of apples while Alric fumed.

“You said you’d trust me,” Alric said, starting to panic when she began looking for another portal.

“I do, and you need to trust me. I have a god and I have to follow his will.”

“Not into your death!”

She reached down and grabbed something off of the ground that he didn’t even see.

“What?” he asked, following her gaze into the trees.

“It’s my portal. I’ll be back as soon as I can,” she said, and then started through it.

When half of her disappeared, Alric realized she was serious and pulled her back through, then kissed her softly.

“I’ll be back,” she said again, and then disappeared.

Chapter 15

Kyrin waited outside of the compound for a way inside. She’d been tracking the Nosata for almost a month and had finally found one that was careless enough to lead her to his compound. She knew that Daemionis’ Priest was in there, and she was determined to get him back and return to Paragoy to prove to Alric that she was capable.

As she watched, she saw that the Nosata had wight’s guarding their boundaries and revenants walking around. Both animated corpses posed a great problem to a fighting magic user. They were able to drain the power she had to pull from to cast magic.

There had to be another way in. The Nosata weren’t the smartest of the Consortiums, but they were smarter than the Shadowmere. Necromancers started the Consortium but were killed off when the Clemency Consortium outlawed magic. Now it was being run by worshipers of the dead, a type of necromancer that used their deity instead of magic to animate corpses into the undead.

The Nosata compound had water on three sides of it, but Kyrin figured they would have draugen hiding in the water itself. She'd much rather have to fight off wights or revenants than the draugen. She studied them to see if any spells came to mind. That's how she usually found spells. They seemed to pop into her mind when the need for them arose.

Nothing was happening though, and it would be dark soon, putting her at a disadvantage. She was glad that the other Consortiums tended to stay away from the Nosata because of their tendencies toward evil. That meant she had little chance of running into the Shadowmere tonight.

The only idea to get inside easily wasn't a pleasant one. She'd done the spell before, and it made her appear dead. It ceased the heart and lungs, while still maintaining the body for some time. The problem was, to keep the body alive it required a type of stasis, so while under the spell, she wouldn't be aware and would be unable to defend herself if there was a problem.

She suddenly had another idea and ran back into Kyrstalis. The first house she came to belonged to an elderly man and woman living out their lives in peace. They weren't aligned with a Consortium, so they were ignored by most of them, unless they did something illegal.

Kyrin studied them as they got ready for bed. This wouldn't be hard. Killing the elderly was easy compared to some of the fights she'd had. She first had to make sure that there was no one else in the house. After a few hours, she was sure of it, and she quietly slipped into the house through an open window.

When under the cover of the house, Kyrin chanted softly, and slowly began to transform into the old man, then tucked her flail onto her side. She had both of them dead in seconds, and pulled on the old man's clothes. She then picked up the old woman, using a levitation spell, and started to carry her to the Nosata.

A lot of the people of Kyrstalis thought the Nosata had the ability to bring back the dead. As such, anyone brave enough to walk up to the compound, would then ask for a loved one to be brought back. Kyrin had seen it many times, and knew that the Nosata always offered to bring the loved one back, and invited them inside. After that, she didn't know what happened to them, but none of them had ever stepped foot outside again.

When she was within sight of the Nosata compound, she slowed her gait and slumped, so as to appear old. The revenants and wights ignored her. They were there to find trouble, not to deter someone from handing themselves over to the Nosata.

“What do you want?” A tall man asked. He wore the black torn robes that were customary with the Nosata, and he smelled of death.

“Please, my wife... my love is dead,” Kyrin said, faking a deep voice as best as she could. “Can you help her? I can pay...”

“You can pay?” the Nosata asked, looking down at the frail old man and his dead wife.

“Yes, I can pay 10 platinum if you can bring her back. Please... help us...”

The Nosata smiled, “For 10 platinum? I guess I can do that. Let's bring her inside and see what we can do.”

Kyrin nodded and then swallowed hard before walking voluntarily into the compound of a Consortium. Just inside, a heavy stone door was shut behind her, and she followed the Nosata down dark passageways. Screams pierced the building and there always seemed to be someone running through the hallways.

“In here,” he said, pointing to an empty room. Kyrin walked in and then jerked when the door slammed behind her. She was now in the custody of the Nosata.

She dropped the woman to the floor of the cell and then counteracted the spell that made her look like the old man. She listened carefully and heard rustling from all around her.

Kyrin whispered toward the doorway in the language of the shadow elf. The rustling stopped, and the area grew eerily silent.

She knew the best way to stand apart from the Nosata was to speak in shadow elf. They swore that the language of the dead was orc, and refused to learn the shadow elf language. When no one answered her question about a stolen Priest, she sat down to think through the rest of her plan.

Footsteps broke the silence, and Kyrin sprang to her feet and moved back to the wall when the door opened.

“The old man is in here,” one of the Nosata said, and then looked inside. His eyes went from the dead woman to the cloaked figure in the corner, “Who are you!?”

Kyrin stood tall, “I’m a representative of Daemionis, and I’ve come to retrieve the Priest that you took.”

The Nosata snarled, “See how Daemionis likes the Nosata having two of his minions!”

She knew the compound rather well, and with the Priest not in the prison block he had to be down below in the torture chambers. She saw only two Nosata at her door, and quickly killed both of them with electrical bolts from her hands.

She ran out of the prison block and hid in shadows, working her way along the hallway to the lower dungeons. When the alarm sounded, she knew the dead Nosata had been found though, and her way became blocked with angry men looking for her.

Her heart almost stopped when a wight appeared in the hallway. The Nosata were getting smarter. He turned dead eyes directly to

her, and she ran, hoping to find a lucky break out of there. She felt the pull of the wight as she ran, and knew if she didn't do something fast she wasn't going to have the energy to cast a spell.

She tossed fireballs over her back blindly, hoping to catch the wight, but something slammed into the back of her neck, and she collapsed onto the floor.

When Kyrin started to come around, she felt her arms were trapped straight out to her sides, and her head was pounding. She felt weak and knew that the wight had drained her of energy.

She struggled to open her eyes and saw she was standing in a long room, up against the wall. A bar had been slid through the sleeves of her tunic and held her hands out to her sides, with no chance of getting them together.

She pulled against the metal cuffs holding her to the wall, but there was no give. Off to the left side of her was a smaller woman hanging by her wrists and probably dead. To her right was a decayed corpse that had once been shackled to the wall, but as his body rotted, the weight of it pulled his hands away from his body, and it had slumped to the floor in a congealed mass, leaving the grotesque hands to hang from the shackles.

Cages stood along the floor down the right side, and in them were prisoners in various stages of rest. Across from them were the rack tables, and in one was a dark-skinned elf with white hair and a jagged scar down the side of his neck. His clothes were torn off and tossed beside the table, but she saw the distinct mark of Daemionis on them.

Kyrin pulled at her sleeves, but the metal bars wouldn't bend. It was irritating how they used her own tunic to keep her hands apart so she couldn't use magic. She looked down and saw her flail was no longer at her side, which didn't surprise her. She just hoped she could get it back.

She whispered softly into the air, asking in shadow elf if the Priest on the table was alive. He nodded slightly, but was obviously in a great deal of pain.

“I’ll get you out of here,” she whispered again.

“You? Young one?” one of the prisoners in the cage said. “They’ve already sent for the Clemency Consortium to come and get you. It’s going to pay off some huge debt they owe.”

She sighed and again tried to pull her hands away. If she could get the tunic to tear, it would drop her arms, but the tailors in Valhara were very good, and she couldn’t get them to rip even a little.

“When did they contact Clemency?” she asked.

“Not long ago, then they complained that Clemency can’t come and get you until morning.”

“Good, I’ll be gone by then,” she said.

“Every Consortium is looking for you.”

“How do you know that?”

“Your picture, my Dear. It’s posted on every street corner. The Shadowmere and Clemency have joined forces to find you, and the reward is great.”

“I bet the Nosata will love that.”

“Except they don’t know what they have. They told the Clemency that you are merely a young magic user that needs punished. They do not know you are the much-sought after Kyrin.”

She nodded and looked around, to see if she could find a way out of this mess.

They all looked up when the doorway at the end of the room opened. A Nosata entered and headed straight for Kyrin, “You, magic user. It’s your turn.”

“For what?” she asked, trying not to sound afraid.

“You need punished for killing one of the Nosata,” he said, and roughly pulled her from the wall. He slipped the bar out of her tunic, but held her wrists tightly so she couldn’t get her hands together.

Thinking quickly, she kicked off from the wall and slammed her knee into the side of his head. He fell forward and crashed into one of the empty cages, sending it in pieces to the ground.

Kyrin jumped onto him and pressed her foot onto his neck as she kicked the side of his head to keep him down. When he fell silent, she ran to the Priest and began untying him, “We have to get out of here.”

Just when she got his first hand free, a punch flew in from the side and connected with her jaw, sending blood flowing from her mouth and onto the Priest. She spun, and the Nosata blocked all of her hits and dodged each attack, but managed to hit her a few times. The last punch was squarely to her stomach, and she doubled over in pain. He slammed his elbow into the middle of her back and sent her onto the floor, now at the mercy of the Nosata again.

When a bucket of water was poured over her, she woke up with a gasp and shook the water from her face. Her limbs were all pulled away from her and tied to horses that faced away from her in all four directions. She was surprised to see horses, but their hollow eyes, sunken faces, and decaying skin let her know they were undead also, probably stolen from another dimension.

“Prisoner, it is the decision of Ryder, our most holy leader of the Nosata, that you are to be drawn and quartered in punishment for the killing of two of the Nosata.”

He gave the signal for the horse’s riders to move forward, and she screamed in pain at the feel of her limbs being torn from her body. She finally managed to shout, “The Clemency will be mad at this!”

“Pull back,” he said, moving the horses back a bit. Kyrin did a quick assessment and found that her left arm was dislocated but the rest of her limbs were fully attached, albeit in pain.

“Why would the Clemency care that we kill a magic user?” one of the Nosata asked.

“Because I’m Kyrin...”

Just the name brought a murmur through the Nosata and one of them knelt down to study her, “It’s hard to tell with the look of her face.”

She knew she must look completely different. One eye was swollen shut, and she felt her jaw might be broken. Her lips were puffed and bloody, and her mouth was filled with the taste of it.

“It could be,” the Nosata said, studying her.

“If it is her, we cannot harm her, or they will punish us.”

“She could be lying though.”

“Only if she’s stupid. Why would she prefer to go to the Clemency Consortium?”

Kyrin tried not to groan in pain. She didn’t want to give the Nosata the satisfaction to know they’d already injured her badly enough it was hard to concentrate.

“Let her go then. If she wants to meet the Clemency Consortium so badly, we’ll let them know.”

It was more than she could hope for. In their haste to turn her over to the Clemency Consortium, they untied both of her hands at the same time.

With her left arm useless at her side, she swung onto her left side and brought her right hand to the left. The second they connected, she yelled, “Vasieth!”

Lighting shot out from her hands and killed each of the Nosata and their horses. The loud thud from the fall of the horses made her nervous that others had heard, so she quickly untied her feet and then ran back into the compound, in search of the dungeons.

She stopped long enough to put a magic shield around herself, hoping it might stop the energy draining of the wights. Her legs hurt with every step, and she was finding it harder and harder to move quickly.

The stairs down into the dungeon were daunting and when she emerged, the prisoner in the cage gasped, “You’re alive!”

Kyrin moved as fast as she could and untied the Priest from the table. The shadow elf stood slowly and gathered his robes before the two of them set off. She used his experience as an Assassin to guide them from shadow to shadow.

Only twice did she have to destroy more Nosata, and each time she grew weaker. She was able to pry her flail from the hands of one of the dead, and the weight of it in her hand was somewhat comforting. Her left arm hung uselessly at her side as they crouched low and looked toward the front gates of the Nosata’s compound. The wights and revenants were still there, and en masse.

“Can you get us past them?” she whispered.

He shook his head, “Undead see through my advantages.”

“Ok, here’s the plan. I’m going to distract them with a split image and see if I can get them to run off. We need to make it to the other side of Kyrstalis. The portal for Paramide is in the cemetery, and we just pray to Daemionis that there’s a portal key there.”

He nodded, “If you die on this mission... I will sacrifice for you.”

She smiled and then shut her eyes and began to chant. When her soul split it caused some pain, and her image flickered weakly above the water. Seeing that the undead hadn’t noticed the figure, the Priest began throwing tiny pebbles into the water to draw their attentions.

The hiss of the wight let them know her image had been seen. When the undead began to lurch toward the water’s edge, Kyrin and the Priest took off. She couldn’t use her boots of speed, or she would leave the Priest behind, but he spotted the perfect hiding spot, and she was able to break the spell and reattach her soul just as one of the undead had reached it.

There were screams of anger from the revenants when her image disappeared.

The Priest nodded to Kyrin and she moved behind him, careful to step only where he stepped and to pay attention to his every move, a trick Creteloc had taught her. The Assassin was good, and he even had time to poison one of the Dieb Consortium before they made their way to the cemetery.

Kyrin’s pain was becoming worse, and she was bathed in sweat.

“Is there a key?” he asked, glancing around a tomb in the cemetery.

She nodded, “If you can grab it, I’ll lead you into the portal. It’s that stick lying up against the wall.”

He nodded when he saw it and then made a break for it.

“Hey!” someone shouted when he ran across the cemetery. Kyrin saw two of the Clemency heading toward him, so she stood and mustered the energy to hit each with a ball of fire before she grabbed the Priest by the collar and hauled him through the portal.

Once on the other side, she collapsed and fell unconscious. When she regained consciousness, it was dark in Paramide and no one was around. The Priest had left her at the portal, as soon as he was back in his own dimension. Lucky not to have been killed by stray Assassins, she sat up and tried to nurse her wounds, so she could get back to Paragoy.

When she tried to pull her left arm back into the socket, the pain was unbearable, and she started to black out. Deciding to just leave it for now, she tied it to her side with a strip of rope she kept in her backpack.

Kyrin sat down and ate a few apples, which helped her feel better immediately. The pain in her jaw to eat was only tolerated because of the intense hunger she felt. Her right arm seemed fine, but her legs were wobbly and lacking strength. She had a long way to go and still had to make it through Kyrstalis before she came even close to Paragoy.

She'd been gone for just over five weeks, but already missed it. Or missed him, she thought. Glancing in a mirror she stole off of a dead gnome in the plane of sun, she looked over her face. She was right about the damage, and was sure her nose and jaw were both broken.

Kyrin looked around with her one good eye and then steadied herself on the portal before slipping back into Kyrstalis. The Clemency Consortium had given up on finding her, and the cemetery was empty and quiet.

She hobbled across the city, sticking to the back streets, and was completely focused on returning to Alric. She no longer thought of the food or the water in Paragoy, but wanted to feel his arms and see his face.

It took extra time to get to the dimension outside of Paragoy because both legs were still causing pain to shoot into her back, and the slightest movement jostled her injured arm. Even though it was tied tightly to her side, it sent pain up through her chest.

Kyrin fell through the portal and into Paragoy. The high mountain portal was now surrounded in snow, and the wind was blowing mercilessly. As she looked down onto the Boriana ruins, her heart sunk. She wasn't sure how to crawl down there with only one arm and her legs in so much pain.

She decided her best bet was to freeze her injured limbs in the snow and then try to make it down the cliff without falling. The snow actually felt good against her dislocated shoulder, and once she'd numbed her arm and legs, she inched down on to the first foothold.

The pain intensified, but she was committed now and couldn't get back up if she wanted to. Down was her only option, and she held on for dear life with her one good hand, hoping not to fall the rest of the way.

Kyrin wasn't sure how far down she was, but she couldn't take much more.

"I got you," someone said, and she felt strong arms pull her off of the wall and gently lay her down on the snow. She looked up into the face of one of the Knights of Valhara.

"We have to get her to the Priests," another said as he wrapped a blanket around her.

"The horses will be the most painful, but the fastest."

“Horse,” she groaned, and then leaned her head against the shoulder of the Knight that picked her up. The sway of the horse made her entire body hurt, and she held onto the Knight as she asked Daemionis why he didn’t help her.

The Knight stopped quickly outside of the temple and Saith met him, “We have Kyrin.”

Saith nodded and motioned him forward. The Knight laid Kyrin down on the table and Saith immediately began summoning the blessings to heal her. He frowned when the wounds didn’t heal, and then he called for more of the Priests.

By the time Alric arrived, the Priests were frantically trying to figure out why they couldn’t heal her. She was no longer moaning in pain because the warmth of the room and being able to lie down on the table was already helping.

“What’s wrong?” Alric asked, looking over her wounds.

“We cannot heal her,” Saith told him.

“Sithias?” Alric asked toward the back of the temple. When the god didn’t answer, Alric turned to the Priests, “Can you still help her?”

“Yes, but it will take time.”

“Do what you can. I’ll go find out why Sithias is refusing these blessings.”

Alric stepped into the back of the temple and dropped his sword by the door. He hit his knees and fought to calm his voice, “Sithias, why aren’t you helping her?”

Sithias appeared and looked down at him, “She was injured doing the deeds of a demon. He has forsaken her after this dangerous mission, and I cannot intervene.”

“What do you mean he’s forsaken her?”

“It’s common for the evils. Once she saved the Priest, she collapsed at the portal, and he left her there to die and returned to his god. Daemionis didn’t even come to her aid, even though she sustained the injuries on a mission to retrieve his Priest.”

“Why does he have followers?” Alric asked, confused.

“Fear. I cannot step in when a god has forsaken their own. She will heal with time, and it may help clear her mind about the god she follows,” Sithias told him.

“Can you block him from entering Paragoy?”

“Not while she is here.”

Alric sprang to his feet when Kyrin’s screams pierced through the quiet temple. Sithias excused him and he ran out, “What happened!?”

Saith was bandaging a wound on her wrist, “We had to re-set her shoulder. It’s been long enough the swelling got in the way and made it more painful.”

“Is there anything we cannot fix?”

“If we cannot fix it, then it will eventually fix itself.”

“I told you I’d be back,” Kyrin said from the table.

Alric touched her arm lightly, “I’d prefer if you would return in one piece.”

“Thank you for the Knights.”

“I figured you’d come back there.”

“Drink this,” one of the Priests told her. He held out a vial and put it to her lips, but she turned away.

“No”

“What is it?” Alric asked.

“It will help the pain and make her sleep.”

“Take it, Kyrin.”

“No,” she said again. Kyrin knew better than to take a potion from someone she didn’t trust. Just because Alric trusted the Priests, she didn’t.

“Why won’t you take it?” Alric asked, kneeling down to her level.

She just shook her head.

He sighed, “We’re going to move you to a bed here in the temple ok?”

“Floor”

“I want you to try a bed.”

She nodded and then Alric picked her up gently and laid her down in one of the back rooms. The fire was roaring, and he watched as her eyes slowly slid shut.

Kyrin sat up suddenly when she felt she was being watched. Her shoulder screamed at the movement, but she instinctively reached for her flail anyway. The day after her return to Paragoy she had

been moved back to the castle, and into the Lady's quarters. She was on day 9 of her recovery and was feeling stronger each day.

“Good morning,” Alric said from beside her bed in the Lady's chamber. “Are you going to attack?”

She yawned and then shook her head, “What are you doing in here?”

“I came to see if you were going to get up today.”

She looked over at the window and saw that the sun was high in the sky, “That's why I hate beds!”

“Because you sleep well in them?”

“It's hard to defend yourself or know if you're being watched if you're too deep asleep.”

“You're too jumpy. As a Holy Knight, I'm always on guard, but my body needs rest to heal, so I allow that. I still have a reaction time if attacked.”

“You lose too much time waking up.”

“A second, at best.”

“That's all it'd take.”

“How's the shoulder?”

“Not too bad.”

Alric looked over her and sighed. She still had signs of the fight with the Nosata, and though it didn't bother her, the injuries infuriated him.

He sat back and watched as she slowly got out of bed. He learned quickly that she didn't accept help unless it was vitally necessary.

She sat down on the bed, facing him, “It seems to me, you want to talk about something. I’m thinking you want to start that training again.”

“No, I decided you don’t need to learn how to be proper. You’re fine the way you are.”

She frowned slightly, “But I don’t fit in.”

“Do you want to?”

“Not really. You seemed to want me to though.”

“I did, but then it dawned on me that there’s no reason you should conform to the norms of Paragoy.”

“So what is it you want to talk about?”

“Daemionis”

Her eyebrows rose, “Ok.”

“His Priest abandoned you the second you rescued him.”

“So?”

“Don’t you think after almost dying saving him, that he could at least help you?”

“Why should he?”

“Common courtesy.”

“Yeah, not a strong suit of Daemionis’ followers.”

“Then why didn’t Daemionis help you?”

“I suspect he was mad that I was that injured.”

“It wasn’t your fault!”

“Yes, it was. I messed up with my execution of getting into the Nosata’s compound. I’m sure he knows that and figured I didn’t deserve help.”

“That’s stupid! As your god he should have helped you. You’d just saved his Priest, and it shouldn’t matter how.”

She sighed, “Daemionis isn’t like that.”

“Then why follow him? Gods protect their followers and offer them rewards for loyalty. Yours punishes for no reason and often neglects you.”

“Of course he does! It makes us stronger.”

“Why follow him? What benefit does he have?”

She thought about her answer, trying to decide what she could tell him and what would make Daemionis mad. She finally decided to explain most of it, “When I escaped from the Shadowmere, I was 11-years-old.”

“Right”

“I didn’t even know what a dimension was when I first shifted. What I did know was that I’d escaped out of where the Consortiums were though, and into a dark place full of sounds and shadows. I’ll admit it. I was terrified.”

“Of course you were! You were on your own at 11.”

“I was on my own at 6, if we’re going to be honest.”

“True, go on.”

“I was a fighter by then, but had no idea how to survive out on my own. So I did something stupid and fell asleep...”

“That’s not stupid. That's necessary.”

“Creteloc found me.”

“You’re lucky.”

Kyryn smiled, “She decided that I was too pretty to kill herself, and decided to offer me up to Daemionis as a sacrifice instead.”

“Or not...”

“He scared me to death, and my first instinct was to cast at him. So I did. The sacrifice stopped immediately, and I was given some food and turned over to Creteloc to be trained. Daemionis realized how ignorant I was to the ways of the land, and knew I wouldn’t make it without help.”

“So he kept you alive because of your magic.”

“Yes. Creteloc took me in and taught me the ways of Daemionis, and he offered my life in exchange for devotion. After a year, I set out again with the knowledge Creteloc gave me and the power of Daemionis behind me.”

“He’s using you.”

“Daemionis uses everyone.”

“But why follow him now? You don’t need his help.”

“He’s my god, what more reason do I need?”

“You need to find one more suitable for you. Your god shouldn’t send you on impossible missions alone. You can’t tell me he doesn’t have some Assassin or rogue running around that could have helped you.”

“I didn’t need help.”

“From the looks of your injuries, you could have.”

“It’s my fault. I got in the situation to be drawn and quartered though.”

“No it’s not! Your god is using you for your abilities, and he’s going to kill you doing such.”

She stiffened, “I’m not going to sit here and let you bash Daemionis!”

He put his hands out, “Calm down, I’ll stop. I just worry that you may be needlessly in pain.”

“I don’t mind pain, and I will do whatever he asks me to.”

“I know, and I’ll drop it.”

Kyrin leaned back against the headboard, “So no more training at all?”

“Nope, none.”

“We’ll see.”

“Do you want it?”

“No”

“You just don’t want to dress like a woman.”

Alric stood suddenly and looked out the window when the mountain’s battle alarm went off.

“You get attacked a lot,” Kyrin said from the bed.

“Crows”

“You’re getting attacked by a bird?”

“Millions of them,” he said, and ran out of the room.

“I’m not wiping out a million birds,” Kyrin mumbled to herself before getting up to look out the window. The entire eastern sky was completely black. What looked like a cloud was moving toward them, “Damn, that’s a lot of angry birds.”

“Kyrin!” one of the Knights called out.

She slowly walked to the door and peeked out, “What?”

“We’re on battle alert.”

“For birds?”

“Erianah’s birds.”

She shrugged, “Ok, well, have fun.”

“You aren’t going to fight?” he asked, frowning.

“Why would I?”

“Valhara is under attack!”

“By birds,” she reminded him.

“Millions of war birds.”

She looked at her window, “My window’s shut. I’m good.”

He shook his head and ran down the stairs.

“Wait! Who’s Erianah?” she called after him, but he was already gone.

Kyrin went back to the window and looked out. The crows were getting closer and had forced the nearby mountains into shadow. She started to get leery when she saw the size of the coming cloud, so figured it’d be best to at least be ready to fight.

It was hard to get her clothes on with one arm, but she finally managed and then slipped the sling on over her black leather vest. Once her flail was tucked in at her side, she started to tie her hair back, but heard a loud thud against the window.

She jerked and looked at the window and saw birds slamming into it, “What in god’s name...”

A wolf howling stopped her curiosity, and she turned and ran for the door when another answered. She took the stairs two at a time and appeared out in front of the castle where the Knights had gathered. They had their swords drawn and were looking up at the sky as millions of black crows swirled above them.

“They’re coming in from the north!” someone shouted, and Kyrin looked toward the northern mountains. A solid army of gray wolves was walking toward them. Their hackles were raised, and they were snarling.

Kyrin ran toward them, but Alric grabbed her arm, “No! You can’t fight those alone.”

“They aren’t here to fight me,” she said, and then pulled free.

“Don’t go over there!”

She ignored him and ran at the wolves. Once at them, the front wolf lowered his chest to the grassy ground and then stood up. She nodded and then turned and walked back to the shocked Valharans as the wolves followed behind her.

“Who is Erianah?” Kyrin asked Alric.

He kept a close eye on the wolves, “She’s the god of the Qualsax.”

“She sent the crows?”

“Yes”

“For what?”

He glanced at her before looking back at the wolves, “Because we’re harboring the follower of an evil demon not of this world.”

Kyrin looked up at the crows, “So they came for me.”

“More like they came to punish us for having you here.”

“It has to be more or Daemionis wouldn’t have sent support.”

“He sent the wolves?”

“Yes,” she said, and walked forward a bit. The wolves kept close to her and carefully watched the Valharans.

“Erianah!” Kyrin yelled toward the sky, “I suggest you back off.”

One of the crows dove at her, and Alric stepped back when it stopped suddenly mid-air and fell to the ground, dead. The space in air it had stopped glowed blue for a moment and then disappeared.

“You can’t get through my shield, so I suggest you get your ugly ass down here and face me yourself,” Kyrin yelled.

Alric winced. The people of Paragoy weren’t used to challenging a god.

Laughing sounded and the crows dove to the ground and began to form a tall figure. Kyrin took a step back and watched as the goddess Erianah emerged and looked down on her. She was an imposing figure, standing 8-foot tall with broad shoulders and short, spiked red hair that flowed, as if blowing in an imaginary wind. Her armor was made of black feathers, and her eyes were pure white.

She turned away from Kyrin and faced Alric, “Why have you allowed an evil into my world without my permission?”

“We don’t need your permission for anything,” Alric yelled toward her.

“Evil has been gone from this land for centuries... yet you bring one here and don’t even consult me?”

“Again, I owe you nothing.”

“Did you know that she is an evil?”

“Yes”

“Yet you allow her to live with you? What do you gain by that?”

“Nothing, she’s done nothing to warrant expulsion.”

Erianah smiled, and her teeth dripped with thick, green saliva, “You love her.”

“Leave him alone,” Kyrin yelled. “If you have a problem with me, then I suggest you turn around and face me.”

Erianah spun and glared at Kyrin, “How dare an evil talk to me like that! This is my world, and you are not to be in it.”

“Oh, you going to kick me out?” As soon as she said it, the wolves began to advance.

The goddess began to laugh, “Daemionis sent dogs? How quaint.”

Thunder cracked and Kyrin bowed when Daemionis appeared, towering behind her, “Erianah.”

“You do not belong here! This is my world,” she roared.

“If you want me to leave, then you have to make me.”

Alric called for his troops to run. He’d heard of the ancient god wars and knew they were unpredictable and highly violent. The

Valharans ran for their houses for essentials, and then were heading to the safety of Fortress Orphang.

Alric ran up and took Kyrin's arm, "Let's go. This will get nasty."

"I can't just leave."

"Let the gods handle this."

"Do not fight on my ground," Sithias said angrily, appearing beside them.

Alric turned when he heard his god speak, and stopped pulling at Kyrin's arm as he froze.

"Sithias, you allowed this evil to invade our land?"

He floated forward but kept away from the other two gods, "I did."

"What gives you the right!?"

"It's not his choice what my followers do," Daemionis yelled.

Sithias was calm and spoke evenly, "She has done nothing that would banish her from this land. I am studying her."

"You're what!?"

Erianah snarled, "You had no right, Sithias."

"You're just mad because she stays with Valhara and protected them against the Minotaurs."

"She didn't protect your puny Valharans! She protected that insignificant King of theirs."

"Back off, Erianah. Kyrin is staying here as long as she likes."

Erianah looked at Kyrin closely, "What does she have that you two want?"

The wolves advanced on Erianah, so she turned and held her hand out to them. Angry crows flew from under her feather robe and began to attack the wolves as they howled in pain and tore any bird they caught to shreds.

“Take your quarrels out of here!” Sithias yelled.

Daemionis stomped his hooved foot, and the ground began to shake and crack beneath Erianah. His growls echoed off of the mountains, and Erianah turned to him and looked up toward the sky.

He looked up just as the crows appeared and began to barrel down at him. He swung his massive, scaly hands at them, and they began to fall to the ground with dull thuds and small puffs of feathers.

“We have to get out of here,” Alric said, pulling Kyrin again. “We can’t stay here during a god fight.”

“I can’t leave...”

Without another word, he picked her up, tossed her over his shoulder and ran toward his horse. She didn’t struggle badly, and soon he had her on the horse and mounted behind her. With a swift kick, he sent the stallion flying toward the mountains near Boriana ruins as lightning shot down from the cloudless sky.

Hail began just as they got to Boriana ruins and Alric stopped his horse, and they ran into one of the fallen rooms that still had part of a roof. The horse was fidgety as they sat down to wait out the storm.

“Some storm,” Kyrin said, looking out at the fist-sized hail that started to fall. They were glad that the hail that started while they were on horseback was much smaller than what it was now.

“God fight,” Alric said, and smiled slightly. “We’ve had this issue before.”

“Erianah and Sithias fight often?”

“Not really any more. There was a big fight when it was decided to get rid of all evil from the land though. We hid for almost a year before things calmed down.”

“Wow. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Daemionis fight another god.”

“I’m sure he has. It’s pretty dangerous to stay there during it though.”

The entire ground shook, and they grabbed onto rubble and held on until it stopped. When it did, fierce winds started and dirt flew past them.

“How far are we from Fortress Ophang?”

“Too far to make it. We’ll have to stay here.”

“I can’t believe this entire thing is over me.”

Alric smiled slightly, “This is nothing. If Erianah knew you were a magic user, it would be a thousand times worse.”

“Why does she care?”

“It’s dead here, remember? We didn’t necessarily want it gone. When the evils were removed from the land though, magic went with them. We’ve tried to get it back, but haven’t managed so much as a spark.”

Kyrin thought about that for a bit, “What do you mean when the evils were removed?”

“About a hundred years ago there were four kingdoms here; Valhara, Qualsax, Minathim, and Aloria. In short, Valhara had the

Holy Knights, followers of Sithias. Qualsax held the darker types, unruly fighters and such, but they weren't exactly evil. Qualsax follows Erianah."

Alric paused when they both had to duck to avoid a flying branch that the wind flung at them. When it was clear, he continued, "Minathim was home to the elves, what you called Royal Elves, and they are good aligned also and follow Sithias. Then, there was Aloria, home to the black elves. They were evil, pure evil, and magic users. They followed Tiasis."

She cringed, "Has he joined the fight now too?"

"No, he's dead. His followers were all that was keeping our lands from being mostly peaceful. The gods fought a lot and most of that was started by Tiasis. When it was decided to get rid of evil, then, for the first time ever, Sithias and Erianah joined forces and killed him. We took care of the black elves and, sadly, with them went magic."

Kyrin shifted uncomfortably. Creteloc was affiliated with the shadow elves in Paramide and most of Daemionis' followers were shadow elves.

"Since then there's only been bickering between Sithias and Erianah... caused by her."

Kyrin smiled, "Of course."

"It was thought that once Tiasis and his black elves were gone, evil wouldn't return."

"Then I came along."

"Well, yes, but Sithias found you intriguing and was determined to learn more about you. It wasn't until he saw you single-handedly wipe out the Minotaurs that he knew how powerful you are though.

He told me that if you were to return, you would be welcomed back.”

“Why though? I’m an evil…”

“We need your magic.”

“For what?”

“Nothing specific,” Alric told her. “It’s just something this land is lacking and something prized.”

“Well if Erianah doesn’t like me, she must absolutely love having Daemionis here.”

Alric laughed, “Oh yes. I would imagine so.”

“I can’t do Sithias’ bidding though. I won’t use my magic to further his followers or to help him.”

“I’m sure he knows that.”

“I hope he wasn’t expecting Daemionis to help him get rid of Erianah.”

“There’s no way he would team up with Daemionis.”

An explosion sounded in the distance, and both of them peeked around a high pile of rubble just in time to see the top blow off of a volcano and a thick plume of smoke barreled out of it, turning the sky black.

“This went on for how long?”

“11 ½ very long months. This won’t be as long though.”

“You’re sure?”

“No, but I suspect Erianah will back down to the two other gods.”

“If not, you may not have a dimension left.”

“Well then it’s a good thing I’m with you.”

“How long have you been king?” Kyrin asked.

Alric looked up and shook his head when snow started falling from the volcanic ash, “Fifteen years.”

“You’re old enough to be king for that long?”

“I was 20 when my Dad died, and I took over.”

“So you were handed the Kingdom.”

“I wouldn’t say handed to me.”

She smiled, “You’re offended?”

“Well you make it sound like I didn’t deserve it.”

“Didn’t mean to.”

When thunder crashed above them, Kyrin looked past the roof to the sky, “You do realize that just because I come into Paragoy here, it’s not a portal out.”

“It’s not?”

“Nope”

“You don’t see some... I don’t know... rabbit testicles or something that’d get us out of this?”

“Rabbit testicles?”

“Well I don’t know what you use.”

She grinned at him and then shook her head, “No, I don’t see any portals around here.”

“We don’t have any food here.”

“I have apples in my bag.”

“What’s with you and apples?”

“They’re perfect. Full of water and they’re so good.”

“I never thought of that.”

“You’ve never starved.”

“True”

Kyrin sat back, “So your Dad died, and you became king at the age of 20.”

“Basically”

“What am I missing?”

“The post was between me and my brother.”

“Did you fight to the death for the position?”

“You need to get a life. No, we didn’t fight to the death. He died with my Dad.”

“At least you made king.”

“You have an odd view on things.”

She shrugged.

“Anyway, yes I was young, but I was ready. My brother and I were raised from birth to be kings.”

“Sounds like fun. Why aren’t you married?”

His eyebrows rose, “Is that odd?”

“Yes, at 35 and with your money, I’d think you would have a lot of wives already.”

“Well I never found anyone interesting enough to marry.”

“Just Genessa.”

“That was different. She and I had only met briefly before she moved in.”

“If there are only three groups of people left, then how did you meet her?”

“There are three kingdoms, but there are some little outlying villages and such. Her Dad wanted to incorporate their village into Valhara’s Kingdom. During talks, I met her.”

“Want to tell me why you banished her?” Kyrin asked.

“No, I don’t.”

“Why not?”

Alric just smiled, “No.”

Another rumble shook the Borianna ruins, and Alric jumped for his horse while Kyrin held onto what was standing of an old doorway. When it stopped, he tied the horse up and walked back to sit down beside her. She was pulling an apple out of her pack and cut it in quarters, then handed him one piece of it.

“I don’t rank a full apple?”

“We’re rationing.”

He ate the quarter in one bite and then watched as she ate hers more slowly. Alric watched her and wondered how often she’d been out of food and water. He could only imagine what hardships

she's been through, and he wondered if she'd realize that in Paragoy, she had enough of both.

After eating her part, she tucked the apple core into her pack.

“What are you doing with the cores? I've seen you put a hundred of those into your bag in the past.”

“I've planted them in my favorite dimensions.”

“Is there enough water to grow them?”

“Probably not.”

When the ground shook again, Kyrin put her backpack beside her, grabbed the flail in her good hand, and then laid down, using a rock as a pillow.

Alric sighed, “Great.”

“It's not that bad.”

“How long have you had to sleep on the ground?”

“I've always slept on the ground.”

“Never had a bed?”

“Not until now. Lay down and get comfy.”

He groaned when he laid down and then shifted to try and get comfortable, “Is it possible?”

“Sure”

Kyrin drifted off quickly, but Alric tossed and turned all night. Just before dusk, he sprang to his feet when balls of fire began to fall around them from the sky.

“Kyrin, get up,” he said as he moved the horse further into the ruins.

She looked up and then gasped and scrambled further away from the exposed part of the castle. The flaming balls landed around them stirring up the dust. Some of them hit the rubble hard enough that another wall caved in at the opposite end of the ruins.

“I was hoping they’d be done,” Kyrin said, looking through her bag.

Alric dodged just as a flaming ball flew at him and barely missed hitting him in the leg. He crawled backwards, trying to get further away from it.

“Come here,” Kyrin said, pulling him back.

He leaned up against the rock wall, still shaking from how close he came to losing a leg. He was confused when Kyrin slipped between his legs and leaned back against him.

“Jilavanu,” she whispered, and the sounds around them died down some.

Alric looked carefully, but couldn’t tell what she did, “What was that?”

“Magic shield. I’m hoping it’ll stop those fireballs.”

“I’m worried about my people at Fortress Ophang,” he said, relaxing some under the shield.

“I’m worried about us.”

“How much damage can your shield take?”

“I don’t know. It’s different strengths each time.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. There’s no one to ask.”

“Oh, right. Well as long as we don’t get hit directly, we should be ok.”

“I can hold it, unless I fall asleep.”

“Can I have another apple?”

“We’re about to fry, and you’re hungry?”

“Yes”

She chuckled, “Yes, grab one.”

“I get a whole one?” he asked, digging in her bag.

“Are you going to complain about hunger if you don’t?”

“Probably”

She just shook her head and looked out over the burning terrain.

“What’s this?” Alric asked, holding up the amulet she’d stolen off of a Qualsax Warrior.

She looked back at it and shrugged.

“These disappear off of Qualsax Warriors when they die.”

“Oh”

“So you killed this one.”

“Not exactly.”

“Did you kill him?”

“He was already on the way to being dead.”

“So you did.”

She just shrugged again.

Alric sighed, “Was it after they attacked our village?”

“Fine, yes, it was. When I found him, he was almost dead anyway.”

“Did you kill him?”

“Yes”

He reached up and whispered, “Please don’t prove Erianah right.”

“He was already almost dead.”

“Still, I can only hold the gods off for so long if you can’t rein it in.”

“I’ll be more careful, ok?”

“Promise me you won’t kill anyone else.”

“No”

“No?”

“No, I kill who I want, when I want, and they always deserve it.”

It was silent for almost an hour while they watched the fireballs fall from the heavens, and both thought through their last conversation. He was worried Sithias would eventually tire of Kyrin if she kept doing evil deeds, and Kyrin was afraid that Alric would try to control her enough to make her behave. She thought it would cause a fight bigger than the one of the gods if he ever tried.

“It’s calming down,” Kyrin said finally, and then watched as the last of the fireballs fell.

She started to get up, but Alric wrapped his arms around her, “No reason to leave.”

“Oh, yeah, I guess it’s safer under the shield.”

“Not what I meant,” he said, and lightly kissed her neck.

She shivered and then crawled out of his grasp, “We have to see if it’s over.”

Just as Kyrin peered out from behind a tall pile of rubble, Sithias appeared. She immediately disappeared back into the ruins toward Alric, “Door’s for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Alric?” Sithias called out. His voice sounded ethereal, but it was obvious he was close.

“Oh, gotcha,” Alric said, and walked out. He bowed to Sithias, “Is it over?”

Sithias floated gently above the ground, “It is over and Daemionis has left my dimension.”

“What was decided?”

Sithias saw Kyrin peeking out from the rubble and smiled before motioning her over, “Come, I won’t hurt you.”

She thought for a moment and then walked out.

“Erianah is appeased for now, as long as no evil befalls her people,” Sithias said, directly to Kyrin.

“If they leave me alone, I’ll leave them alone.”

“As is expected.”

“Do I have a Kingdom still?” Alric asked, a little leery.

Sithias laughed, “Yes, King Alric. You do. Our little quarrel didn’t reach to Orphang.”

“Little quarrel?” Kyrin asked, crossing her arms. “That was more than a spat! You almost hit Alric with a fireball.”

“My apologies.” It was obvious to Alric that Sithias was amused at how she spoke to him. She didn’t seem to be afraid of the towering god.

“We’ll return then. Was it agreed that Kyrin can stay in Valhara indefinitely?” Alric asked.

“I wouldn’t say indefinitely. Daemionis is studying this land, so he has allowed her to stay. I suspect when he is done, she will be called back into the dimensions.”

“When he tries, I’ll stop him.”

Sithias nodded, “I assumed as much.”

Kyrin shook her head and started toward Valhara. She knew that Alric couldn’t change Daemionis’ mind if she was told to leave Paragoy, but she didn’t want to deal with that right now.

Chapter 16

“You look lovely,” Alric said, and then bent down to kiss her bare shoulder. She watched her reflection as she brushed her hair down and tied the front back into a long braid.

“You said just tonight.”

“Yes, I just ask that you dress up tonight. It’s very important that we smooth things over with the elves, and they are vain and put high regards into beauty.”

She frowned, and that small gesture made him laugh.

“Meet me down there when you’re done, ok?” Alric asked. “They’re here and I need to greet them.”

“Sure, will be down in a second,” she told him, and then stood up and smoothed down the long black dress. When the tailors came to make her a formal dress for the dinner, she had agreed to embellishments as long as the dress was black and the embellishments were silver, and not gold. Of course, she also specified a high collar, but this dress had a plunging neckline that she couldn’t seem to tug up any higher. After slipping on the sling for her arm, she looked in the mirror and grimaced.

Contrary to what she’d promised Alric, she then hiked her dress up and tied her flail to her thigh. The tailors were thrilled when she asked for a full skirt with many layers, but only because they didn’t realize that she was using it to stash weapons. If Creteloc had ingrained anything into Kyrin’s subconscious, it was the need to always have a weapon.

Once she was sure nothing else could be done to lessen the femininity of what she was wearing, she sighed and walked out of her room. The Lady’s quarters were on the 5th floor of a seven floor castle, and shared the floor with a bunch of empty rooms. She’d never bothered to ask what they were for, but she did like the privacy.

The ante-chamber with the soft couches and fire place was where men were to visit, or so she was told by Alric. It wasn’t proper for any man to walk past the ante-chamber, and she wasn’t quite sure

why. Any time he visited her, he dutifully stayed in that room though, as did any Knights or even Trox.

The floor was empty, as usual, when she stepped out. She carried her dress, so she didn't step on it but would have to drop it as soon as she got to the stairs. The tailors had dropped off a delicate pair of black shoes that she was sure would fall apart if she had to run through a forest, so she'd replaced them with her boots of speed. She just had to keep them covered during dinner.

Just as she started out of the main hallway and toward the stairs, a slight movement in the shadows two floors down caught her attention. She immediately backed up to the wall and then crouched low and peered around the corner to watch. Her hand hung inches above her flail as her eyes narrowed, and she studied the corner.

She saw another movement. Someone was hiding in the shadows of the castle. None of the Knights could hide like that. It took one skilled in stealth to do. Kyrin studied them for a moment, trying to decide if she should go attack them with her flail, or just cast at them from where she stood.

Trox and Alric started down the stairs from the top floor. They had a quick discussion about what to tell the elves, and had fallen silent as they walked toward the ballroom. They both stopped when they saw Kyrin hunkered low against a wall and watching something below her.

Alric chuckled to himself at the un-ladylike way she squatted and how she didn't care that her hair was piled below her on the floor.

Trox's eyebrows rose as he watched her, and he couldn't help but smile. Both Alric and Trox saw her flail though. The way she was positioned, her skirts were tight against her right leg and the visible outline of the flail was discernible.

After a few seconds, when she didn't notice them, Alric cleared his throat. Kyrin jumped to her feet and spun to face them. She couldn't help but look startled, and she chastised herself for not knowing she was being watched.

"Is there a problem?" Alric asked.

She nodded and motioned him forward with the bend of a finger. He moved closer to her and bent down so she could whisper into his ear, "There's a rogue hiding in the shadows on the 3rd floor."

When he started to look around the corner to see for himself, she pulled him back by the collar of his dress tunic, and Trox had to stifle a laugh.

"Don't look!" she whispered.

"I don't thi..." Kyrin stopped his words with a hand to his mouth.

"Shhh"

When she reached to grab her flail, he took her wrist, "It's not a rogue."

"Would you keep your voice down?" she whispered harshly.

He grinned, "No, I won't. The elves have protection around the castle for their King. Each floor has a guard posted, and the elves are trying not to be too visible."

"I don't like it."

"Flail," he said, and she looked over and saw he was holding his hand out.

"But..."

"No weapons. This is a peaceful dinner."

“But...”

“Flail,” he said again. Trox watched them and was surprised how calm Alric was staying with her. He’d ordered no weapons in the ballroom, and his orders were always followed.

“Alric”

“Kyrin, no. Hand it over.”

She hesitated and then hiked her skirt up to remove the flail. Trox spun when her bare leg came into view and Alric just shook his head and held his hand out.

Kyrin handed the flail over. She wasn’t happy about being without a melee weapon, but she knew she always had magic to fight with if they decided to attack.

Alric disappeared into her room and came back out without the weapon. He walked up to where she was standing, took her wrists in his hands to keep her hands apart, and then kissed her softly.

She was frowning at him when he pulled away from her, “Stop holding my hands.”

“Not until I feel like you aren’t going to turn me into a basilisk.”

She huffed slightly, so he took her hand, and they started down the stairs, followed by Trox. The ballroom was full of Valharan dignitaries and a handful of elves. The elves were all wearing gold and platinum shimmery clothing that was almost surreal. Their beauty was beyond anything else in the room, something common for the royal elves in any dimension. Most were taller and thinner than the bulky Valharan Knights.

The elven king, Auldian, saw them coming and stood up from his chair by the table and smiled at Kyrin. Her skin crawled. She

didn't like, nor did she trust, the royal elves, and she wished they had an alliance with the shadow elves instead.

"It's so nice of you to join us," Auldian said with a slight bow. He took her hand and kissed it gently, and she couldn't help but wrinkle her nose slightly.

Alric saw the conflict and interrupted, "Shall we have a seat?"

Kyrin had never seen this much food. The long tables were heavily laden with every kind of meat available in the Kingdom, along with thick gravies, stew, breads and muffins, baked apples, and too many vegetables to count. Each guest had a tall glass of clear water and wine.

She'd decided not to eat anything she couldn't eat properly with her hands, so she grabbed a roll and sat back to endure the endless talk of the Minotaur attack, though she noticed no one mentioned her magic to get rid of them.

When the dinner was over, Kyrin started to stand, but Alric stopped her, "It's time for dessert."

She cringed, wondering what that meant. She didn't know if she could handle another long meeting or any type of entertainment. Servants began to stream into the room carrying large trays of what looked to her to be brown towers. Each table had at least five of them, and then dainty plates were passed around.

Not sure what to do, Kyrin watched the others as they cut a piece and put it on their plate. Once everyone was served, although Alric had to serve Kyrin because she wasn't about to try the brown lump, they all settled down to eat.

"Not going to try it?" Alric asked when he saw her not eating the cake.

"What is it?" she asked, poking her finger into the thick frosting.

“Cake, try it.”

“No thank you.”

“Cake is sweet. We eat it after dinner.”

“Why? Aren’t you full?”

“We’re never too full for cake,” Trox told her before taking a large bite.

She looked down at it. She was still hungry, having just had a roll, but the brown mass didn’t look appealing at all.

Alric laughed, “Just take a bite.”

Another reason not to eat cake, it required the use of a fork. She was getting better at it but was afraid she’d spill it down her front, and everyone seemed to be watching her at the moment.

“I really don’t want to.”

“Afraid?”

Kyrin looked up at him with a scrutinizing gaze, “No.”

“Then try it.” Alric was having fun with this. He thought if she would try it, she would like it. The castle Baker was famous for his chocolate cake.

She hesitantly picked up the fork and put the tiniest crumb of cake onto it, then looked up at Alric before bringing it to her lips. The texture alone made her want to gag. It was like heavy bread, but the sweetness made her teeth hurt, and she put her fork down immediately.

“You don’t like it?” Alric asked, shocked.

“No, I don’t.”

He laughed and called out for a servant. He whispered to the servant, who then ran out of the room. She wondered where he went, but he returned a few minutes later with a large apple in his hand. She smiled and took it, much happier with it than with the disgusting sweetness of cake.

As she ate, she watched the interactions of the elves and the humans. Both kept complimenting the chef on the cake, but just the thought of its sweetness made her sick. Once everyone was done eating, Alric put out his hand, and she took it and followed him into a large room with one round table in the middle.

Alric and Kyrin sat down, followed by six high-ranking Valharan officials, and then the elves.

Once seated, Auldian addressed Kyrin, “After the disturbances, I asked Sithias what happened, and he directed me to you.”

Alric nodded, “You could say it was my fault...”

“Or my fault,” Kyrin added.

“How is it your fault?” Auldian asked her.

“The gods were fighting because I’m here.”

He smiled, “Why would they care?”

“That’s not important,” Alric said just as Kyrin started to let the elves know why. He knew she wasn’t embarrassed about being an evil and didn’t much hide it, but he also knew that the elves wouldn’t be happy if Valhara had allowed an evil to live with them.

“I think it is,” Auldian said. “Our Kingdom took damage too.”

“I understand that. All we can really say is that it was another god fight.”

Auldian sighed, “Did Erianah attack?”

“Yes, and Sithias wasn’t going to allow it.”

“And they fought over the girl?”

“Yes”

“Again, why?”

Alric studied him and then spoke, “She’s a magic user.”

Auldian leaned his head back and laughed.

Kyrin frowned, “What?”

“There is no magic anymore. You’re just too young to remember it.”

“Yes there is.”

“Prove it,” he said, on the verge of grinning.

“Let’s not,” Alric told him. “I’ve seen mostly offensive spells from her, and I don’t wish for tonight to turn into a battle.”

“You cannot simply... I don’t know, disappear or make the table levitate?” Auldian asked her.

“Why would I want to do that?”

“To prove it to us.”

“No”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to.”

“Or because it wouldn’t work and prove that Alric is lying.”

“I’m not lying,” Alric said angrily. “I am insulted that you think I would lie.”

“Magic, from this young one? The entire idea is preposterous. Now tell us the truth about why the gods fought over her.”

Alric turned to Kyrin, “Can you just do something little? Like maybe blow up a vase?”

“I don’t have to prove myself to anyone.”

“For me?”

“No”

He grinned, “Come on, please.”

Kyrin stood up, “I’m done here.”

“Sit, please,” Trox said. “A demonstration would help out immensely.”

“What stake do I have in this? I mean, what do I care if the elves and humans are friends?”

“It keeps us at peace,” Alric explained.

She shrugged, “Let them break off the peace and when they attack, they’ll get their fair share of magic.”

Auldian’s smile faded and he began to tense, “You’re ok with a war?”

“Yes”

“No, she’s not,” Alric said. “She’s just kidding.”

“She seemed serious. I haven’t seen anyone ready for the end of an alliance since the black elves.”

Kyrin smiled and sat back in her chair, happy that she'd made the elves nervous.

“The problem is that she doesn't use magic for no reason. I've seen it. In fact, most of my Kingdom has seen it. That's how we got rid of the Minotaurs.”

Auldian leaned forward, “She destroyed them?”

“Yes”

“How?”

They all looked at her, and she simply looked away.

“Tell them, please,” Alric said to her.

“Ok, here's the deal, but I don't know why I'm telling you this. I didn't learn spells. I didn't have a mentor. I can just do it. When I need something, words pop into my head, and I use them. Sometimes they work, sometimes they don't, and sometimes they aren't what I wanted. I am getting better at defending myself, but if I'm not being attacked, spells rarely work.”

“You have to have heard them, the words and incantations.”

“Well I didn't. I have only about eight spells that I use regularly and those I do remember the words to. However, once in a while when I'm trapped or in a new situation, new ones appear in my mind, and I use them.”

“But sometimes they don't work?”

“No, sometimes they don't.”

“Such as when?”

Kyrin was starting to get irritated at the question, “Such as once in a while.”

“We still don’t believe you, and unless you have a demonstration, then we’ll have to confront Sithias about the lies and break off the alliance.”

“I have no reason at all to demonstrate anything to you.”

Alric thought it through, along with some of the things Sithias had told him about evils that were loyal, “If the alliance breaks, Valhara will be in the middle of a war.”

“Right”

“Meaning I’ll be out on endless battles and skirmishes, and you will be here, constantly under attack from the elves.”

Her eyes narrowed, “Keep going...”

“Things change during a war. There’s not a lot of down-time or peace and quiet. I could spend years away from the Kingdom fighting in remote lands.”

Kyrin turned and looked at him, “Magic is selective. If there’s no real need, then sometimes it doesn’t work.”

“You may just need more practice.”

She looked up at the ceiling and sighed, “What do you want me to do?”

“Just do magic, doesn’t matter what.”

“I don’t want to blow anything up in the castle.”

“Then we’ll go outside,” Alric said, standing up. She was openly not happy about what she was doing, but saw the need to protect herself from an unwarranted war with the royal elves.

Everyone walked out of the castle and to the front lawn. She looked around, “I still don’t see anything to blow up.”

Auldian was clearly not believing any of it, “Just blow up one of my consorts.”

“Ok”

“Wait!” Alric interrupted. “No, do something else.”

She nodded and looked around the lawn. A small bunny appeared out of the apple orchard and began to lick his paws on the fluffy grass.

Alric followed her gaze, “You wouldn’t...”

Without warning, Kyrin’s hands grew red, and she threw a flaming ball at it, hitting is squarely. It immediately burned down to the bone and the grass around it turned black.

The elves were speechless. Magic was dead, yet they were seeing it first-hand. A murmur ran through them, and Kyrin looked at Alric, “What?”

“That was a harmless bunny.”

“Which serves no purpose. It’ll never be missed.”

He was glad the elves were talking among themselves and didn’t hear what she said. Her evil ways were going to be harder to hide than he thought if she kept spouting off with things like that.

“Qualsax cannot know,” Auldian said at long last.

“They don’t,” Alric assured him.

“If they find out that Sithias has a magic user, they will stage a war.”

“Against both of your kingdoms at once?” Kyrin asked.

Trox turned to her, “Qualsax doesn’t have the rules our kingdoms have.”

“So you’re saying that Qualsax is much bigger because they don’t have to adhere to rules?” For some reason, she thought that was funny.

“Yes, they are much bigger than both of our kingdoms combined,” Auldian told her. “The only reason they don’t attack us is that they are also lazy. If Erianah finds out you are a magic user though, that would all change.”

“How would she find out?”

Auldian turned to Alric, “Sithias knows?”

“Of course.”

“Has he considered that she might be an evil?”

“Yes, that was what we first thought also.”

“Well I’m not convinced she’s not.”

Kyrin wandered over to the burnt grass to avoid getting in on the argument she saw coming. She didn’t care if they knew she was what this dimension called an evil.

She looked back long enough to see that Alric and Auldian were still bickering, so she disappeared into the apple orchard. When she got to the tallest tree, she hiked her skirt up and climbed up into its branches. Once high above the ground, she leaned back with an apple and listened to the others.

“If we deem her an evil, she will have to be destroyed,” Auldian snapped.

“She’s not an evil and to destroy her, you have to come through my army,” Alric replied evenly.

“I’m not afraid of your army.”

“I still think this is senseless! We have the Qualsax after us, and we’re fighting. We have to stand united against them, or they will eventually take over.”

“You’re right,” Auldian said, a lot calmer than before. “We’ll expect your magic user to protect us if the call comes though.”

“I don’t control her.”

“You should. She’s in your Kingdom.”

Kyrin grinned, knowing neither of them could control her.

“Well I don’t. She’s free to come and go as she pleases, and as you’ve seen, she doesn’t bow to my command,” Alric told him.

“Then you need to get a grip on her.”

“She’s a special case, and I’m sure Sithias will agree. She’s not part of my Kingdom and isn’t under his influence even.”

“No, she’s not in your Kingdom, but she’s obviously your lover.”

“I wouldn’t say that exactly,” Alric said, and she could tell by his voice that he was smiling.

“Control her.”

“She’s not mine to control.”

“I’ll be talking to Sithias about this,” Auldian threatened.

“Go ahead.”

“Four of my assistants will be arriving to work out details of our peace treaty within the week.”

“Very well, they are welcome here.”

Kyrin looked over from her perch up high, and saw the elves heading out toward Valhara. She leaned back with another apple and watched until they disappeared.

“Kyrin?” Alric called from in the orchard.

When he passed below the tree she was in, she dropped down behind him, “Yes?”

He turned quickly and shook his head, “You were up in a tree?”

“Yes”

“In a dress.”

“Sure”

He grinned at her, “You wouldn’t know proper etiquette if it slapped you in the face, would you?”

“See, that’s your mistake,” she said, slowly circling him. “I know proper etiquette if I really try to think about it. The question then becomes, if I wish to follow it or not.”

“Interesting”

“Ever considered taking off the official tunic and climbing a tree once in a while?”

“I do, maybe not literally.”

“I haven’t seen you.”

“I don’t do it often, especially in front of the people of Valhara.”

“Why not? You’re the King. If you want to walk around naked, then they shouldn’t have a say in it.”

He laughed at that, “I try not to.”

“Well at least you can. You should relax a little.”

“It is good to be King.”

“Lady Kyrin?”

Kyrin sighed and turned behind her, “Don’t call me that.”

“I’m sorry.” The young tailor came in with a garment bag and bowed.

“First off, don’t bow either. Second, I don’t need any more clothes. I have three entire outfits already.”

“I thought... well... I heard what you said... to the other tailor. I thought you might like this.” His nervousness irritated her.

“What is it?”

“A dress... sort of.”

This caught her attention, “What do you mean?”

“Well, we’d need to check with the King... but it’s not long, as is proper...”

She smiled, “Really? Let me see.”

Kyrin took the bag and disappeared behind the dressing curtain. She pulled the dress out and was fairly impressed. It was deep blue and gray, and had no embellishments or jewels. The top was a halter top with an under shirt of dark gray and the skirt was full, but would only come to her knees.

She slipped it on and looked in the mirror. It was much nicer than the tunic she wore every day, but not nearly as fancy as what they usually made her wear. She moved a bit behind the curtain and saw that it wouldn't restrict her movements at all. The body was fitted and not at all bulky, and she had free range of motion with her flail.

Kyrin came out and smiled, "I like it."

"We still, well we have to get it approved through the King." He said, looking over his work.

"Why's that?"

"It's not proper."

"Well he's not my King, and I like it."

"We still..."

"No, we don't. Now can you make me a way to hold my flail?"

He nodded and then rushed off.

Kyrin had to smile. Alric was going to love the dress, even with its modifications. It wouldn't inhibit a fight, so she thought she may actually like it. Because it was fitted on the top and flowing on the bottom, she didn't think it would get in the way at all, and it was much cooler than the tunic and pants she'd been wearing.

It wasn't but an hour later when the young tailor returned with a belt made out of the same material as the gray shirt. It was thick and accentuated her small waist, but had a loop for her flail that fit perfectly. She was nervous about looking as feminine as she did, but figured she wouldn't wear it out of Paragoy anyway.

"Perfect!" Kyrin said, slipping her flail into her belt.

“Ma’am... I need to get permission, please.” The tailor seemed even more nervous.

She turned to look at him, “Why?”

“I’m new. I can’t cause problems or I could get sent back to the village.”

“You designed this dress?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Stop calling me Ma’am.”

“Yes... ok.”

“Let’s go talk to Alric.”

“What!?” His eyes grew wide.

“Alric, your King.”

“I know who he is. I just... why bother him?”

“Because I have an idea,” she said, and started out the door. The nervous tailor followed her and kept watching around him. He wasn’t sure if he was supposed to be walking around the palace with the Lady, and he knew he wasn’t supposed to be designing dresses for her.

When she knocked on Alric’s office door, the young tailor cringed and sunk back slightly away from her.

“Who is it?” Alric called out.

“Me,” she said, and then glanced behind her.

“Come in.”

Kyrin opened the door into the massive office. She often suspected she could fit Creteloc's entire home into his office, and it seemed ostentatious, but so were so many other things in Paragoy.

"Hello," he said, smiling. Alric stood and moved to her and then kissed her lightly after taking her hands.

She backed away, still irritated that he held her hands, and turned, "I want him as my tailor."

Alric was looking down at her dress, "Wow."

She looked down, "What?"

"You're wearing a dress, and no one died."

"This one... I like."

"I've never seen anything like it," he said, and walked around her. A proper dress had long sleeves with billowing cuffs, long, full skirts with petticoats and sometimes even a hoop, and low necklines.

"That's why I want this tailor."

Alric looked up at the tailor, who was just starting to back out of his office, "Who are you?"

The tailor bowed deeply, "Dison, Sir."

"You made this?"

Dison simply swallowed hard and nodded.

Alric grinned, "How did you get her into it?"

Kyrin slapped him on the arm, "He didn't force me. I told you, those dresses you all put me in don't allow me free movement. If I can't fight, then I won't wear it."

“I... I... well... I heard... and then...,” Dison mumbled, looking at the floor.

“Are you afraid of me?” Alric asked him.

“Sir?”

“You look like you’re going to have a heart attack.”

“Well...”

Kyryn sighed, “He’s afraid because apparently he thought he had to get the designs for this dress approved by you.”

Alric grinned sheepishly, “That is true.”

“Why do you have to approve my clothes?”

“It’s not that exactly. You’re... well... for all intents and purposes, barely dressed.”

Kyryn looked down, “I’m covered.”

“We’re just used to women being more covered.”

“And helpless.”

“That too.”

“Well either he’s my tailor, or I go back to pants.”

Alric leaned back on his desk, “Dison... you came up with this?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Based on what she said to someone?”

“To the head tailor, Sir.”

He smiled, “Perfect.”

“I can move in it,” Kyrin explained. “There aren’t any long sleeves to get caught on things, and no long skirts. He even gave me a spot for my flail.”

“Yes, I saw that.”

“If he’s going to take the time to listen to me, then he’s the only one I want to sew for me.”

“No one, not even me, has a personal tailor.”

“Then I don’t need a tailor at all. I already have three entire outfits,” she said, crossing her arms.

Alric studied her, appreciating how the dress showed off her figure, “Fine. Dison is your personal tailor.”

Dison’s eyes grew wide, “Sir?”

“Tell the Head Tailor that you are Kyrin’s personal tailor.”

Dison nodded, bowed, and then left quickly.

Alric tensed when he felt the hair on his neck stand up again. His entire body was suddenly on edge and he looked around, as if a dark shadow should have covered the land.

“What’s wrong?” Kyrin asked, frowning.

“I feel an evil again.”

“I’m right in front of you.”

“No, a greater evil,” he said, looking out the window. “I’ve felt it before. Once when Creteloc came to me, and then when Daemionis is in Paragoy.”

She smiled, “Creteloc’s here?”

“I don’t know.”

“Other than those times, you’ve never felt it?”

“No, and it’s making me nervous.”

“I can go look.”

He turned toward her and then smiled, “No, stay in here where it’s safe.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Or... just stay in here with me?”

“Depends, are you going to hold my hands?”

“Yes”

“That’s getting old.”

“You still tense when I kiss you,” he said, moving toward her slowly. “Until you stop, I have to hold your hands.”

“I told you I won’t cast on you.”

“I don’t trust you.”

She couldn’t help but smile, “That’s probably not a bad idea.”

“Why would Creteloc be here?” he asked, now just inches from her.

“I don’t know. She does what she wants.”

“She’s your friend. I figured you’d know.”

“Creteloc doesn’t have friends,” she said, backing up until her back hit the wall.

“Running from me?” he asked, leaning toward her with his hands behind her on the wall.

“I don’t run.”

He grabbed her wrists in his hands and then kissed her softly. She fought to get her hands loose, but couldn’t.

After a few minutes, Kyrin turned her face away from him, “Let my hands go.”

He shook his head and then began to kiss her neck, working his way up to her lips again. She hated how his kiss made her stomach flutter and how her body seemed to draw closer to him. As much as it made her nervous, part of her craved it and couldn’t help but respond if he persisted.

When he broke the kiss and let her hands go, she was able to compose herself enough to sound on the verge of being angry, “Stop holding my wrists!”

“No”

“Then stop kissing me and you won’t have to hold my wrists.”

He grinned, “No to that too.”

Without another word, Kyrin spun on her heels and walked out, furious when she heard him laugh behind her. She hit the stairs running and ran out into the apple orchard to get away from him.

By the time she hit the trees, she was mad and didn’t care who saw her. Engaging her boots of speed when she hit the tree line, she flew through the forest. When she was far enough from the castle to know she was alone, she slowed down and looked around.

While she inwardly yelled at herself for the feelings her body put out for Alric, she looked around the area. She hadn’t been this far north before and wanted to see what she could find.

The more she thought about Alric the madder she became and tears started to form in her eyes. She knew better than to let herself get

attached to a man, and figured Creteloc would probably punish her if she were to find out.

She couldn't fight the tears, the main reason she'd run from the castle, and finally sat down and buried her face. It wasn't often she cried, but when she did she preferred to be alone. The feelings she had for Alric were in conflict to what she learned growing up and while running from the Shadowmere.

“Venduii”

Kyrin sprang to her feet when she heard the soft voice. She turned slightly and faced the shadow elf that stood before her, “Hello.”

The way he moved was indicative of an Assassin, so she slowly grabbed her flail and kept a close eye on him.

He smiled, “You are going to fight me with a weapon?”

“Yes”

“Why not use magic? I heard it's not banned here.”

“Are you a shifter?” she asked, narrowing her eyes.

“No, I was led here.”

“By who?”

“You know who,” he said, and began to circle her. She spun with him, never letting him at her back.

“Why would Daemionis send you here?”

“To watch over you.”

“I don't need a tender.”

“Don't you? You've fallen in love with a human in this dimension... a good aligned dimension.”

“I have not.”

“Daemionis tends to disagree.”

She sighed, “So you’re to stay here now?”

“For a while. Just to see where this is going.”

“I’m not sure Sithias or Alric will agree to that.”

“They don’t have a choice, do they?”

“They could send me packing,” she said, starting back for the castle.

“Not dressed like that they won’t,” he said, and she could tell that beneath the dark hood, he was grinning.

“Don’t insult me. I don’t like you already.”

“Then don’t dress like a girl.”

“Shut up!”

He followed behind her, though she couldn’t hear his footsteps. She’d learned with Creteloc not to expect a single noise out of a well-trained Assassin, and it shocked her when she heard a tiny twig snap. He paused and then continued to follow her.

“New to walking?” she asked him as they neared the orchard.

He didn’t answer, so she smiled and walked to the castle. The Knights instantly moved to block the dark figure from entering the castle.

Kyrin turned around when she heard the Assassin unsheathe his dagger and step back.

“He’s with me,” she said, though she wished he wasn’t.

“We cannot let him enter.”

“Then bring Alric down.”

“To face this dark one? No.”

Kyrin shook her head when the shadow elf tried to fade into the shadows and managed to fall on his way, knocking over a suit of armor that stood beside the door.

The Knights chuckled, “Issues?”

“You’re sure Daemionis sent you?” Kyrin asked him.

“Yes,” he whispered, still trying to be cool and calm, when he’d managed to attract half of the castle.

“What’s going on?” Trox asked, walking up to them.

Kyrin sighed, “Daemionis sent a babysitter for me.”

“So what was the racket?”

“He is having noise problems.”

Trox looked over and immediately recognized the short figure of the shadow elves, “Get the King, now!”

Two of the Knights ran up the stairs to get him while Kyrin watched the Assassin try to act inconspicuous as he was being watched by fifty Knights.

“Trox, what’s wrong?” Alric asked, running up to them.

“Daemionis sent a black elf into our Kingdom.”

Alric looked at the hooded figure, “You’re sure?”

“Shadow elf, actually,” Kyrin said. “And yes, he did.”

“I’m actually surprised we found him, from what I’ve heard,” Alric said, studying him.

“Well he’s not very good at his profession.”

“I don’t have to put up with this!” the Assassin yelled.

“What happened to the door?” Alric asked, looking over at the pile of armor.

“He ran into the armor and knocked it over,” one of the Knights told him.

“Why are you here?” Alric asked the shadow elf.

“I came to watch over her,” he replied, trying to sound harsh, but his voice turned throaty, and he started to cough.

“Why?”

“Daemionis doesn’t trust you with her.”

“That can’t be it. He knows we are honor bound not to hurt her.”

“Unless she does something you don’t approve of.”

“Like bringing an Assassin home?” she asked, irritated.

“Where did you even find him?” Alric asked her. He was still trying to sort through all of this.

“I was out in the woods north of town, and I ran into him.”

“I followed her from the orchard, but she didn’t see me until I caught her crying in the trees,” the shadow elf told him.

Kyrin shifted nervously, “I was not! You couldn’t have followed me either, so stop lying or at least make it good.”

“I’m not lying!”

“You are too and you know it. You can’t keep up with me.”

“Elves are pretty fast, Kyrin,” Trox said.

“Not as fast as I am.”

He just frowned and turned back to Alric, “Sent by Daemionis or not, we can’t let him stay here.”

“No, we can’t.”

“If he leaves, I’ll go with him,” Kyrin said.

“Why?”

“If Daemionis sent him to watch over me, then I have to stay with him.”

“That’s stupid! You’re safe here. Safer than anywhere else with the Shadowmere trying to kill you.”

She glanced quickly around, but no one reacted to that, “Still, I have to stay with him.”

Alric looked at the Assassin as he noisily dug around in a bag, “What can it hurt?”

“We sure you aren’t supposed to protect him?” Trox asked.

Kyrin shrugged, “It’s possible. I’m more of an Assassin than he is.”

“Hey,” the shadow elf yelled.

“We could let him stay out in the old wood-cutter’s cottage,” Alric said.

“No, I stay with Kyrin,” he told them.

“I could stay there too.”

“I’d rather have you here,” Alric said.

“Something’s not right,” Kyrin said, and watched the Assassin.

“What?”

“Daemionis expects perfection.”

“He is far from that.”

“Or he wants me to kill him.”

“No! Let’s just imprison him and see what his true purpose is.”

Using her boots of speed, Kyrin disappeared from the castle’s entryway.

“Where did she go?” Trox asked, shocked.

“Not only that, but how did she move so fast?” Alric added.

“And you think I’m slow,” the Assassin said, evil returning to his voice.

Kyrin hit the trees and kept going. Daemionis wouldn’t send a bumbling idiot into another dimension. In fact, Daemionis would have killed the inept fool himself. He had to be a distraction, to pull their attention away from the true evil in the land. She remembered Alric saying he felt an evil presence, which furthered her feeling that he was a deception.

Once out where she met the Assassin, she stopped and looked around, “Creteloc? Are you here?”

“I was wrong,” someone said off to her side.

She spun and looked toward the voice, but saw no one. It wasn’t Creteloc’s voice she heard, but a male with harsh tones, “Who’s there?”

Whispers sounded as a breeze blew through the trees.

Kyrin readied her flail and looked closer into the trees. There was no noise, but she knew she was being watched.

“What were you wrong about?” she asked, her body tense.

When he stepped out of the trees, he stayed in the shadow, and his face was completely obscured, “I told Daemionis that you wouldn’t realize I was here.”

“Apparently I’m smarter than I look.”

“Creteloc disagreed with me, as usual.”

“What do you want?” She watched him closely, knowing that good Assassins could simply disappear into shadows, never to be found.

“I have a message, from Daemionis.”

“He sent you across dimensions for a message?”

“Yes”

“Why?”

“He cannot risk the gods of this land seeing him here.” The Assassin suddenly appeared in the shadow of a tree to her right. She spun to face him.

“Ok then, what’s the message?”

“Two of them, actually. The first is he demands a sacrifice. He said you are lax.”

“I have to be careful here. He knows that.”

“He desires what he desires.”

“If I kill someone from Paragoy, the gods will be angry, and I’ll be forced to leave. He wants me to stay here,” she told him, unbelieving.

“That is why Creteloc sent the idiot.”

“Creteloc sent that Assassin?” Kyrin asked.

“Do not refer to him as such. He wants to know the dark ways, but lacks any form of discipline.”

Kyrin smiled, “So Creteloc found him and wants me to kill him.”

“Correct”

“Easy enough. What’s the second request?”

The Assassin finally stepped out of the trees, so she could see him, though his face was still in shadow, “It is time for you to marry the Holy Knight.”

She frowned, “No.”

“You say no to a request from Daemionis?”

“He wouldn’t tell me to do that. I haven’t done anything to be punished that severely.”

“It is not a punishment.”

“Then why?” Her heart was racing. She couldn’t imagine defying the orders of her god, but she couldn’t be tied to this man either.

“Daemionis does not tell me his wishes, other than what I have told you.”

“Well I don’t believe you.”

“Are you refusing to do as he wishes?”

It was hard to speak, “I can’t marry him.”

Kyryn was struck with such pain it caused her to fall to her knees, unable to breathe. Blood began to ooze out of her skin as she slumped to the ground, losing all strength.

The Assassin watched her silently, and when the pain backed off, and she could breathe, she looked up at him when he spoke, “Again, do as you are asked.”

“I can’t do it,” she gasped, just as the pain started again. This time a scream escaped her, and she fell back against the crisp fall leaves that lined the forest floor.

The Assassin seemed uninterested in her pain, and carefully watched to make sure no one was going to interrupt. This time, when the pain ended, she stayed on the ground. Blood seeped from her pores, and her eyes were blood-shot.

“Agree to marry him and I will leave,” the Assassin told her.

“Please... Daemionis don’t do this.”

“I want out of this retched land, and to do so you have to marry that useless King,” he told her.

She shook her head and screamed again as her body erupted in pain.

He sighed, “Stop being difficult, girl. How bad can it be to marry?”

When a tear escaped her eye, it was blood that fell, and she groaned and again shook her head.

“Daemionis, leave her alone,” Sithias said, appearing in the clearing.

The Assassin fell back into the shadows, and his voice grew angry, “Stay out of this. She is not yours.”

“I will not allow her to be needlessly tortured in my dimension.”

“Back off!”

Sithias knelt down beside Kyrin and ran a hand over her. She relaxed against the ground, no longer in pain, and seemingly unconscious. The god then stood up to face him, “Tell Daemionis that he cannot force her to do this.”

“He can, and he will,” the Assassin told her.

“We both wish for this union, to see what children it will produce, but we cannot force it.”

“You may not completely control your followers, but Daemionis does, and he expects her to comply immediately!”

The Assassin watched her, but it was obvious that he was listening to something else. Finally, he snarled, “If she will not obey, then he will have to remove her from this place for punishment.”

Sithias stood tall, “Tell him to face me about this. I don’t want you here any longer in my land.”

“He reminds you that she is not yours to protect.”

“She’s young, and I don’t believe she had a choice in following Daemionis. There is good in her.”

“Then you’re a fool.”

Sithias calmly smiled, “Tell Daemionis that we agreed to leave her here for observation and torturing her isn’t part of that deal. He is to leave her alone and not take away her choice in such a personal matter as marriage.”

“He does what he wants!”

“Not on my land. Now you may leave.”

The Assassin looked down at Kyrin, and then turned and swept out of the area.

Sithias gently picked her up and watched until Daemionis took the Assassin back out of Paragoy.

“I’m an Assassin! I can get out of here,” the puny shadow elf said from inside of Valhara’s dungeon.

Alric shrugged, “Try it.”

“I don’t have to prove myself to you.” With that, the shadow elf tripped over a chair and fell onto the bare bed in the cell.

Alric frowned when he felt the evil presence leave the dimension, yet the Assassin remained.

“Sir?” Trox asked, looking over at him.

“The evil is gone.”

Trox studied the shadow elf, “How can it be?”

“That means this thing wasn’t the evil.”

“Then who was?”

“I don’t know, but I bet Kyrin realized it and went after it.”

“Do you think she killed whoever it was?”

“I don’t know.”

“There is no one else here,” the Assassin said, smiling. “Daemionis knows my true power.”

They both ignored him, and Alric turned toward the door when one of the Priests came in, “Sir.”

“Is there a problem?”

“Sithias brought the girl to us.”

“What happened?” he asked, tensing.

“She was punished by her god. We cannot intervene.”

“Perfect,” he sighed, and then left to follow the Priest. When he arrived at the temple, they all seemed nervous and Saith showed the King into the back room where Kyrin was laid out on the bed, covered in blood.

“Sithias cannot help her when she’s punished by a god,” Saith explained.

“What did he do?” Alric asked, sitting on the side of the bed. He’d never seen anyone so completely covered in blood with no obvious injuries.

“We aren’t sure. She seems to be sweating blood.”

“What caused it?”

“Sithias won’t say. He said it is between her and her god.”

“Kyrin?” Alric asked, and touched her face softly.

“Sithias made her sleep.”

“Was she in pain?”

“I believe so.”

“Why would he do this? She’s so loyal to him and all I’ve seen him do is cause pain and suffering,” Alric said, mostly to himself.

“She may not know how to leave him, Sir.”

“Only once have I seen her badly injured that wasn’t the doing of her so-called god.”

When Kyrin sighed softly, they both looked over at her and Alric took her hand, “Kyrin?”

She slowly opened her eyes and looked at him, “Where is he?”

“Who?”

“The Assassin.”

“He’s in our dungeon.”

She sat up slowly, aided by Alric, “Not that one. The real one.”

“I don’t know then. I don’t feel any evil in the dimension though.”

“But how accurate is that?” Kyrin stood slowly, testing her legs.

“Should you be standing?”

Saith shook his head, “No, she should not be.”

“I’m fine. Daemionis doesn’t leave lasting injuries,” Kyrin explained.

“Why did he do this?” Alric asked her.

She sighed, “I’d rather not say.”

“But you must have agreed. He stopped.”

“No, Sithias intervened and I’m sure I’ll pay for that later.”

“Sithias stopped him?” Alric asked, following her out when she left.

“Yes, now I need to go to the lake, and then I need that bumbling Assassin.”

“You can bathe in the castle. It’s safer.”

She smiled, “Daemionis won’t be back just yet.”

“I don’t trust that.”

“I do. I’ll be ok.” She didn’t wait for him to respond, but immediately headed toward the lake north of Valhara.

Alric watched her go and then turned to Saith, “I hate this.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“How can I get her to see that she would be better off here following Sithias?”

“She’s an evil. Sithias may not want her.”

“I have a feeling he does.”

Saith bowed slightly and then walked back inside. Alric stopped to talk to some of the townspeople, and just as he was arriving at the castle, Kyrin was walking out with the Assassin in a tight grip. She was no longer covered in blood, and didn’t seem injured at all.

“Where are you going?” he asked, unsure he wanted her to leave with the Assassin, no matter how inept he might be.

“I’ll be back. I need to take care of something.”

As she walked past, he took her arm, “Are you going to kill him?”

“No, I’m going to boot his ass out of Paragoy.”

“Ok,” he said, and then let her go. He had a strong feeling that she was about to murder him though.

Kyrin walked slowly to keep pace with the Assassin beside her. She knew immediately why Creteloc would want him dead, and was just glad she’d thought ahead to send him to Kyrin for a sacrifice. She hoped Daemionis would forget about the marriage order in lieu of getting a shadow elf sacrifice.

“You can kick me out of this dimension, but Daemionis will bring me back,” he said, starting to panic.

“I’m not taking you to a portal.”

“Then... what are you doing?”

“You’re a sacrifice,” she said as they walked up to the large rock she often used to sacrifice animals.

The Assassin turned on her and drew his dagger, “I won’t let you.”

She readied her flail and shrugged, “You are to be a sacrifice. Fight if you want.”

He lunged at her with the dagger held incorrectly, and she was easily able to slam her flail into the back of his neck, breaking it instantly. He fell to the ground, unmoving, but by now she was mad. Kyrin pummeled him with her flail, turning him into a mass of flesh and blood. When she was done, she was covered in his blood, and he was no longer breathing.

She took the ceremonial dagger from her bag and immediately removed his heart. She tossed it to the side for local predators to eat, and then dragged him to the rock. The hardest part was getting his blood-slicked body up onto the rock, but when she managed, she dropped to her knees.

When she didn't get the feeling that Daemionis was appeased by just the sacrifice, her throat threatened to close off, "Please, Daemionis, no. I'll do anything else you ask."

Nothing happened, no booming voice, no pain, nothing. She looked up, and although the body was gone, there was no sign that he accepted the body in lieu of his request.

"Daemionis, I can't do it," she whispered, but the world seemed unnaturally silent as she looked around the trees. The sun was setting behind the majestic mountains, and the shadows seemed darker than usual.

"Why won't you answer me?" She felt alone and afraid that Daemionis wasn't going to change his mind. It wasn't unheard of for his followers to be thrust into an eternity of pain for angering him badly, but she would take that over the thought of marriage.

After hours of praying and not hearing back, she decided that she would have to leave this dimension if she was going to avoid the humiliation of marriage. When she walked into the castle, everyone watched her, unsure why she was covered in blood and why she looked terrified.

She went into her room and began packing her enchanted backpack. She took nothing from Paragoy, and everything she brought with her easily fit into the pack.

"Leaving?" Alric said from behind her.

She nodded and continued to pack. He'd never been in the back rooms of her ante-chamber, but she didn't care that he broke what was proper to come and see her.

Alric looked around at how her room had been transformed. The soft bed was on its side up against the window, blocking it, and a single blanket was laid out by the fireplace. There were pitchers of water throughout the room, all with varying levels of water in

them. What few clothes she had were hanging above the fireplace to dry. He found that amusing. He had people to do the laundry, and from the looks of it, she was hand-washing her own.

He turned back to her and frowned, “Where are you going?”

“I don’t know.”

“Leaving Paragoy?”

“Yes”

“When will you be back?” Alric debated stopping her, but knew that it wasn’t his right to do.

“I won’t be back,” she told him as she slipped on the black leather vest.

“Stop, please,” he said, taking her hand. She looked down at their intertwined hands and then finally looked up at him.

“I just have to go.”

“Why? Is it because of Daemionis?”

“I can’t tell you why.”

“He punished you already, what more does he want?”

“He wants me, and I have to go.”

“Wait! You’re running from him?” Alric asked angrily.

She looked nervously around the room, “I just have to shift as soon as possible.”

“I can protect you.”

“Not from him. No one can, so I have to run.”

His anger grew. No one should have to run from their god, unless they broke a sacred rule, and no one should be that afraid of a being that was supposed to have their best interest at heart.

Kyrin checked around the room and then started for the door.

“You can’t just leave. You’re covered in blood and terrified.”

“It’s not my blood,” she said, walking down the stairs.

“I know whose it is.”

Once outside, she began moving quickly toward the trees, followed by Alric. He knew he couldn’t stop her from shifting out of Paragoy, but he had to try.

“I don’t want you to just leave here.”

“I know, but I don’t have a choice.”

“Did he send you on a mission that you refused?” He was genuinely trying to understand.

“No”

“Did he ask you to do something you don’t want to?”

When she didn’t answer, he knew he had it right.

“What was it he asked you to do?”

She stopped and looked around carefully, then started in another direction.

“Kyrin, stop!”

She turned to look at him.

“Tell me what’s going on.”

“I can’t. I just have to get out of Paragoy.”

“You’re running, and you can’t run from the Shadowmere and from Daemionis! You’re going to fall into the hands of one of them.”

“I have to try.”

“What did he ask you to do?” he asked, stopping her.

She turned to him, “I can’t tell you.”

Alric felt like at any moment she was going to disappear, and he’d never see her again. In a last-ditch effort to get her to stay, he quickly took her face gently in his hands and pressed his lips to hers. In his haste to make her stay, he didn’t restrain her hands to keep her from casting, which is why she did just that.

When the word popped into her head, she brought her hands together and pulled away from him. In the split second it took him to realize what was happening, he was frozen in place.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, and then turned and disappeared into the trees.

He couldn’t see where she went. He was aware and could see directly in front of him, but couldn’t move or make a noise. He strained, but couldn’t move a muscle.

What seemed like hours later, he felt a warming sensation. He could first move a finger, and then his hand, and soon was able to stand up and look around. By this time it was dark, and he wasn’t even sure which direction Kyrin had gone.

“Where did you go?” he whispered, looking around the dark forest. “Sithias, is she gone?”

The answer rang through his mind, “No.”

“Where is she then?”

“I have blocked the portals,” Sithias whispered.

Deciding to go back and find a Ranger qualified to track her, Alric headed back for the castle.

“Sir!” Trox said, running up to him. “We’ve been trying to find you for hours.”

He just shook his head, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, Sir. We were just worried about you.”

“Has anyone seen Kyrin?”

“Not since you left with her.”

“I want Fenre here, now.”

“Yes, Sir,” Trox said, and then turned to go get the best Ranger in Valhara.

When they returned, Trox was surprised to see Alric in full battle gear, “Are we under attack?”

“I don’t know yet. Fenre, I need to find Kyrin. If I take you to where I last saw her, can you track in the dark?”

“Yes, Sir,” he said, a little leery.

“I’ll get the Knights ready,” Trox told the King.

“No, it’ll just be Fenre and I.”

Trox hesitated and then nodded and watched them leave.

Fenre knew better than to question the King, but he was on guard and tense as they walked through the dark trees nearing midnight.

When they got to the clearing, Alric turned to the Ranger, “I last saw her here.”

Fenre moved forward and began a close sweep of the area. After only a few minutes, he started into the woods, followed by Alric, who now had his sword drawn.

Several times Fenre lost her trail, and was starting to get irritated when he held up his hand, and Alric stopped. Both were silent as Fenre pointed to a bunch of thick brush off to their right.

Alric nodded and quietly moved forward. He crouched down and watched Kyrin through the dense foliage. She was seated on the side of a grassy hill and was watching around her.

It was obvious she was in a hurry and irritated, because her foot was tapping impatiently on the ground, and she fiddled with the spiked balls on her flail while she waited.

Alric returned to Fenre and whispered, “Stay here. If she casts on me, then follow her.”

Fenre frowned, and started to argue.

“Do as I say,” Alric whispered sternly.

When Fenre nodded, Alric started around the bushes, “And that’s... why I hold your hands apart.”

Kyrin looked over at him, but didn’t speak.

Alric sat down beside her and put the sword on the hill at his right, “I’m not mad. I just wish you would tell me why you’re in such a hurry to get out of here.”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Why?”

“Because you might agree.”

He thought about that and then frowned, “You think I would agree with the reasons behind Daemionis’ punishment?”

“Yes”

“I seriously doubt that.”

“I killed him.”

Alric knew she was talking about the foolish Assassin, “I figured.”

“Offered him up as a sacrifice. I thought Creteloc sent him, so I could sacrifice him to keep Daemionis from demanding what he did.”

“I take it that didn’t work?”

“No, it didn’t. He took the sacrifice and then didn’t retract his demand.”

“What are you waiting for out here?” he asked, looking into the dark forest.

“A portal.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t found one.” He wasn’t too surprised. Sithias mentioned he was blocking portals out of Paragoy.

“Sometimes it takes a while.”

“So you plan on waiting out here until you find it?”

“Yes”

“Couldn’t that take days?”

“I’ve seen it take months.”

He sighed, frustrated, “Just tell me, please.”

“No, I’m not going to do it. He can just kill me.”

“Is it really that bad?”

“Yes”

“How can it be!?” His irritation came through in his voice, “How can it be that bad when you think I’d agree with it?”

A ball of light appeared before them and Kyrin stood with her flail ready, but Alric put his hand out. The light grew until it became Sithias.

Kyrin’s eyes narrowed as she watched him walk over to Alric.

“So good to see you unfrozen,” Sithias said, highly amused.

Alric grinned sheepishly, “I forgot to hold her wrists.”

“You,” Sithias said, turning to Kyrin, “seem to be in quite a hurry to leave my dimension.”

“You could say that.”

“Do you not think Alric has a right to know what Daemionis asked of you?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Interesting”

“Do you think I should know?” Alric asked his god.

“Yes, I do.”

“Then tell me, please.”

“We could solve the problem here, right now,” Sithias said to her.

“NO!”

“How?” Alric asked.

Sithias didn't answer him, “It would be a secret, Kyrin. No one has to know but those of us here, and Daemionis.”

“I said no!”

“What are your fears?”

Her eyes shot to Alric, and then back to Sithias, “Try it, and I'll kill myself.”

“Without these?” he asked. Sithias held out his almost glowing hand, and in it, he held eight tiny vials.

She gasped, “You took them!?”

“Yes, I did. I don't wish for you to kill yourself over something as harmless as this.”

“Harmless? It's not harmless.”

“It is.”

Alric was getting irritated with his lack of being included in the conversation, but knew Sithias wouldn't appreciate being interrupted.

“What you've heard is not necessarily true in this dimension.” Sithias was being very kind and tolerant with her, and Alric was even surprised at how patient he was.

“I said, no,” she said through gritted teeth.

“I realize you don't need the poison to kill yourself, so we resolve this tonight, or I will have to take matters into my own hands.”

“Do what!?”

“I can take you to my home and keep you there, safe, until an agreement is made.”

Alric was dumbstruck. He'd never heard of anyone being allowed into Sithias sanctuary.

“Daemionis won't stand for that.”

Sithias smiled, “Oddly, he and I agree on this matter, and I don't think he would interfere.”

She shook her head and walked backwards a few steps, “This is not going to happen.”

“It is my will, and the will of Daemionis.”

“I don't care whose will it is! It's my life, and I did nothing to get punished this way.”

“It is not a punishment.”

“You can't tell me that. I've seen it. I'll not fall into that trap, and I don't need you or Daemionis to decide how to live my life. It's a punishment, period.”

Sithias smiled softly, “I have no reason to punish you.”

“You know I sacrificed a shadow elf.”

“Yes”

“I'm sure that's worth a punishment.”

“Not one I wish to pursue.”

Alric finally broke in, “Do I get to know what this is all about?”

Sithias turned to him, “It is time for you to do as I asked.”

He frowned, “Wait, this is all because you want me to marry her?”

“Yes”

“No! It’s not going to happen,” Kyrin screamed.

“I can’t force her!” Alric said. “She’s not ready.”

“She is ready. She is just afraid of the unknown. Afraid of things she’s seen and things she has been told that do not apply here.”

“It’s against everything sacred to force her into marriage.”

“It is my will.”

Alric looked over at Kyrin as she slipped her flail back into her belt. He knew that only meant one thing, and he started forward to protect Sithias, when Sithias smiled.

“Are you going to cast on me?”

Branches reached down from the trees behind Kyrin and wrapped themselves around her wrists. She was pulled back against the tree with her hands held straight out at her sides.

“No!” she screamed, fighting to get loose.

“This is my dimension,” Sithias reminded her. “Things here will do my bidding, and I do not wish to fight you with your magic.”

Alric wasn’t sure what to do. He loved Kyrin and wanted desperately to marry her, but not if she was terrified of it and being forced into it. However, it was Sithias’ will, and he didn’t want to see her punished because it was Daemionis’ will also.

He turned and looked at her, and saw blood appearing from her wrists where the tree branches cut into her as she struggled. He wondered how strong her fear was and how deeply embedded it was for her to have such an intense reaction. His heart went out to her, but it wasn’t his decision to make.

Sithias moved closer to Kyrin, “Now listen to me and try to understand that I don’t want to hurt you. If you cast on me, I am forced to restrain you. Do you understand?”

“Just kill me and get it over with,” Kyrin snapped at him.

“I don’t wish you dead. If I did I would let you shift out of Paragoy and wash my hands of you.”

“If you don’t want me dead, then don’t make me do this.”

“Talk to her,” Sithias said to Alric.

He sighed and walked forward, “I don’t think this is right either, but I’m not threatening to kill myself. Just calm down and let’s talk about this.”

“Of course you aren’t going to! You’re the man. Marriage is all for the men.”

“You don’t even know for certain what you’re talking about.”

“I don’t have to, to know that death is better.”

“Yes you do! You can’t make an informed decision based on fear of things you think might be true.”

Sithias sighed, “The decision is made...”

Alric turned to him, “I need time. Forcing her into this isn’t going to work. I need to be able to work through this.”

Sithias considered it and finally nodded, “You have two weeks.”

“Thank you. I just have to wipe the misconceptions out of her head. If we force her, she’ll either kill herself or shift.”

“Two weeks,” Sithias said, and then disappeared.

The branches holding Kyrin slowly let go, and she grabbed her flail and looked around, "Come back, Sithias!"

"Let's not provoke him, ok?" Alric said calmly.

"I'm not going to marry you."

"Our gods want it, so I suggest we talk through everything you're afraid of. I want to marry you. I love you, and it would bring us together."

"Sure! Bring us together you so can do repulsive things to me."

"Like what?" he asked, standing back to watch her.

"Well... I don't know."

"Then how do you know they are repulsive and not extremely pleasant?"

"Because I know."

"You don't. Now let's go back before we get attacked out here."

Knowing that Sithias had the portals blocked, Kyrin finally agreed to return to the castle to make a decision. She wasn't going to get married, period. She swore to herself at the age of five that she would never marry, and no strange dimension was going to change that.

When they got to the castle, Alric stopped at the floor with the Lady's chamber and shook his head, "No, you have to stay in my room."

"What's wrong with mine?" she asked, ignoring how the Castle Protectors looked at her oddly. She had forgotten she was still covered in the blood of her sacrifice.

“Nothing, but I want to know you aren’t running off or killing yourself.”

“I won’t.”

“I don’t trust you. Up the stairs,” he said, pointing.

She huffed and then walked up the stairs, followed by Alric, who was relieved. He wasn’t sure she would agree to move into his room, so he could watch her. He had to remind himself that she had no reason to fear the bedroom. Her fears of marital rituals were so unknown that she hadn’t associated bedrooms with any of them.

Once in the bedroom, she sat down on the floor in front of the fire and looked over at him, outwardly furious.

Alric sat down on the bed, “Still can’t get you in a bed?”

“No”

“How do you sleep on the cold, hard floor?”

She didn’t answer, but slid onto her side away from him and shut his eyes.

Chapter 17

“I gave them two weeks to work things out,” Sithias said as he looked along the vast dimension full of nothing. It was a neutral

place for gods to meet, where nothing could be harmed if a fight broke out.

“Why? I ordered her and I expect my orders to be followed immediately,” Daemionis asked.

“Alric fears for her life. You know as well as I do that she’s seen nothing good come out of marriage. She’s terrified from what she grew up with.”

“I don’t care... an order is an order.”

“Let Alric do what he can. You are to blame for this,” Sithias told him. His white battle tunic was in stark contrast to the green scaly demon standing across from him.

“Why should I? She is mine, and I told her to do something... Why are you blaming me anyway?”

“You know what she fears! If you had let her learn as she grew, she wouldn’t be terrified of the unknown.”

“I didn’t want her to know. The second she finds a mate she’ll change.”

“So why let her now?”

“She’s changing anyway. Since she turned 17, she’s started getting lonely, and it’s getting in the way of her missions.”

“That’s the only reason?”

“Yes”

Sithias shook his head, “Well that’s stupid.”

“I don’t want to wait two weeks,” Daemionis said, growling slightly.

“You can either wait two weeks and let Alric calm her down, or you may have a dead bride on your hands.”

“She has a mercy killer already?”

“No! She plans on doing it herself.”

Daemionis smiled evilly, “Yes, the girl would do that, wouldn’t she.”

“I know she would. Alric isn’t going to let her out of his sight. Now you take the blame for this and leave them alone for two weeks.”

“I won’t! It was Creteloc’s idea to keep her from finding carnal pleasures. It’s worked too. Kyrin is as loyal as they come.”

“That has nothing to do with denying her knowledge. She’s a lawful evil, and you know it.”

He nodded, “Yes, I do. It’s part of why I keep her around.”

“You keep her around to use her magic for your benefit.”

“That too.”

“Two weeks.”

Daemionis nodded, “Fine. But if she kills herself, I get her, even if she’s in your dimension.”

“Very well.”

“Lord Alric just thought that we could help you,” the young woman said. She glanced at her friend, and then over to Kyrin, who was sitting in the bay window in the castle’s library.

“I’ve been married for eight years, to Rovald,” the other woman said. “Happily married. We met at the summer festival and have two beautiful daughters.”

Kyrin was getting sick. Alric had been watching her like a hawk for three days, and she got no time to herself to think. Now she was stuck in the library with two sniveling women who gushed about their husbands and children. She wanted nothing to do with the entire thing and if given the chance, would just end it.

She knew that preparations were being made for the wedding, even though she still swore it wasn’t going to happen. She hadn’t heard from Sithias or Daemionis and had plans formed on how to end her life without being stopped.

“You can ask us questions, anything you like,” the first told her. “No men are around so we can tell you anything.”

“I don’t want to know anything about marriage in this bloody place,” Kyrin snapped at her, though she kept looking out the window.

“What do you mean in this place?”

Kyrin shrugged.

“Plus, you get to marry the King! He’s handsome, and kind, and you are just too lucky.”

Kyrin saw it shimmer through the window, and her eyes grew wide. A portal key was sitting on the grass not 100 yards from the library window, three floors below it. Sithias must have slipped out of the dimension, and his influence faded enough a natural portal had emerged.

Her heart raced. She had to get to it before it disappeared. As the women behind her spoke about their perfect marriages, Kyrin slid the window open and looked down on the grass, far below.

“Are you hot?” the first woman asked her.

“It is stuffy in the library.”

Both gasped when Kyrin slid out the window and disappeared. They ran to it and looked down as Kyrin hit the ground and started to run. Two Knights had seen her and were in hot pursuit. Her boots of speed were locked up, so she was using human speed.

“Stop!” one of them shouted.

Kyrin had twisted an ankle on the long fall, and wasn't able to move as fast as she wanted, though the portal key still seemed solid. The Knights were gaining and now others had joined. They had strict orders to watch her and stop her if she began to disappear, though they didn't quite know what that meant.

The first one that reached her grabbed her arm, just as she reached down to take a locket from the ground. She spun and tried to hit his neck, but his other hand blocked her and grabbed her wrist.

She dropped suddenly, throwing him forward, and he rolled over her and landed at the base of the invisible portal. When she scrambled to her feet, another Knight grabbed her from behind and locked his hands around her at her waist.

“Stop fighting us,” he said, starting back for the castle. “King Alric said you aren't to be alone out of the castle.”

No matter how hard she fought, she couldn't get free, and he had her hands trapped at her sides. Alric had taken her flail and locked it in the weapon's room, so all she had was magic. While she could easily best most men in a fight, Alric's seasoned Knights

were well trained and heavily buffed. They all had rippling muscles and broad, thick shoulders and necks.

“What happened?” Trox asked, coming out to meet them.

“She jumped out of the library window,” the Knight said, and put her down. As was instructed by Alric, the Knight at each side of her each took a hand to keep them apart.

“Did you injure yourself?” Trox asked, looking her over.

“No”

“She’s limping slightly,” the Knight told him.

“King Alric is busy right now. I will watch her,” Trox said, and started back inside. The Knights forced Kyrin to follow, and only let go when they were both in Trox’s room.

Kyrin looked around at the boiling caldrons and steaming pots in his room.

“Interested?” Trox asked, seeing her eye a green bubbling potion.

She tried to sound mad, but was suddenly curious, “What is it?”

“That’s a truth serum,” he said, walking over to her. He pointed to the others, “I’m trying to make a healing potion, but right now all it does is get rid of warts.”

She couldn’t help but smile, “Are you serious?”

“Why, yes, I am.” He looked at her over his moon-shaped spectacles, and his eyes twinkled. She’d never liked him, but realized she didn’t have any reason not to.

“What’s in it?” she asked, bending to take a closer look.

“Chervil, Knotgrass, and Belladonna.”

“I don’t know what those are. Can I see them?”

“Sure,” Trox said, and then dug around in a large cabinet. He came back with three bottles, and she looked at them.

She thought for a moment, “Have you added the blood from a dying man?”

“No, why would I?”

“Add some of the green leaves with red veins, and I’ll be right back,” she said, and ran out of his room. Once he saw she had Knights with her, he did as she asked and watched the potion go from green to almost pink, “Curious.”

Kyrin came back in, and Trox was sure she looked happier than she had in weeks, “Just a drop, this stuff is hard to come by.”

“It’s hard to come by blood from a dying man?”

“He has to be dying, so you get the blood and kill him. Then it works,” she said, unstopping a vial.

He watched her, “So where did you get it?”

She ignored him and put one tiny drop of blood into the pot. Once it started to bubble and swirls of color swarmed up into the smoke, she stepped back, as did Trox.

When it stopped boiling, she stepped forward and smelled it, “Done.”

“That’s it?” he asked, looking into the pot.

“Of course. So why learn potions?”

“They come in handy. I’d like to be able to send healing potions with the Knights, for instance. However, the potion making left with the...,” Trox looked at her with wide eyes, “magic users.”

“Has nothing to do with magic. You just have to know what’s needed,” she said, looking down at the potion. “Let’s give it a go.”

“I don’t know anyone that’s injured.”

She rolled her eyes and picked up the knife he was using to cut up roots. As he watched, she cut her palm slightly. Seeing what she was doing, he ripped the knife from her hand, “Why did you do that!?”

“To test it,” she said. She dipped a spoon into the potion and then took a sip. Trox watched as the wound healed slowly and was quickly gone without even a scar.

“That’s... oh my god. You did it!”

“Of course. You just have to know what the potion needs in return for helping.”

“Meaning what?”

“Well... you wanted to heal a human, so it takes the death of a human to make. It has to have payment for doing what you want it to.”

“It’s a potion.”

She smiled, “If you want it to work...”

“Fine, let’s look at this one,” he said, walking over to the bubbling vial. “I want to make a truth spell.”

“Ok, so what does it do right now?”

“Makes people vomit.”

She laughed, “Great. What’s in it?”

Trox walked over to his cabinet again and started going through it. He handed her the eighteen vials, and she started looking through them. Half she put on one side, half on the other.

When she was done, she pointed to the pile on her left, “Those are useless for lying.”

He nodded and put them away, “Repayment then?”

“Lying... lying...,” she said, deep in thought. “Let’s try the tears of someone in mourning.”

He frowned, “Why?”

“Well, when someone is in mourning, they are too distraught to lie. So we give the potion pure truth.”

“How do you come up with this stuff?” he asked, looking over her carefully.

“I learned the theory from an Assassin that makes poisons. It’s the same idea,” she said. “So shall we make a truth serum?”

“I’m fresh out of tears.”

She smiled, “True. Well, we can work on something else.”

He nodded, suddenly realizing he was enjoying this time with her, “What shall we make then?”

“An age potion?”

“To make people younger?”

“Sure, why not?”

“That goes against nature.”

“And your healing doesn’t?” she asked him.

“What’s this one called?” Kyrin asked, holding out a bottle. She was sitting in the window as the night put cool air into the warm room. Trox was stirring a pot that was bubbling over the fire. It was well past midnight, but neither was ready to stop.

“That’s Laurel.”

“It’s good if you eat rotten food.”

Trox frowned, “Why would you eat rotten food?”

“Because that’s all you have to eat. You choke it down and then chew on some Laurel.”

“I’ll remember that,” he said, and wrote something down in a book.

“Hand tired yet?” she asked, swinging her feet.

“Yes, very.”

“This one takes a while.”

“I don’t see how useful it can be to turn wine into water.”

“That’s because you’ve never been without it.”

“True”

“Don’t stir too fast or it could explode.”

He looked over at her as she sat in the window and again noticed how beautiful she was. He wondered if she had any idea of her looks, “Might I ask you a question?”

“Sure”

“Do you love Alric?”

“I don’t know.”

“I think you do,” Trox told her.

“Love is useless. It can’t save you, or help you when you’re lost. It can’t feed you or give you water...”

“You’re wrong. It can save you.”

“How?”

“You’d be amazed what love can get you out of. Hope does a lot.”

“Love doesn’t give hope though.”

“It does too.”

“When were you in love?” Kyrin asked him.

“It is my turn for questions. So, you do love him, I’m sure of it. Marriage is the natural progression.”

“There’s nothing natural about it.”

“Why not?”

“Humans weren’t made to be a possession.”

“So marrying Alric would make you his possession?”

“Yes, to be used, abused, passed around, and eventually either killed or sold when he’s tired of me.”

Trox smiled, “I have never heard of a husband that would allow another to have his wife.”

Kyrin reached to her side and grabbed the mug sitting there. She drank it and then put it down, “That stuff’s pretty good. What is it?”

“It’s an ale I make.”

“Is there more?”

“Sure, help yourself.”

Kyrin got up and poured herself another mug before sitting down in the window.

“Just don’t fall out.” Trox laughed when she almost spilled the ale sitting back down.

“I won’t. It’s cooler over here,” she said.

“Ok, so... you get married you become the possession of the husband.”

“Right, no more decisions, no more thoughts or opinions. You do what he says and nothing else.”

“You think Alric would do that?”

“I know he would.” Kyrin took another long drink.

“Alric isn’t that controlling, especially to someone he loves.”

“Do you have any of the fluid from when a baby is born?”

Trox looked at her, “Do what?”

“You know... the squishy stuff that comes out with the baby.”

“No, I don’t have that on me at the moment.”

“You can bring back the dead with that potion.”

He looked up, “Really?”

“Well... sort of. They become kind of a walking corpse. If you’re fighting alone though, it can come in handy.”

“I would imagine. So these vile acts you speak of after marriage.”

“Yes?”

“What are they?” he asked, trying to hide the amusement from his voice.

“I don’t really know.”

“How do you even know there is such an act?”

“I’ve heard new brides talking about it, I guess it’s horrible.”

“I see.”

“Then when the husband gets tired of his wife, he forces a baby into her as a punishment.”

“Where did you hear that?”

“Around,” she said, taking another drink.

“I see, and how does he do that exactly?”

“I’m not sure about that either.”

Trox stopped stirring for a moment, “How is it, you’ve traveled across the universe but don’t know?”

“Well, it’s not something people speak about. It’s done in secret when the husband is mad and the wife is helpless.”

“What if I promise you that Alric won’t control you? He isn’t like that and will treat his wife as an equal.”

She shrugged, “At first, I’m sure. It’s when they tire of the wife that they make her have a baby and after that who wants her?”

“You have the most eschewed views of things I’ve ever heard of,” Trox told her.

“I’ve seen it though.”

“Tell me something personal. Do you like when Alric kisses you?” Trox asked.

“He holds my hands.”

Trox laughed, “Yes, I know.”

“I do though,” she said, watching the pot boil. “It makes me feel all flittery.”

“What’s flittery?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t you think that if Alric did decide to control you, that you could simply use magic and escape?” Trox asked.

“Hey, that’s true.”

“I cannot imagine a man controlling you.”

“Why’s that?”

“You’re too strong and independent. You’ve been alone your entire life and rely on no one. Any man would be hard-pressed to oppress you.”

She smiled, “That’s so nice of you to say.”

He chuckled as he watched the caldron.

“Even if you aren’t controlled, you’re still a possession to be sold at will. Not to mention, the baby thing.”

“Here, most women want a baby.”

“Which is odd.”

“No, it’s odd not to want one. Women are nurturers.”

“Not all of us.”

“True, I don’t see you as a nurturer.”

“Is that potion blue yet?”

Trox looked over, “No, it’s still more indigo.”

“So you tell me how babies are put into the wife.”

“No”

“Why not?”

“It’s just private.”

Just when Alric stepped into the room, the potion Trox was stirring exploded, sending smoke up into the room. Kyrin fell back laughing, almost falling out of the open window, and Trox began to cough and wave the smoke away from him.

Alric frowned and looked at them, “What’s going on? It’s nearly 4am.”

“I told you not to stir too fast,” Kyrin said, righting herself.

“My hand was tired,” Trox said indignantly.

“Don’t make me ask again,” Alric said, frowning.

Trox smiled, “Kyrin knows how to make potions.”

“You do?” Alric raised his eyebrows.

“Yes, of course.”

“What did you make?”

“We made a healing potion.”

“It’s 4am and that’s all you’ve managed?”

“Well, we were working on another but Trox blew it up,” Kyrin explained.

“It’s late. Let’s go to bed.”

She nodded and got down out of the window, then swayed slightly.

“Are you drunk?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Yes, she is,” Trox told him. “My ale loosens lips.”

“Shhhh,” Kyrin said, putting her hand over Trox’s mouth.

Alric studied him and made a mental note to ask him about that later. He then took Kyrin’s arm and led her up to the bedroom to sleep.

When she laid down on the floor, he laid beside her and smiled.

“What?” she asked, looking over at him.

“Did you have a nice time with Trox?”

“I did actually.”

“And did you jump out of the library window?”

Kyrin nodded, “Yes, I did. I saw a portal key.”

“So you tried to run.”

She nodded and then yawned.

Alric leaned over her and took her wrists in his hands before pressing his lips to hers. She tasted like alcohol, but seemed to relax under his touch. He was pleased when she responded, and her kiss became more passionate to match his.

His hands ached to caress her skin and feel her toned body beneath his fingers, but he couldn't risk her casting on him, and he liked how it frustrated her when he held her hands. Her body seemed to fit perfectly against his as he moved on top of her, and his kiss grew stronger.

She inhaled softly as his kiss traveled down her neck and then up to her ear as he whispered, “Marry me.”

“Alric,” she sighed.

“Marry me,” he said again, kissed her softly, and then looked into her eyes.

She hesitated and then nodded slightly.

Alric smiled, “Thank you.”

“If you do it though, I'll turn you into a troll.”

“Do what?” he asked, watching her. Her eyes slowly slid shut, so he crawled off of her and went to bed.

Chapter 18

“You look lovely, my dear,” Trox said, looking at Kyrin.

She was staring in the mirror at the white, long sleeved, long skirted dress she wore. The skirt trailed several feet behind her and left nowhere to put her flail.

“You don’t need your flail tonight,” Trox said, sensing her problem. “There will be 100 Knights in attendance along with most of the Kingdom’s leaders.”

“I’m going to be sick,” she whispered softly.

“Just take a deep breath.”

She spun and disappeared into the washroom as Trox chuckled.

Alric walked in, fully medalled out in his royal tunic and even a thin gold crown on his head, “How is she?”

“I think she’s sick.”

Alric cringed, “Really?”

“She’s had no color for almost an hour, so yes, I think she’s sick.”

“Are you ok?” Alric called through the door.

“I changed my mind,” she said weakly.

“It’s too late. Everyone’s here and we start in 20 minutes.”

Trox smiled, “I’ll have her there.”

“If she seriously can’t get out of the bathroom, we can do this in secret.”

“The Kingdom needs to see you married. It’s important for royal blood to hold the line.”

Alric sighed, "I know."

"However..."

"Don't say it," Alric said. "We're not even discussing children until she's comfortable with marriage."

Trox nodded, "Good idea. Sire, you better head down."

Alric glanced again at the door and then walked out.

"Kyrin, dear, are you ok?" Trox asked.

"I can't do it."

"I'll be with you."

"Just go for me."

Trox laughed, "That I can't do."

When she walked out, she was pale with a tint of green, "I need to lay down."

"It'll mess up the dress and your hair." Trox had watched for four hours while two women from Valhara had strung white beads and tiny white flowers into Kyrin's dark hair.

Kyrin turned again and looked in the mirror. She would give almost anything to change into her fighting tunic and pants. She also would feel better if she had her flail. Auldian and some of the top-ranking elves were there, and she would be defenseless.

"You do look quite lovely," Trox said again.

She turned to him, "What precautions are in place in case I decide to cast on everyone and get away?"

"What makes you...", he sighed, "a lot."

“What?”

“Well, Alric will have your hand.”

“I can still bring them together.”

He smiled, “I will have the other.”

“I won’t cast,” she said, looking sideways in the mirror at her hair.

He smiled and put his hand out, “Good, well, it’s time to go.”

She instantly paled and looked at his hand.

“Calm down.”

Kyrin nodded, but didn’t take his hand.

Trox reached out and took her hand, then pulled her out of the door as she slightly tugged against him.

“I’m going to puke,” Kyrin said when the voices of the gathered could be heard.

Trox just laughed and then stopped at the doors where four Knights were waiting, facing inside the castle’s church. Everyone grew silent and Kyrin briefly considered shifting out of Paragoy when she heard Sithias’ voice.

“Please stand out of respect for the bride.”

The Knights moved aside, and Kyrin backed away when all eyes fell on her. Trox pulled harder and finally got her through the door.

A broad grin crossed Sithias’ face when Kyrin walked in, and Alric shook his head and motioned for one of the Knights at the door. The Knight looked down at Kyrin, and the flail grasped tightly in

her hand. He reached out and took it, half expecting her to turn him into a flaming ball of fire.

Kyrin was too nervous to even notice that the flail was taken. She focused in on Alric, trying to ignore the oohs and ahhs of the crowd. Trox again started walking down the aisle and pulled her along behind two little girls from town that were throwing rose petals at her feet.

Once standing before Sithias, Alric took her right hand, and Trox kept her left as he stood beside them.

Sithias motioned for the audience to sit down, and the room grew silent.

His voice boomed through the ballroom, and Kyrin looked up at him with wide eyes. She pulled slightly at her hands, but they were being held tightly.

“It is a joyous day when the King of Valhara finds a wife. The Kingdom is then blessed with the kind nature of a woman who can tame the wild heart of such a young leader.”

Kyrin frowned slightly and wondered if he was actually referring to her.

“What we have here may be a bit different. This bride is unique and brings a power to this Kingdom that hasn’t been seen in centuries. Her harsh nature and brutal ways are just what this Kingdom needs.”

She was completely confused by his words, and it was while she mulled over what he was saying that he went into the actual marriage part of the wedding. As Sithias spoke of the roles of a husband in a marriage, she looked over to the side and saw Trox watching his god intently.

It wasn't until Alric nudge her that she looked up at Sithias. He was smiling, "Dear, are you listening?"

Kyrin didn't know what to do and was too afraid to lie, so she simply shook her head. A soft laugh sounded from behind her, and the panic within her grew. She tried again to get her hands free. A spell popped into her mind that would freeze everyone in the room, and she could get away.

She struggled harder against Alric and Trox, trying to get her hands free.

"Calm down," Alric whispered, and squeezed her hand softly.

"Ozehshiesh," she whispered, hoping for once she wouldn't need her hands to touch, but nothing happened.

Sithias stopped speaking and looked at her when she spoke.

Alric shrugged slightly and smiled, "She's ok."

The god nodded and continued. Kyrin felt her throat closing off. She'd made a mistake and had realized her deepest fear. When had she agreed to this? When had she actually said she would marry? Her head began to spin, and she looked nervously around her, praying for a way out. She begged for Daemionis to come and get her from the hell she agreed to.

When Alric spoke next to her, she looked at him but couldn't hear what he was saying over the pounding in her ears. The thumping grew louder and faster as Alric looked at her and his lips moved.

He saw the terror in her eyes and leaned forward to whisper into her ear. She wasn't sure how, but she could hear his soft voice, "Calm down. This is almost over."

Her heart raced and she felt herself becoming weak, "Help me."

He kissed her softly and then looked into her eyes, “I’m here, ok? Just focus on me.”

When he felt her start to give way under his hand, he took her hand in his other and wrapped an arm around her waist. Trox looked over at him, concerned, and then motioned for Sithias to continue.

When Sithias called her name, she looked up at him. It was like looking through a tunnel, and she started to pull away, but hands held her firmly.

“Do you take him?” Sithias asked again, clearly entertained at her fear.

Kyrin looked at Alric and he leaned forward again and whispered, “You have to say yes.”

She was trapped. Daemionis wanted this marriage, as did Sithias and Alric. No one was going to back her if she turned and fled. She had nowhere to go that would take her fully out from under Daemionis. Not having a choice, she managed to whisper a strained, “Yes.”

Sithias’ voice boomed, “As god of this land and over the people of Valhara, I hereby announce the union of the Lord and Lady of Valhara, Alric and Kyrin.”

A cheer erupted, and Trox almost lost Kyrin’s hand when she jerked suddenly away from him. His hand tightened as he looked at her, noticing she was still pale and would run at any moment.

As was customary, the guests left first to go to the reception in the ballroom, while Sithias, Kyrin, and Alric stayed behind to be anointed in private. This would make them the official royalty of Valhara. Trox stayed behind, as requested, to keep Kyrin’s left hand.

Alric dropped to his knees when asked, but Kyrin remained standing, not sure what to do. Her stomach was settling down now that she didn't have hundreds watching her, but she was still wondering how to shift out of Paragoy.

“Kyrin, I need you on your knees,” Sithias said, smiling down at her.

She shook her head and tried to get her hands free.

“Do it.” Daemionis' voice rang out angrily in the room. Trox and Alric both looked around, but didn't see the demon.

Again not having a choice, Kyrin dropped to her knees and lowered her eyes as Alric's hand tightened on hers.

Sithias finally began, “Alric, having been born of noble blood and of great Kings, you are taking this woman into your life to rule my honorable Kingdom of Valhara. Such trust in another is dangerous, and it will be your responsibility as her husband to see that she is learned in the ways of our people and adheres to the laws of the land. Do you so agree?”

“Yes, my Lord,” Alric said.

Sithias gently touched the tip of a long, glowing sword against Alric's right shoulder, “I hereby anoint you as her husband. Your souls will become one.”

He lightly touched the tip of the sword to Alric's left shoulder, and stepped back. Alric stood and took the sword from his god, and then turned to Kyrin.

He knelt down and whispered, “Kyrin, I need both of my hands. Swear to me, you aren't going to cast.”

Kyrin felt his hand release, and she nodded slightly as Sithias chuckled behind Alric. Alric stood finally and used his right hand

to draw the cross of Sithias on his forehead before taking the sword in his hands.

He brought the tip to Kyrin's right shoulder, "You, Kyrin, being chosen by the King of Valhara of the noble Holy Knights of Sithias, are hereby touched by the sword of the gods, anointing you as ruler of the land of Valhara. You are forthwith to abide by the sacred rules of the ruling lands and to always put the people of Valhara before yourself."

Alric stopped talking when Kyrin's finger twitched slightly at her side. He was secretly waiting for her to panic and turn all three of them into trees.

"Go on," Sithias whispered after a few seconds.

He cleared his throat and moved the sword tip to her left shoulder, "By agreeing to abide by the laws of Sithias and Valhara you are anointed as Lady of Valhara to go forth and do the bidding of Sithias and to honor the King and the laws of the realm so long as you live. I pass this virtue to you."

She swallowed hard and looked up at him when he handed the sword back to Sithias and again knelt by her side. He took her hand in his and held them out in front of them.

Sithias pulled a thin gold chain out of nowhere and bound their wrists, "This chain is to remind you that you are now bound, body, mind, and soul."

He then laid the sword down in front of them, "The sword a reminder that you are to protect each other, and the people of Valhara."

Again out of thin air, a delicate gold crown appeared, and he placed it on Kyrin's head, "The crown a symbol of your loyalty to Valhara."

Sithias laid a shield before them, “The shield a symbol of respect, reverence, and duty to myself and to the Kings of the past.”

“Lastly, you swear of your purity, of which gives you the ability and obligation to further the noble family line of Alric’s family, and to...” Sithias stopped talking when Kyrin tensed.

“Skip that part,” Alric said, tightening his grip.

“I cannot skip it,” Sithias told him. “She has to swear that she is pure...”

“We know she is! Now skip it.”

“Kyrin has to go through this ceremony,” Trox told him. “It’s been done for hundreds of years.”

Sithias sighed, “Alric, we know she’s pure, but the ceremony must be done. It’s her promise to remain so, to ensure us that any children she produces are of noble heritage.”

With that, Kyrin sprung forward. Alric and Trox weren’t expecting it, and she slipped out of their grasp, grabbed the sword in front of her, and turned it on the two Valharans and their god.

“Kyrin,” Alric said, putting his hands out.

She glared at him, her eyes black, “You said nothing about children.”

“That’s because it’s not a decision we have to make right now,” he explained. “It’s not going to be forced on you.”

“That’s not what he just said!”

“He has to say that, it’s tradition. I’m not my father, nor his father. I don’t feel like it’s my duty to have children.”

“It is your duty,” Sithias told him. “We cannot have non-noble blood ruling Valhara.”

“Can we not!?” Alric snapped at him, and then his eyes grew wide. “I’m sorry, my Lord.”

Sithias chuckled, “Understood, however, she must know her responsibilities as Lady of this land.”

Alric looked back at Kyrin, “Listen to me, ok? I’m never going to force you into anything. What Sithias is saying is just tradition. We’re almost done and then you’ll see that nothing will change. In the morning, you’ll feel the same, and we’ll go about our lives the same as we have been. I swear to you.”

She shook her head, “No! You talked me into marriage, fine... but I am not going to agree before your god to have children!”

“I can’t change the ceremony,” Sithias told her. “However, let’s finish and we can all discuss this later.”

“No! I’m done...”

All three from Paragoy gasped when Daemionis appeared suddenly behind Kyrin. She didn’t see her god, and kept the sword pointed at the men, “I agreed to this marriage to appease Daemionis and to try to stay with Alric, but it’s not worth it if you’re going to force children onto me!”

Without a word, Daemionis slammed his fist into the back of Kyrin’s neck, and she crumpled to the floor.

Alric rushed forward to see if she was ok, and Sithias glared at Daemionis, “Was that entirely necessary?”

“She sometimes forgets that I am in charge, and she is to do as I ask,” Daemionis said, pleased. “Now you may finish this ceremony once and for all.”

“Leave”

Daemionis glanced down at Kyrin, smiled wickedly, and then disappeared.

“Is she ok?” Trox asked, joining Alric on the floor.

“Kyrin, can you hear me?” Alric asked, brushing the hair from her face.

Sithias reached down and picked up the sword, and then stood back and watched them.

“She’s alive,” Alric said. “I think he just knocked her out.”

“Seemed a bit harsh,” Trox said, irritated.

“You can expect nothing more from a demon,” Sithias said. He walked up and looked down at her, “We should take advantage and finish.”

“While she’s unconscious?” Alric asked.

Sithias smiled, “Yes, it could save your life.”

Alric sighed when Sithias continued, “Swear of your purity, of which gives you the ability and obligation to further the noble family line of Alric’s family, and to bring happiness to this castle in the name of your... erm... in my name.”

Sithias again touched the right shoulder of both Alric and then Kyrin, and smiled, “As my power extends, so shall you reign.”

Trox shut his eyes and lowered his head, followed by Alric.

“She’s going to have quite a headache,” Sithias said, smiling down at her.

Alric opened his eyes and then sighed, “Yes, she is. I’ll go get her to bed and put a cold rag on her eyes. That might help.”

Trox shook his head, “I’ll do that. You need to attend the reception.”

“I’m not going to leave her side when she’s like this.”

“Trox will watch over her. You still have your duty,” Sithias said, and then he shimmered and disappeared.

Alric took her hand, “I shouldn’t have done this, Trox. She’s not ready.”

“She will see soon that her fears are unfounded, and her life won’t be as different as it was before,” Trox said. “This will make it easier. She no longer has to fear marriage.”

“But children... she doesn’t even know how they are made.”

“I know, but as her husband it’s your duty to teach her about all of that. Now go to the reception, I’ll watch over her,” Trox said. He bent down and lifted her gently.

Trox watched over her until she started to stir. He’d shut all of the drapes and had a cool rag over her eyes. She sat up and grabbed her head, “What happened?”

“Daemionis has no patience at all, does he?” Trox asked, handing her a glass of water.

She shook her head and took a drink, “I don’t remember the end.”

“Sithias finished and then I brought you here to recover. How is your head?”

“Bad,” she said, and then laid back on the bed.

“The reception will be over soon, and Alric will be back to care for you.”

She nodded and then shut her eyes. Her head was pounding, and her neck felt like it wasn't aligned properly, “What am I going to do, Trox?”

“You're going to trust your husband. He has only your best interest at heart.”

“Don't trust anyone,” she whispered.

“It's a little late for that. You have to trust your husband, and you have to try to understand what he tells you. Alric is a good man, and a good King, and it's not in his nature to hurt those he has sworn to protect,” Trox explained.

A few minutes later, Alric came into the room and sat down beside them on the bed, “How are you?”

She just shook her head.

“She has a headache,” Trox said, irritated. “That demon is lucky he didn't paralyze her, hitting her neck like that.”

“I know,” Alric said, touching her face lightly. “I never thought I could love anyone like this, Trox.”

“You are going to have your hands full tonight, so I will leave,” Trox said, and then quickly left after shutting the door.

“Kyrin?” Alric whispered softly.

She stirred slightly and then pulled the rag from her eyes and looked up at him.

“Are you ok?”

Kyrin nodded.

“Can I get you anything?”

“My back hurts,” she said, shifting slightly.

“Maybe from the fall when Daemionis hit you.”

“Or this bed.”

He smiled, “That too. Would you prefer the floor?”

She nodded and then Alric helped her off of the bed. He handed her a nightgown, and she went into an adjacent room to change. The room was for bathing and had a giant tub in the middle. She looked at it, shocked, and wondered how many servants with buckets it took to fill it. After changing, she put the white dress on the side of the tub and walked back out to Alric. She was nauseous because of the headache, so she immediately laid down on the floor.

Alric watched until she fell asleep, and then put his hand against her forehead. His hand began to glow slightly, and he chanted softly, moving his hand down her head and onto her neck, where he concentrated further. He was afraid Daemionis had injured her badly, and wanted her to feel better when she woke up.

As the night drew on, he watched her sleep and held her in his arms. His back began to ache though, and just before dawn, he moved up to the bed and fell asleep.

The sun was high in the sky when Alric woke up. He first glanced down and saw Kyrin was still asleep on the floor. He wondered how she was able to sleep so well without any comfort, but figured you would get used to what you had. He stretched and then stood up and opened the curtain. When he turned back, Kyrin was opening her eyes.

“Good morning,” he said, sitting down beside her.

She sat up and nodded.

He smiled, “So do you feel different?”

She laughed, “No.”

“I told you that you wouldn’t. I don’t even have shackles set up for you yet though.”

Kyrin looked at him, “I’m sorry I threatened you.”

He laughed, “We had it coming.”

“You should have told me that I was expected to have children.”

“I didn’t tell you because I don’t expect it. I don’t want you to do anything out of character or anything you’re afraid of.”

“If I don’t feel any different, why do brides speak so badly of their wedding night?”

He smiled, “When you trust me more, I’ll tell you.”

She nodded and then stood slowly.

“Why don’t you go take a bath, and I’ll get breakfast,” Alric suggested.

“Someone will need to fill it.”

“We have a system for that. It’s already full.”

“Fancy,” she said, and disappeared into the washroom.

Alric heard voices outside of his door, and he grew furious. He pulled on his clothes and then stepped out, shutting the door behind him. Trox was there along with two Priests and one of the historians.

Trox bowed, “We’re here.”

“No,” Alric said sternly.

“We have to. It’s tradition.”

“I don’t really care, and as King, I say no.”

“Even the King cannot deny this,” the historian said. “It’s done to protect the noble bloodline.”

“You aren’t going in there.”

Trox sighed, “We already know, my Lord. We just have to see for the marriage to be complete.”

“It’s barbaric and I’ll not allow it.”

“If you’re worried that Kyrin will know, we can be quiet and discreet.”

“No”

“Are you worried that we will find nothing?” one of the Priests asked.

“You can take this up with Sithias, but I’m not letting you in there,” Alric said again.

Trox frowned, “Did you not...”

“You’re not getting in there.”

“My King, the marriage isn’t complete until...”

“I know, now leave,” Alric said angrily. “Have our breakfast brought up.”

They watched Alric disappear into his bedroom and slam the door.

“I’ll ask Sithias what he wants to do,” Trox said, and they all headed down the stairs.

Back in the room, Alric quickly gathered up her blankets and shoved them under the bed, and answered the door when their breakfast arrived. The servants loaded up the table by the fire and then bowed and left.

Kyrin came out a few minutes later, freshly bathed and back in her tunic, “Where are my blankets?”

He smiled, “I hid them.”

“Why?” she asked, sitting down to eat.

“We’re supposed to share a bed. It would start rumors if they knew that I slept on the bed, and you slept on the floor.”

“That makes no sense.”

He sat down and dished up his plate, “There are a lot of stupid traditions around marriage.”

She nodded and took a bite, “So will I be moving out of the Lady’s chamber then?”

“Yes, this is your room now too.”

Once finished, she sat back and watched him.

He smiled when he saw her looking at him, “What?”

“What do I do now?”

“What do you mean?”

She shrugged.

“Are you expecting me to tell you what to do?”

Kyrin just watched him.

Alric chuckled, “Do what you want. I’m not an authoritarian that is going to tell you what to do.”

Her eyes narrowed, “You have no wishes for me today?”

“You have no idea,” he said, and then grinned.

“So spill it.”

“Not right now. I need to go talk to Sithias. Why don’t you go do something?”

“Like what?”

“Kyryn, I’m not going to tell you what to do.”

“What if I want to go horseback riding?”

“I’d say have fun,” Alric said, and then stood up and kissed her lightly. “I shouldn’t be more than an hour.”

She nodded and watched him leave, still half expecting him to turn around and order her to do something. When he didn’t return, she went in search of her flail. The Captain of the Knights had it, and returned it after talking to Trox.

Once her weapon was in place, she went out and found a horse waiting for her. She felt like the people in the castle were watching her and talking behind her back. Soft whispers stopped when she walked by, and it was making her nervous.

Kyryn still felt awkward on a horse, but was starting to learn to enjoy the speed. As she was in a hurry to get far away from the people of Valhara, she kicked him into a fast run. They tore through the trees and she smiled. Nothing had happened last night, no beatings, no tortures or punishments. She was sure when she’d pulled the sword on the King, that she would have to endure humiliation and agony.

Her horse stopped suddenly and reared back, sending her flying over the back of him. She hit the ground hard, and it knocked the wind out of her. It wasn't until she got to her knees that she saw eight men standing around her, all wearing the battered armor of the Qualsax Warriors.

She started for her flail, but it was torn out of her belt, and she was pulled to her feet and restrained by two of them.

“Fancy meeting you out here,” one of them said, smiling at her with black, cracked teeth.

“Surprised she could ride a horse after the wedding night,” one of them said, laughing.

“She married a Valharan. That's why. I bet she's even walking right.”

“Wouldn't happen if she married a Qualsax!” They all laughed when the man spoke.

“Leave me alone,” she yelled.

“Or what?” the Qualsax asked, walking up to her. He reached down and kissed her forcefully before grinning and stepping back, “Now that you've had a Valharan, maybe we need to show you the ways of the Qualsax.”

Kyrin struggled to get her hands free when he reached out and began to squeeze her breast roughly. He just laughed and then tore her tunic open in front, leaving only the thin white shirt beneath it.

“It's obvious why the King picked you,” he said, running his tongue along his lips. “At least he has good taste. I'll give him that much.”

The Qualsax moved back to her and kissed her again, using his hand against the back of her head to smash her face into his. His

other hand slipped into the back of her pants and painfully squeezed her butt. When his tongue slipped into her mouth, she bit hard, and her mouth instantly filled with blood.

He moved back angrily and then backhanded her, “You’ll behave, or I’ll have your head.”

She spit the blood at his feet and then glared up at him.

“This is the way I see it,” he said, now grinning again. “If I take you, then there’s a chance that the next heir to the throne of Valhara will be a Qualsax.”

The Qualsax restraining her forced her to the forest floor, and she kicked out when he came near her, “Last warning…”

“Last warning?” he said, laughing, “or what? You don’t know us… and by the time your King finds out I’ve had my way with you, I’ll already have ruined you.”

He reached down and swiftly removed her pants, and then stood up and admired her body, “Damn.”

Kyrin kicked out at him again, catching him squarely in the groin. He doubled over and she almost got loose from the Qualsax restraining her, but they retightened their grip.

One of the watching Qualsax moved to her quickly and kicked her in the side several times, before the other regained composure and stood up, “Stop, I’ll get her in other ways.”

Kyrin couldn’t breathe. She had stabbing chest pains, and each breath made it worse. She was also filled with a panic, not sure what the Qualsax had in mind to do with her. The look in his eyes was feral, and it sent terror through her.

The Warrior knelt between her knees and ran his hands up her hips, “I do hope you aren’t already impregnated. I would love nothing more than to have a Qualsax ruling Valhara.”

He dug his jagged nails into her stomach and ran them down, leaving bloody trails along the sides of her abdomen. When she screamed in pain, the others laughed and his grin broadened.

“Now to show you a real man,” he said, and began to unfasten his belt.

It took less than a second. One of the Qualsax holding her arm relaxed the slightest bit, and she jerked her arm free.

“Ozehshiesh.” She twisted, slamming her hands together, and the Qualsax Warriors instantly froze.

Catching her breath, Kyrin pulled her arm away from the frozen Qualsax and crawled out from under the one at her knees. Her stomach was bleeding from the scratches, and her side hurt to even move. She clutched it as she stood against a tree and looked back at the Qualsax.

First, she pulled her pants on, and then walked over to the leader of the Qualsax and removed a dagger from the sheath at his side. She walked up to the Qualsax he faced, and cut his neck, stepping back as the blood poured out over the floor, and he sunk to the moss-covered ground.

“I don’t know what made you think I’m an easy target,” she said. She knew they could see, and could hear her, but couldn’t do anything about it.

She did the same to the next Qualsax, but held a handful of his hair so the blood squirted out over his companions. When she let go, he also fell motionless to the forest floor.

By the time seven of them were dead, she was covered in blood and feeling the evil running through her veins. She walked over to stand before the Qualsax leader, “You aren’t going to get off as easily as them. What were you going to do to me?”

She walked slowly around him, studying his armor and the tattoos across his face.

When she faced him, she grinned maliciously, “You are going to feel pain, and you can’t do anything about it. I’ll offer up your suffering to Daemionis. He’ll enjoy this.”

Once he was dead also, she mounted the horse and kicked him, heading back for the castle. She had to take it slowly, as the sway of the horse made her side hurt worse. The adrenaline was wearing off, and her pain was becoming more prevalent.

By the time she got to the castle grounds, she was slumped over and fighting unconsciousness. Breathing was almost unbearable, and her head was pounding.

Knights rushed at her when they saw her, and one of them pulled her off of the horse and laid her down on the lush green grass in front of the castle.

“Get the King,” he said, looking her over.

“Four of you head out, find what attacked her,” the Captain yelled. Four Knights immediately mounted horses and disappeared through the trees, following the direction she’d just come from.

“The King will fix this,” the Knight said, taking her hand. “What attacked you?”

She swallowed hard and managed to speak dryly, “Qualsax.”

His eyes flared, “Qualsax Warriors attacked you?”

She nodded and then squeezed her eyes shut tightly. The world had begun to spin, and the voices of the Knights seemed far away.

“I’m going to move you inside, ok?” the Knight asked her.

She groaned slightly when he picked her up, but he moved slowly and managed to get her into the castle without much pain. When he laid her down, he turned suddenly.

“What happened!?” Alric yelled, running into the room.

“She was attacked by Qualsax,” the Knight said, bowing.

“What did they do?”

He sighed, “We don’t know yet. Knights are out looking for them.”

None of the Knights wanted to state the obvious. They knew what the Qualsax wanted, and no one knew if they had succeeded except for Kyrin. Alric sat down beside her and immediately began working to get rid of her injuries.

He wanted to know immediately how far the Qualsax had gone, and what exactly was said and done. His eyes flared when he saw the deep gashes along her stomach, but he was able to heal them with time. Priests came to help, but he didn’t want anyone else near her.

“Sire,” one of the Knights said, coming into the room.

Alric looked over, “Did you find them?”

He bowed, “Yes, Sir. There are eight dead Qualsax about two miles into the trees.”

“Dead?” he asked, moving his hands slowly over the bruise on her cheek.

“Yes, the throats were cut on seven of them... and the eighth...”

Alric looked up when he hesitated, “What?”

The Knight paused, “Mutilated, Sir.”

“How so?”

“His tongue has been removed, a few fingers, and he has long gashes down his body. I think the fatal blow was... well... his heart was torn out, Sir.”

Alric’s voice was angry, “Was he dressed?”

The other Knights filed out of the room and shut the door before the Knight spoke, “His belt and pants were undone, but that’s all.”

“Leave”

The Knight bowed again and left his King alone. Trox silenced the Knights and had them all in the conference room, waiting word from the King.

“Kyrin?” Alric said softly, and took her hand. At first, he couldn’t understand why she was still so ill, but then he found the mass of bruises on her side and was able to repair the damage.

She opened her eyes slowly, “Where am I?”

“You’re back in the castle,” he said, and kissed her forehead lightly. “Are you hurt anywhere else?”

“No,” she said, and then sat up slowly.

He helped her and then looked into her eyes, “Tell me what happened.”

“They were waiting out in the trees for me, eight Qualsax.”

He nodded.

“They kept saying they wanted to have a Qualsax running Valhara.”

Alric grew furious, “How far did they get?”

“They hit me a few times, kicked me...”

“No, how far?”

She frowned slightly, “To what?”

“Did they... well... did one of them undress at all?”

“He started to, but then I got my hands free.”

“I need you to concentrate and tell me exactly what they did. Even if you don’t understand it, I want to know.”

Alric joined Trox and the Knights in the conference room.

“How is she?” Trox asked him softly.

He was outwardly furious, “They didn’t get far, but they were attempting to have their way with her.”

Trox nodded, “But they didn’t...”

“No, they didn’t. I wasn’t aware the Qualsax would go to such extremes to get to me.”

“We have to protect her then,” the Knight’s Captain told them.

“We will. I assure you. First, I want to pay a visit to the Qualsax with the heads of their Warriors.”

“We brought the bodies back, that won’t be hard,” one of the Knights said.

“I’ll not stand by while my wife is assaulted and made a prime target of Qualsax!” Alric yelled.

“They’ve never bothered the Lady of Valhara before.”

“Well they are now.”

“We’ll go and talk to them,” Trox said, “you and I, and the Knights.”

“I can’t leave her yet. She’s upset and confused,” Alric said, and he softened some. “As soon as she feels safe again, we’ll go and confront them.”

Trox nodded and turned to the Knights, “No word of this can get out. We don’t need the people of Valhara knowing how far the Qualsax got with the Lady. They can’t feel they are in danger.”

The Knights nodded and then left the conference room.

Trox watched Alric, “Are you certain they didn’t succeed?”

“Yes”

“I’ve been thinking about this morning.”

“What about it?” he asked, irritated.

“How you refused to let us into the room.”

Alric just watched him.

“Then I realized why you wouldn’t allow us in. You haven’t consummated the marriage,” Trox said.

He sighed, “It’s complicated.”

“It’s not a true marriage until it’s consummated.”

“It will be. I can’t throw all of this at her at once.”

Trox nodded and stood up, “Maybe we should assign Knights to Kyrin, just until things with Qualsax calm down.”

Alric nodded, but his mind was a million miles away, so Trox simply left.

Chapter 19

Kyrin looked over the field of flowing flowers and then glanced behind her at the two Knights seated on horses. Alric and Trox were out at the Qualsax, and she was asked to stay with the Knights. Memories of the fight with the Qualsax was fresh in her mind, and the thought of how well they restrained her helped with the request for Knights.

She was still surprised at how little her life changed once she married Alric. While he seemed more attentive and even more in love with her, nothing else had changed. She’d had no beatings still, and the vile acts talked about by the new brides hadn’t come to pass.

Kyrin moved forward and waded through the thick pink flowers, running her hands along the soft petals. The Knights stayed closer to her and were watching around. She got the feeling they almost wished Qualsax would attack, but she would prefer if they left her alone.

Although the Knights jumped at the chance to guard her, she realized it was because of the possibility of fighting Qualsax, and trying to keep on the King's good side. She knew the Knights didn't trust, nor like her. They hadn't forgotten how she bested several of them in fights the first week she was with them, nor had they gotten over her brutal attack on Finn's brother, Hicks, when he tried to kiss her.

She'd told Alric that the first person to call her Queen would meet her flail, but he assured her that she wasn't a Queen. In Valhara, Kings and Queens had to have noble blood. Those married into their position were simply Lords and Ladies.

King Qualsax glared as the Valharan Knights walked in with Alric and stood before him. Eight of them held the heads of dead Qualsax Warriors, and then threw them at the feet of their King.

"We thought you might be missing these," Alric said angrily.

The King stood up and screamed, "How dare you attack and kill eight of my warriors!"

"We didn't," Alric said, now smiling. "They attacked my wife, tried to have their way with her, and she killed them."

"The idea is preposterous. My Warriors cannot be beaten by a woman."

"You don't know my wife. She's a fighter, and a damned good one. She's not going to be easy to victimize, so I suggest you leave her the hell alone!"

“We do what we want! She is your wife, and that makes her a target,” the Qualsax King said, and then sat down on his throne. “I’m sure they simply wanted to slowly breed out the Valharan line.”

Alric grew furious, but Trox stopped him from advancing, “So your goddess agrees with your views?”

“I’m sure she does.”

“Then I’m even more disgusted with her and her followers than I was before.”

“Kyrin has done nothing to Qualsax,” Alric said. “Leave her alone.”

“No! It is my duty to make you suffer, and if attacking your wife does that, then I will.”

“Consider yourself warned.”

Alric turned and walked out, followed by the others. They were far away from Qualsax before anyone spoke.

“They have no moral fiber,” Trox said. “I can’t believe that what those Warriors did was sanctioned by their King.”

“I guess we shouldn’t really expect any more of them,” Alric said. “We’re just lucky that Kyrin isn’t that easy to keep down.”

“Do you think they will realize that one of their Warriors is without a tongue?” one of the Knights asked.

Alric couldn’t help but smile, “I hope they do.”

Trox’s voice grew soft, “I wish Finn were here to see what she did to those eight Warriors. He was always so proud of her strength and abilities.”

Alric simply nodded. His death was still fresh on the King's mind, and as they couldn't find a body to bury, there hadn't been any closure for Finn's family or the Kingdom.

"Kyrin?" Alric said from beside her on the floor.

She looked up at him and smiled, "You're finally back."

"Yes, finally. Did you have any problems while I was away?"

"No, did you?"

He shook his head, "Not really. They just made it obvious that you are a prime target."

"They just won't learn, will they?" she asked.

He shook his head, leaned down and took her wrists in his hands, and then kissed her softly. Her body moved up against his, and the strength of her kiss increased.

Alric broke the kiss and met her eyes, "Do you trust me?"

She thought about it and then nodded.

"Fully?"

"Yes, why?"

He kissed her again and then whispered, "It's time I show you how much I love you."

The pit of her stomach dropped, "How?"

“Just trust me,” he whispered, and began to unbutton her nightgown.

“Kyrin?” Alric said, sitting up in bed. He looked over at the door just as she disappeared from the room. He sighed and then laid back and pulled the covers up over his bare chest.

The stain on the sheets caught his eye, so he reached over and covered it with the blankets also. A few minutes later, he got out of bed and then bathed and got ready for the day. Today, he met with the people of Valhara. Some asked him for help, while others asked for his blessing, and still others offered up riches to him for his kindness.

When he was dressed officially, he walked down toward the throne room, and met up with Trox on the stairs.

“Kyrin seems pretty mad this morning,” Trox said as they started down the stairs.

“I saw.”

Trox couldn't help but smile, “You were patient longer than I thought you would be.”

“Not talking about this, Trox,” he said, and then started across the long room to his throne. He sat in the chair on the right, and glanced once at the chair that Kyrin was supposed to sit in.

“Let them in,” Alric said to the Knight at the door.

Trox sighed, “She's supposed to be in here to make it official.”

“Leave her be.”

“It’s not proper.”

Alric looked up at him, “She’s mad at me, and I don’t feel like turning into a toad.”

Trox grinned and then moved to the side of Alric where the advisor’s spot was.

Kyrin was furious as she stormed through the trees, taking random corners and ignoring the Knights as they fought to keep up with her. Alric had broken his promise never to hurt her, and she was trying to figure out if it was time to shift out of Paragoy. He’d demonstrated the repulsive act she’d heard so much about, and the brides were right.

The thought made her sick to her stomach, and she was ready to have his head for what he made her do. She’d trusted him, and let him continue, but as the night wore on she became more and more furious.

The sight of a cave caught her eye, and she headed toward it. It was deep in the forest and partially obscured by thick vines. She used her flail to slam away the vines, and then stepped inside.

“We shouldn’t go in there,” one of the Knights told her.

Without turning, she took a step further, “Why not?”

“It’s not explored, so it could be dangerous.”

“Are you afraid then?”

“No,” he said, offended.

“So let’s explore it.”

The Knight pushed past her and walked into the cave as far as he could see, “Doesn’t look like much.”

Kyrin and the other Knight joined him. Just when they stepped together, the floor gave out and the three fell through it and landed on a hard surface almost 25 feet down.

“Are you hurt?” one of the Knights said frantically, as he looked over Kyrin.

She shook her head and looked around, “No, you?”

“I think he is,” the Knight said, looking over at the other.

The second Knight was motionless on the rock floor. She knelt down by the injured Knight, “He’s breathing.”

“He’s badly hurt. We have to get him help.”

“Well... heal him.”

“I can’t do that.”

“You aren’t a Holy Knight?”

“No, only a few select are Holy Knights,” he explained.

Kyrin stood up and looked up the sheer walls to the hole above them, “I don’t know how we can get out of here though.”

“There’s a tunnel down this way.”

“Let’s go then,” she said, heading for it.

“We can’t just leave him.” They both looked over when the Knight began to stir.

Kyrin watched as the Knight knelt down by him, “Antony, are you ok?”

The injured Knight finally nodded, “My leg.”

“We’ll get help, ok?”

She looked over as the Knight moved the thick cobwebs out of the way of an opening in the wall. He took a step into the passageway, “We don’t have a choice. We have to go down this way to see if there’s a way out, but it’s too dark to see.”

“I can get us light.” Kyrin walked over and peered past him. With one soft word, her hand lit up, and she held it out to show the long cavernous corridor.

“There has to be a way out, let’s go.”

She nodded and walked down the corridor, careful not to hit her head on low stalactites. The only sound other than dripping water was the sound their feet made against the cold ground of the cave.

It was hours later when the Knight spoke, “We’ve gone miles. There must not be a way out.”

“We can’t get out back that way either,” Kyrin reminded him.

“I don’t like that Antony is alone. If he’s attacked, he can’t defend himself.”

“He’s not going to get attacked. The only way in there is either the long fall or through here, and we haven’t seen so much as a mouse.”

“Fine, we’ll keep going.” He stormed past her, and she shook her head and followed him. To their right was the cave wall, but to their left was a drop off that fell into darkness below. The Knight had thrown a rock down into the black, but they never heard it hit anything. Keeping far away from the edge, they worked their way deeper into the expanse of caves.

After what seemed like an eternity, when both were cold and wet from the cave, and exhausted from climbing, the passageway ended at a wall.

“Great,” the Knight said, sighing.

Kyrin was frowning, “Something’s odd about that wall.”

“Like what?”

“I’m not sure. It just looks different.”

The Knight bent closer to see, but it looked the same to him, “Nothing’s different. Let’s head back. Maybe they’re looking for us by now, and we can call and get someone’s attention.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

The Knight started back the way they came, but Kyrin kept looking at the wall. When he got far enough away that he couldn’t see, he returned to her, “What!?”

Had Kyrin known proper customs, she would have chastised the Knight for speaking to her like that. Instead, what she did was reached out and touched the cave wall, “It’s warm.”

“It can’t be warm.”

“Touch it.”

The Knight slipped off his gauntlet and touched the wall, “It is warm.”

“I tell you, something’s weird about this wall.”

He sighed, “We need to get back and make sure Antony is ok.”

Kyrin touched the wall again and then a word came to her. She put her hands together against the wall and whispered a strange word.

The wall slowly began to melt, and both of them stepped back when a dungeon appeared before them. It smelled of death and was dark and damp.

The Knight stopped Kyrin when she started to walk into the room, and instead walked in ahead of her.

“What is this?” Kyrin whispered, touching the outline of a crow in the ground.

The Knight’s eyes grew wide, and he whispered back, “We’re in Qualsax castle. I’ve heard about this room. It’s used for torture.”

She nodded and looked around at the torture devices. Some she’d seen the Shadowmere use. Others were strange and foreign.

“We have to get out of here,” the Knight said, taking her arm.

“Wait, there’s a door over there.”

“Of course there’s a door, how else would they get in here?”

“Not that one, that one,” she said, pointing to a smaller door off to the side. It was only half as tall as the other door and wasn’t locked.

“Come on, now.”

“No, I want to see what that door is.”

They both froze when they heard voices outside of the main door, but the voices trailed off as the Qualsax moved further from the room.

“See? We’re going to get caught, and they’ll torture us,” the Knight said.

“Don’t you wonder what’s in there?”

“No”

“I do... just let me peek,” she said, and got down on her hands and knees. She opened the door easily and then poked her head through. What she saw was a large room full of prisoners. Some were dead, some were injured, and others looked to just be sleeping.

“Hey, who’s that?” one of them whispered, looking over at her.

Kyrin smiled slightly, “Just seeing what’s in here. Don’t mind me.”

There was a mad rush to get away from her, and she was just starting to crawl back out of the room when a familiar face caught her eye, “Finn!?”

A starving and haggard Finn looked up at her with wide eyes, “Kyrin?”

Another man in the room looked over, “Is that the Kyrin you told me about?”

Finn nodded, “Yes.”

“Come on, let’s get out of here,” she said, and backed out of the room through the door.

“What did you find?” the Knight asked, nervously watching the larger door.

Kyrin got to her feet, and the Knight was shocked when Finn crawled through after her. He didn’t have the strength to stand, and his face was a mass of bruises. His lips were dry and he was emaciated, with sunken features.

“Captain?” the Knight whispered, helping Finn to his feet.

Another man crawled through, and Kyrin helped him to stand.

“Oh my god!” the Knight said, watching the other man.

“Who are you?” Kyrin asked him.

“Get us out of here,” Finn said, and then glanced nervously at the front door.

Helping the two prisoners, Kyrin and the Knight supported them through the portal and into the cave’s passageway.

“Can you shut that now?” the Knight asked her.

Kyrin looked over at the door, “I’m not sure.”

“Well try or we’ll have half of Qualsax after us.”

She nodded and put her hands together, then held them up in front of the opening. She whispered softly and looked up, but nothing happened.

“Concentrate,” Finn whispered.

“I’m trying!” She held her hands up again, and tried any word that came to her, but the portal remained opened.

When someone tried the door handle into the torture room, they all fell silent. Voices sounded, and they tried the door again.

Suddenly, Kyrin held her hands up and whispered quickly. The door slowly began to flow upwards, blocking the portal an inch at a time.

The door finally opened and the Qualsax that walked in immediately saw Kyrin, the Knight, and two prisoners standing behind the wall as it shut. They ran forward and slammed into the wall as the last of it sealed the portal shut.

Kyrin clutched her throat and turned around, still shaking from fear.

“That was close!” the Knight said as he supported Finn.

“Let’s go,” the other man said from beside them.

“First, who are you?” Kyrin asked him. She wanted to make sure they weren’t about to rescue a Qualsax.

“He is one of our Knights,” the Knight beside him said. “He disappeared five years ago, and we thought he was dead.”

“Qualsax Warriors got me,” he explained. “They threw me into a cell, and then the Captain joined me. He’s been tortured almost every day because of his rank.”

“Why didn’t you go through that little door and get away?” she asked him.

“We tried that, it was a trick. Once you got through, they would be waiting for you and would then torture you. Staying in that room was our only option.”

Finn’s legs gave out and the Knight was now supporting him, “We have to get them back.”

Kyrin nodded and whispered the spell to bring light to her hand, and then started through the caves.

“How far is it?” the rescued Knight asked as he helped the other with Finn.

“A long ways,” Kyrin told him. “We walked for hours trying to find a way out. Once we get to where we fell though, we still can’t get out.”

“Don’t you have magic for that?”

“No, it doesn’t work like that. You’re lucky I got the door closed.”

“He’s starving and weak. He’s not going to make it,” the Knight told her.

“I don’t have my bag of apples either. We’ll all take turns and get him out.”

Finn smiled slightly, “I never thought I’d see you again.”

They continued on, “Well a lot has changed.”

“She’s the Lady of Valhara now,” the Knight told him.

Finn nodded, “I saw that coming.”

She frowned when he groaned in pain, “We need to take a break. Let’s sit down here and rest.”

“Here?” the Knight asked, looking around at the cold, damp walls.

“Yes here. Finn’s injured and too tired to go on.”

“I don’t know…”

“We’re doing it,” she said, and sat down against the wall. She wrapped her arms around herself to keep warm, and then the light disappeared, and they were shrouded in darkness.

“We’re wasting time,” the Knight said, sitting down also.

“If you’re injured and you push it too hard, you die,” Kyrin said. “I’ve seen it too many times. We have to take it slow.”

“I guess.”

“In case you’re wondering, Finn. The Knights still don’t like me.”

“I wouldn’t say we don’t like you.”

“You have to like me. I get that, I’m the Lady. However, you don’t trust me and would rather not be around me.”

“You’ll get us all in trouble if the King hears that.”

“I’m sure he knows, besides, I don’t really care what the King thinks,” she said, emphasizing the word King sarcastically.

“What’d he do?” Finn asked weakly.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I’m surprised you married him.”

“I had to. Daemionis ordered it.”

“That’s weird.”

“What’s weird is that he and Sithias agreed on it. I didn’t have a choice, trust me.”

“Then Qualsax tried to take her,” the Knight said. “Now she has guards.”

“Why does Qualsax want you so badly?” Finn asked into the dark.

“Oh I know now,” she snapped.

The Knight lowered his voice, “They wanted to have a Qualsax as the next king.”

Finn sighed, “Great. So how is it you two are even down here?”

“We fell,” Kyrin explained. “One of the Knights is hurt back where we fell, and we couldn’t get back up, so we started down this passage.”

“How long ago?”

“I’m guessing it’s been about eight hours since we fell,” the Knight said.

“Shh, time to get some rest,” Kyrin told them. She grinned when it fell silent. She wondered if she could order them around now that she was Lady of the Kingdom. Course, she didn’t plan on staying, not after what Alric had done.

Kyrin leaned back against the cold ground and started to drift off. She woke up a while later and wrinkled her nose, “What’s that smell?”

“I don’t know. It’s awful,” the Knight said.

She sat up, “Should we head out?”

“The Captain’s asleep.”

“Should we wake him up and...” Kyrin quit talking when a burst of warm air wafted past her. “We’re not alone down here.”

She scrambled to her feet and used the spell to light up the passageway. Looking at them from the depths of the darkness was a scaly blue head with brutal yellow eyes and long teeth. It hissed at them, and they all screamed.

The Knight grabbed Finn and headed down the passageway after Kyrin, who had immediately taken off running. They moved quickly, even though it didn’t sound like the beast was following them. Kyrin ran with her hands glowing, ready to throw fireballs at it if its head appeared again.

When they barreled into the room with the injured Knight, he looked up at them, “Where were you? I thought you were dead.”

Kyrin turned and brought her hand back, ready to pelt magic at the beast, but it didn’t follow them.

“Captain!” the injured Knight said, shocked.

The Knight laid Finn down beside the injured Knight and then looked up, “Now how to get up there.”

Kyrin finally turned back from the door and looked up, “I have no idea.”

The Knight turned slowly and looked at her, “How well do you climb?”

Her eyes narrowed, “Why?”

“I think I can get you up to that ledge, but from there you’ll have to climb.”

She glanced up again.

“If Alric married her, he’s not going to want her smeared all over this floor,” Finn said, looking way up to the top.

She sighed, “Lift me up.”

He nodded and then picked her up gently. When he had to put his hands on her butt though, he blushed, “Maybe this isn’t a good idea.”

Kyrin was laughing too hard to care, and finally made it to the tiny ledge. Realizing her shoes were keeping her from grasping the wall, she slipped them off and then started slowly up the face of the wall.

“He’s going to kill us,” the injured Knight said, watching her.

“Please don’t fall,” Finn called up to her.

Kyrin started laughing again and almost fell, but steadied herself.

“Why are you even laughing?” the Knight asked, irritated.

She calmed enough to speak, “I’m an evil for god’s sake. Why would I come back after you?”

The Knight gasped, “You wouldn’t!?”

Finn grinned, "I bet she would."

They watched breathlessly while Kyrin maneuvered up the face of the cliff and finally disappeared over the top.

"You ok?" the Knight called up to her. When she didn't answer, he sighed, "Do we need to find a way out of here?"

Finn shrugged and then slowly shut his eyes.

Kyrin hit the front of the cave running and tore through the trees, heading for the castle. The thoughts of leaving Paragoy were far from her mind, as was Alric's deception. Right now she wanted to get help for Finn. She hadn't lied to the Knight. She didn't really care if he got out or not, but she felt a kinship with Finn and wanted to get him help.

She tried to muster up a spell to help her move faster, but it didn't work so she cursed and kept running. Once in sight of the castle, she ran past the Knights, who all watched her and wondered where her personal guards were.

Kyrin took the stairs two at a time and burst into Alric's office, out of breath and covered in dirt.

"Kyrin! Where have you been?" he asked, standing suddenly.

"Fell... cave... Finn..."

"Wait, calm down," he said, taking her shoulders. "Catch your breath and tell me what's going on."

Finally, she was able to talk, "The Knights and I fell down a hole in a cave. We followed the cave around and came out inside a Qualsax dungeon."

"You what!?"

“Finn was in there, and some Knight that’s been gone for five years. We got out, and they’re stuck down in the hole.”

Alric stood back and then smiled, “Are you kidding me?”

“No, some of us don’t always lie.”

He sighed, “I didn’t lie to you. You have to trust me still.”

“After last night? No, no more trust.”

“We can talk about this later, ok? I have some work I have to get done.”

She crossed her arms, “So after all of that you’re not going to go get them out of the hole in the cave?”

He looked up and frowned, “Are you being serious?”

“Yes”

He just watched her, “And you found Finn?”

She rolled her eyes and started for the door, “Fine, I’ll go get help elsewhere.”

“Wait, Kyrin,” Alric said, taking her arm. “Do you just want me out of the office to talk about last night?”

She was starting to get mad, “Tell you what... come with me, and I won’t shift before we can talk.”

“Fine,” he said, sighing. He then followed her out of the castle.

Kyrin turned to the closest Knight, “Do you have a really long rope?”

The Knight looked at Alric, who shrugged, “Go get it.”

Once he returned, Kyrin crawled up onto a horse and made sure the others were with her before kicking him and running into the trees. They were deep in when she stopped and slid off of it, looking around, "It's here somewhere."

"You don't even know where we're going?" Alric asked, looking around also.

Kyrin moved to him quickly and slapped him. He looked at her with wide eyes when she yelled, "I don't like you right now, so don't push me!"

Alric backed off the Knights when they went to restrain her. She turned and started through the bushes, still mumbling about Alric.

Alric chuckled and started after her. He stopped when he came out of the trees and saw her knelt down inside of a cave, talking to the floor. When he realized someone was talking back, he ran up and looked down.

"King Alric!" the Knight said, looking up at him.

"Get the rope," Alric said, turning to the Knights. Kyrin stood back with her arms crossed and watched as they pulled the Valharans out of the hole. The first to come up was Finn, who was still too weak to move much on his own.

Alric knelt and began to heal his wounds, while the others told the Knights what they'd seen over the last nine hours down in the cave.

When Finn stood up with Alric's help, he smiled at Kyrin, "Thank you, Kid. I owe you for that."

She spun and started back for the horses, still irritated that Alric hadn't believed her. He caught up to her and took her arm, "I'm sorry I doubted you."

She tore her arm away from him, “Don’t touch me.”

Kyrin got on her horse and rode off, leaving the others to fend for themselves.

Alric watched her go and then turned to Finn and shrugged, “Not a lot has changed.”

He smiled and then was able to climb onto the horse with much effort.

“Are you ok?” Alric asked him.

“Just tired.”

The injured Knight, Alric, and Finn rode back on horses while the other Knights returned on foot. Trox was waiting for them and was shocked to see Finn come in with the King.

“Is Kyrin back here?” Alric asked, dismounting.

Trox nodded, “Yes, but she’s pretty mad.”

“See to Finn, make sure he gets a room in the castle and gives a full report.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Alric walked inside quickly, wanting to talk to Kyrin before she decided to take off. He found her in the Lady’s room, sitting on the couch in front of the fire. The time in the cave had sent a chill deep into her bones, and she’d started to shiver.

He pulled a blanket down from a rack and wrapped it around her shoulders before sitting down, “Thank you for helping them.”

She shrugged and watched the fire.

“Do you want to talk about last night?” he asked.

Kyrin glared at him, “You lied to me.”

“I didn’t though! It won’t hurt again. I swear.”

“No it won’t, it’s not happening again.”

He studied her, “You need to trust me on this.”

“Why would you do that?”

“It’s what married people do. It’s what people in love do.”

“That’s why I’ve avoided love! You had no right trying to make me believe it was anything different.”

“It was different. It’s done in love. I swear.”

Kyrin stood up, “Well that was the discussion I promised. Now it’s time for me to go.”

“Wait, don’t go, please,” Alric said, taking her hands in his.

She hated how her stomach fluttered just looking into his eyes. He reached down and kissed her, holding tighter to her hands when she tried to pull them out of his grasp.

The more he kissed her and the more forceful he became, the more she weakened in his arms. Her mind screamed at her to stop, but her body ached to be near him.

Alric picked her up gently and laid her on the bed in the Lady’s room. When his body pressed into hers, she started to panic, but her protests were stopped by his lips.

Kyrin sighed softly and then opened her eyes and looked over at Alric as he slept. She smiled and moved over to nuzzle close to him and went back to sleep.

Pronunciation Guide for Dimension Shifter

Alric – Ah l ri k

Daemionis – D ay me ah nis

Jilavanu – J il ah vah n oo

Kyrin – K ear un

Kyrstalis – K eer st ah lis

Nosata – N oh s ah t a

Ozehshiesh – O z eh shee esh

Paragoy – P air ah goi

Shamagiem – Sh ah mah gee eh m

Sithias – S ih th ee us

Tiasis – T ee ah sis

Vasieth – V as ee eh th

Books in the Dimensions Saga

Dimension Shifter (Book 1)

Paragoy Dimension (Book 2)

Shadowmere (Book 3)