



TALES OF Y'MYRAN  
**BANSHEE'S HONOR**  
BOOK ONE



**SHAYLYNN ROSE**

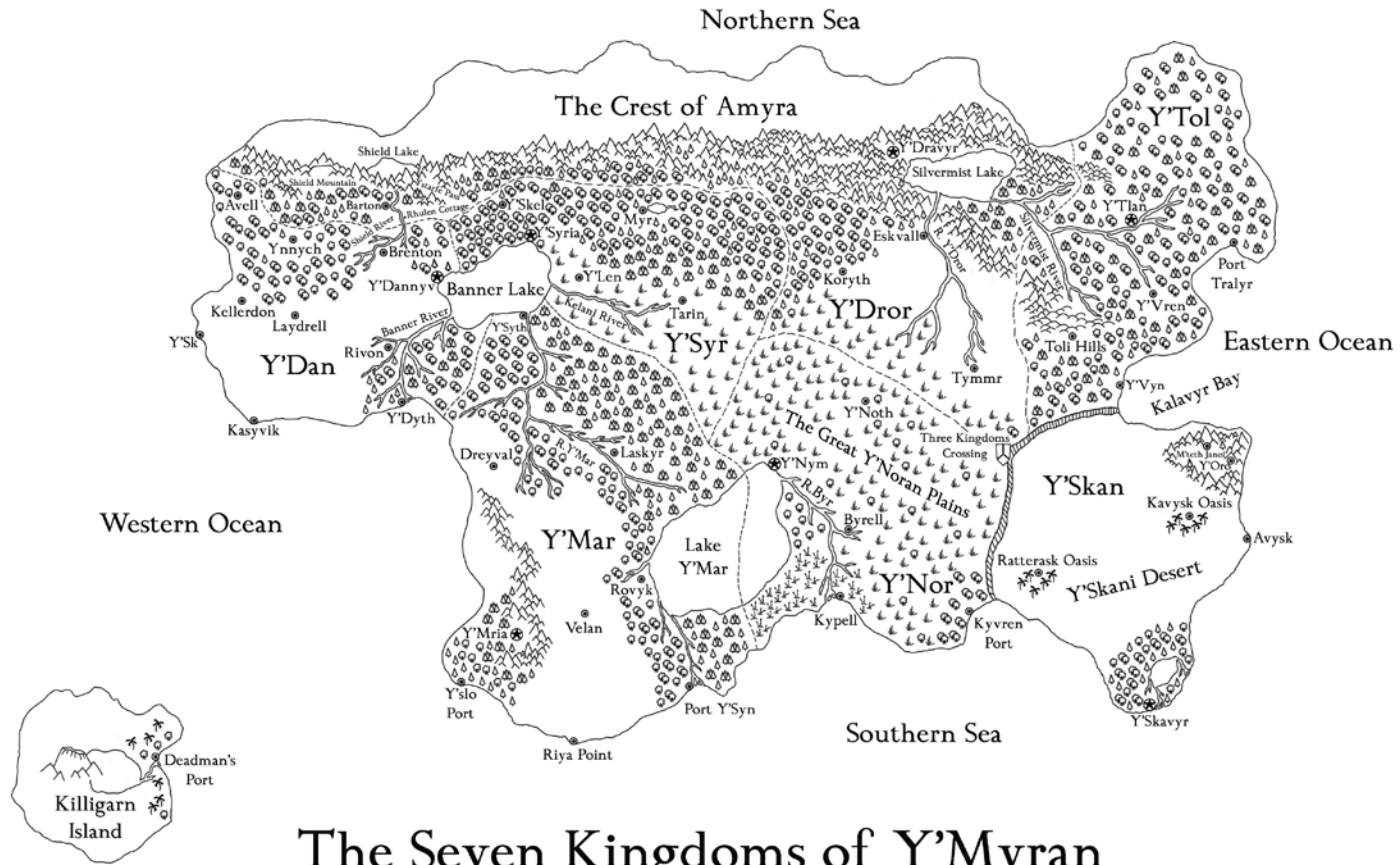


OTHER BOOKS BY  
SHAYLYNN ROSE

*The Tales of Y'Myran*

Banshee's Honor  
(Book One)

Banshee's Vengeance  
(Book Two; Coming in Fall 2015)



The Seven Kingdoms of Y'Myran

# PROLOGUE

LONG BEFORE THE FIRSTLANDERS CAME to dwell upon the fair land of Aldyran, a dark prophecy haunted the sages of the elves. This nightmare warned of a time when war and strife would beset all the peoples of the land. Inscribed in the ancient histories, these are the words of that terrifying vision:

*“The breaking is at hand. The Blade, the Heart and the Pawn shall meet, and on that day the sun will stand still and the stars will no longer spin with time. The Beast will rise to seek his place among mortals. Stand well against the storm, and sages shall sing of thy glory into the mists of Eternity. Fall, and all shall blacken and fade.”*

Their dreams filled with darkness and death, the ancient seers kept faithful records of their oracles. Lesser divinations told that one would come who would seek to shatter the locks that bound the most terrible of all demonkind to the abyss.

Laws more ancient than even the nearly immortal elves prevented the gods of Aldyran from interfering with the prophecy. Instead, they kept watch, waiting for the ones who would come to battle the darkness.

In the fullness of time, the Firstlander humans came to Aldyran and claimed it for their own, giving to it the name of Y’Myran. During the wars that followed, nearly all of the elves’ ancient knowledge was lost.

Peace was eventually achieved. Kingdoms rose and flourished and the peoples of Y’Myran forgot the past and strove toward a future of prosperity.

Deep within the halls of Hell, this prophecy was remembered by one who waited patiently. The time would come.

Kasyrin Darkchilde glared at the green-topped forests of Y'Dan and cursed his fate. *I was so close.* All of his carefully wrought plans had been destroyed.

*It should have been so easy. I should have won.* Bitterly, he allowed himself to recall how he got here. Casting his mind back to the past twenty years, he remembered what had transpired to bring him to this place...

*“Did you think I wasn’t watching you, boy? Did you really believe I wouldn’t see your murderous ways? That I wouldn’t miss a harlot here or an alms boy there? Did you think killing anyone who wouldn’t work for you would make you look stronger than me?”* Istaffryn’s rough voice struck Kesdyn like a whip. *“And did you truly, honestly think I wouldn’t notice you slipping your hand into my pouch and trying to filch that which is rightfully mine?”* He circled Kesdyn, slapping the blunt, hard end of a club against his palm. Without warning, he lashed out, striking the young thief in the gut, bending him double. *“Get him up,”* he commanded, not even looking as two of his men rushed forward to drag the wheezing man upright. *“You could have been my heir, Kesdyn, but you got greedy.”*

*Kesdyn spat and sneered. “You’re old, Istaffryn. Someone will get you.”*

*“But it will not be you, boy. Not someone who sees the path to my chair as a road of death and destruction,”* Istaffryn replied. *“If you want to control something, Kesdyn, you have to be willing to accept allies, friends, even, in strange and sometimes counterintuitive places.”* A gesture caused the gathered crowd to part. A man, tall, dark-haired, and proud, walked into the dimly lit, smoke-filled chamber in which they had all gathered.

*In shock, Kesdyn stared at the king’s right hand, the warrior Rhu’len DaCouré. “You?”* Kesdyn gasped. *“You dare to step here, in this den you are sworn to destroy?”* With his arms pinned, there was nothing Kesdyn could do to strike out, to batter the body of this man who had, so many times before, been the bane of all that he and the Cabal had tried to accomplish.

*Rhu’len’s face was a mask of calm, but his eyes glittered as he looked around the room, finally stopping at Istaffryn and bowing. “I am here merely to uphold the king’s law. A man has reported a break-in. His retainers have captured the would-be assassin and thief. Thus, it is my duty to see to it that the perpetrator is punished accordingly.”* He smiled. *“It gives me great pleasure to declare you Oathbreaker, Kesdyn Nightblade. No man, woman, or child of the kingdoms shall grant you succor. Your name will become anathema. Your deeds curses. Your holdings property of those you wronged. Flee Y’Dan, Kesdyn, for it has declared*

*you unwanted!" Turning, he glanced at Istaffryn, and added, "It's done. Next time you need to clean house, talk to the constables."*

*"As you command, milord," Istaffryn said with a cold smile. "Still, your task is done and this one is now mine to...deport."*

*"Yes," Rhu'len replied. "The king will have no further interest in him so long as he is gone from Y'Dan by week's end."*

*Istaffryn smiled. "I think that will be easily arranged."*

*With that, Rhu'len DaCoure departed, leaving Kesdyn to meet the doom he could see in the faces of those who hemmed him in, keeping him from escaping Istaffryn's clutches.*

*Taking a fireplace poker from the hearth, Istaffryn pushed the tip into the heart of the flame, holding it there until it glowed red hot. Only then did he remove it, and, with a casual cruelty that belied the soft, almost gentle nature of his elderly face, he drove it into Kesdyn's side, branding and burning him, making him scream again and again as the superheated metal destroyed his flesh.*

\* \* \*

*They left him in a broken heap at the border, wrapped in rags, crawling toward the trees. Most laughed. Some took the time to throw rocks at him, others emptied their bladders over his head as he strained to cross from Y'Dan into the no-man's land at the foot of the Crest of Amyra. Only when his feet were beyond the border did the torment finally cease. Istaffryn's men rode away and Porthyros Omal, Kesdyn's most loyal friend and servant, dashed out of the shadows, picked up his master, and raced away with him.*

*For months after this event, Porthyros tended him, using their few remaining connections in the kingdoms to establish allies, then depending on their help to keep Kesdyn alive. Once he was strong again, he wanted nothing more than to destroy Istaffryn and his unexpected ally, Rhu'len DaCoure.*

*In the mountains, they found an old sorcerer. Though he was near senile, he had plenty to teach his eager student—the same student who one year later challenged and destroyed him in a duel of magick. With that magick, Kesdyn changed his face, with guile, he changed his name, and with Porthyros at his side, he returned to take what he felt was his—and failed, again.*

\* \* \*

*"And here we are again," Istaffryn said, shaking his head as he and Rhu'len DaCoure stood over the near-dead figure of he who was once Kesdyn Nightblade*

*and who now claimed the name of Kasyrin Darkchilde. A thief no more, Kasyrin was one of the most hated and feared sorcerers in Y'Dan, guilty of so many crimes that the king had declared him an Oathbreaker even before he'd been caught. "You never learn, do you boy?" He squatted down, grabbed Kasyrin's chin and forced him to meet his gaze. "This time, it's not me who'll give you your final lesson. You've stepped beyond my hands, lad. The king'll have you now."*

*In silence, Rhu'len dragged Kasyrin out to the field beside Banner Lake and there, upon a platform, he was raised, placed on display for all to see and mock. For a full fortnight, the people of the kingdom were invited to come and stare, to throw stones and curses, to pummel and pelt, to smear whatever they wished onto the face and body of this most hated of men and Kasyrin could do nothing to prevent this ultimate humiliation for his hands were bound, his mouth gagged, and his most faithful servant, Porthyros, could not get past the dozen guards ringed around him at all times.*

*On the fifteenth day, the old king himself appeared. Standing before the abused, malodorous wreck that had caused so much trouble, Thodan sighed and said, "I am here to formally and finally call you Oathbreaker, Kasyrin Darkchilde—or Keskyn Nightblade. Whatever name you wear, you will always and ever be one who is anathema to the kingdoms of Y'Myran." He looked to one of the guards, nodded, and waited for the sorcerer's gag to be removed. Two mages stood by, waiting in case the man attempted magick, but he could barely move his mouth, much less speak the words to a spell.*

*"I-I claim the r-right to challenge your man in a d-duel," he said, his voice harsh from disuse. Though Kasyrin knew this was his own arrogance speaking, it was also the only chance he would have of escaping death. Summoning the last of his strength, he rasped, "You will not hang me, Thodan."*

*Though he knew the king could pretend the words were not spoken, he also knew that he was not such a man. Honor compelled him to agree to Kasyrin's terms.*

*"So be it. You will face Rhu'len DaCoure at the rise of noon."*

*"Water. Food. You will not deny me these things," Kasyrin said, his tone crisp with disdain.*

*Thodan's jaw hardened, but he ordered that bread and water be brought.*

*Kasyrin ate, consuming every crumb, every drop of water, making everyone wait, and forcing the king's mages to waste power to keep him magically bound. This would be his chance, his moment to steal glory right out from under everyone's noses, and he was going to make every drip on the day candle count.*

*They brought him a laughable excuse for a sword, a shield that had last seen the inside of a smithy some fifty years prior, and an old iron pot for a helm. The pot he disdained, wanting everyone to see his face, the shield, he donned, though it would likely only survive one or two blows. It was the sword he wanted, for with it, he would spread Rhu'len DaCoure's entrails over the field, and make his little girl watch her precious father die.*

*Plans and machinations, however, would not match reality, as Rhu'len simply tore Kasyrin to pieces. Kasyrin would feint and Rhu'len would laugh and cut him. They danced, blade smashing into blade. Sweat poured into Kasyrin's eyes, but he refused to surrender, to give up this one chance at freedom. They clashed, teeth clenched, blood pouring from dozens of tiny wounds that, taken one by one, would be insignificant, but counted as a whole, worked to drain what little energy Kasyrin had.*

*Rhu'len treated Kasyrin like a novice, slapping him with the flat of his blade more often than not, never taunting him verbally, but never giving him the chance to truly hurt him, either. Any time Kasyrin attempted anything underhanded, such as grabbing at a handful of dirt to toss into his opponents eyes, Rhu'len would punish him with another cut that would bleed freely, stealing yet more of Kasyrin's strength.*

*The fight wore on, the crowd chanted, howled, and begged for the death of the sorcerer until he became lost in rage and unleashed a flurry of blows, hammering away at Rhu'len's shield. His sword could not take the abuse and, between one strike and the next, shattered. Pieces of metal rained around them, most flying backward to pierce Kasyrin's flesh.*

*Rhu'len drove his sword into Kasyrin's gut and said, "Now you will bleed in the dirt like a rabid dog." Twisting the blade, he jerked it free, kicked the dying man over and walked away...*

\* \* \*

"...and that's when the people went mad with rage, Master. Beating you, doing horrible things to you—I tried to act quickly, but it was difficult to get my hands on fresh vitter pods."

Kasyrin nodded. "Of course, they would not yet be in season," he said, wondering where his servant had eventually found the poison that would mimic death, giving the servant the chance to save his master. He



remembered only the surprisingly bitter taste of the herb before blissful unconsciousness had finally dropped over his thoughts.

“I found an apothecary who’d grown them in his greenhouse,” Porthyros said proudly. “And then, after sunset, under the guise of a beggar seeking dropped coins, I acted.” He smiled. “The blinding powder worked just as you claimed, Master, and I was able to filch your body from the field and flee.” Growing nervous once more, he began to pace, walking around the sorcerer in jagged circles. “I knew of an old wisewoman who lived outside Y’Dannyv, and she could do little to stop me from entering—a bit of coercion brought about your healing.” He paused and shivered a little. “I killed her, of course.”

That Porthyros used violence to attain his aims did not surprise Kasyrin. “Very good.”

Once again, Porthyros preened. “Once you were well enough, I fled, bringing you here, because it was safe once before.”

Slowly, Kasyrin nodded, the broken pieces of his recent days finally fitting together, but that did not make the memories any better. Everything that had once seemed so clear and easy was now just ashes. His plots against Istaffryn, the shadowy leader of the loose-knit organization of Y’Myran’s criminals, were in ruins, his plans to control the wealth and power of Y’Dan were shattered, and worst of all, the only thing he had left of his fortune were the few coins in Porthyros Omal’s pouch.

“Damn him,” he snarled, startling his servant.

“Damn who, Master?”

“Rhu’len DaCoure. How dare he treat me like a common criminal!” Pain lanced through Kasyrin’s side. The wounds were not yet healed; his power was still too weak to do more than spark the tinder for their fires at night. “Damn that old bat you found, too. The least she could have done was healed me properly!” He kicked a stone and sent it flying into the forest.

“I’m sorry, Master.” Porthyros cringed and Kasyrin grinned. He liked seeing people’s fear, liked watching their faces go clammy with sweat in his presence. It was almost as satisfying as hurting them.

“Where will we go now, Master?” Porthyros asked.

Stroking his chin, Kasyrin considered their options, which were decidedly few. “North. The barbarians hate the kingdoms almost as much as the damned rimerbeasts. Perhaps they will offer us succor.”

"Of course, Master," Porthyros replied, bowing deeply. "I will find us supper," he then added, grabbing his sling and stones and hurrying off the hillside.

Kasyrin watched him go, then turned away and looked back over the trees that led into Y'Dan. The need for retribution consumed him, filling him with a fire that burned as hot as the sun. All who had stolen the power and glory that should be his would die. Closing one pale hand into a fist so tightly that the nails cut into the flesh of his palm, he watched as blood dripped onto the snow. "Revenge."

The word vanished into a sudden gust of bone-chilling wind.

\* \* \*

"Revenge." The echo awoke the sleeper from his slumber. Demonic eyes opened and blinked. It had been a long time since mortal speech had been heard in this place. Puzzled, he breathed a word of power. Nearby, a mirror shimmered to life, revealing a snow-covered mountain scene. Outlined in the glow of the morning sun was a man whose face was carved into the hardened planes of one who has made an unbreakable vow.

*::So it hath come to pass:: The demon's all-encompassing voice sent quivers of pain through the minds and bodies of his servants. Rubbing his jaw thoughtfully, his eyes half-closed as a smile creased his face into an expression of pure satisfaction. His laughter, sudden and sharp, echoed around the chamber. ::Excellent:: Rising from his throne, Ecarthus strode out into his domain and began giving orders.*

***::Go, my slaves. Fly amongst the mortals and study their wretched lives. It is upon me to learn of those who would seek to thwart my destiny::***

*The demon moved in front of the mirror once again. Extending one clawed finger, he delicately slit the palm of his hand and allowed three drops of his black blood to mar the mirror's surface. Eldritch power rippled the silvered glass as golden light suffused it briefly and then it cleared. Ecarthus' lip curved into a snarl. Picturing the face of the greatest enemy of his children, the demon whispered a name.*

***::DaCoure::***

*A shirtless man appeared in the middle of a forest glade. In his hands was an axe, which he applied with vigor to a pile of wood. It was easy to imagine the same hands could wield a sword.*

Ecarthus growled. Too many of his precious spawn had been slain by this mortal. He was dangerous. Rhu'len DaCoure would be among the first to block any of the demon's plans. Something would have to be done to stop him.

An idea began to glimmer in the demon's mind. It was only the barest seed of a plan, but brought to fruition, it would yield a bloody harvest. To that end, he sent more of his servants into the realms above to wait and watch. Soon they would act, and in that action, bring about his greatest desire.

*::I will be free::*

# CHAPTER ONE

LEANING HARD ON MAKESHIFT CRUTCHES, covered in rags and weeks of grime, Azhani slowly hobbled down the road. Muddy snow hindered her progress as she struggled to drag her splinted right leg through the thick slurry.

*Home.* The word drew her like a harlot's call.

It was sleeting; the slushy dollops churned into the grimy road forcing her to fight for every step through the slick morass. Muffled imprecations peppered the air each time she stopped to pull her twisted leg from the muck. It never got easier, the pain never quite seemed to dull, no matter how many miles she crawled.

The thundering of hoof beats came too late for her to gracefully give way. She threw herself into a mound of snow that bordered the roadway and cursed, watching as the rider shot by without so much as glancing to see if she was unharmed. Silently, Azhani insulted the rider's ancestry back to his Firstlander mother's choice of decorative footwear and prayed she hadn't torn open the wounds on her leg.

*What's his rush, anyway? There's nothing up there but trees, rocks, and more trees.* By nature, Azhani was always curious, though of late, that inquisitiveness had to be quashed. Pushing greasy black braids away from her face, she sneered at the state of her appearance and put that into the column of things about which she could currently do nothing and tried to puzzle out the riddle of the callous rider.

It was then that she caught sight of what was perched so precariously upon the horse's back. Eyes narrowing dangerously, Azhani tried to make herself believe that what she was seeing was in fact, a fabrication—a falsehood of the mind placed there merely to distract her from the fact that her leg hurt so badly that she was tempted to begin gnawing it off, like a rabbit caught in a hunter's snare.

A second, and then third glance, however, informed her that her eyes were not playing tricks on her and that it was, indeed, a person in scarlet robes whose pale, bruised face bore the distinctive triple teardrop shaped tattoo. This rider, whoever he was, had broken one of the most sacred laws of the seven kingdoms of Y'Myran.

*Now what?* Options at this point were limited. Direct attack, in her condition, would prove foolish and deadly. A stardancer was in danger—there was no questioning the mark upon the person's face or the color of their robes. *It's my duty to help.*

The burn that scored her face, coupled with the shooting pains in her leg, begged her to consider otherwise. Who was she to meddle in Y'Myrani affairs, anyway? She was no warrior—not anymore—nor even a farmer with full strength and confidence of limb to give her the courage to take up an oaken stave and lay waste to the skull of one who would dare put hands on one of Astariu's Own. Besides, the border was so close she might already have crossed it. She was outside the realm of the high king's law. This was the borderlands where nothing was sacred.

*Nothing but your oaths, by Astariu's blessed breasts!*

It was this thought that spurred her upright and pushed her to limp and hobble after the rider and his precious prisoner.

Once, Azhani had been more than a broken woman with little more than a name. In days passed, she'd worn a better life, one of honor and pride and the richness of glory. Once, she had been warleader to Thodan, king of Y'Dan, one of Y'Myran's seven kingdoms. Now, she was an exile, thrust from all she'd known. Yet even still, her faith in the Twain ran too deep to ignore. Though it might cost her life, she could not allow the rider's crime to go unpunished, not while she still drew breath.

Sparing a prayer to the goddess Astariu, Azhani tossed one of her makeshift crutches aside and stripped the other down, revealing an ash longbow. Under the layers of her rags was a quiver of steel-tipped arrows.

With one deep breath, she plunged into the thicket and began to hobble as quickly as her body would allow. This section of the forest was home to her, for she had spent many years of her childhood playing in its depths. Though some time had passed since she had last traversed its green depths, still she knew its ancient landmarks and found a hidden shortcut behind a cluster of oak trees on her left.

Every step was agony. Ignoring the pain, she forced herself onward, stumbling over snow-covered ground until, a quarter candlemark later, she broke free of the forest just ahead of the horseman. Quickly, she strung her bow and nocked an arrow, pinning herself against the side of a tree as she waited, breath rasping in her lungs, sweat chilling on her spine.

She could feel the thud of the horse's hooves through the ground, moving closer and closer. The wind carried the faint stink of hay and something else to her nostrils. Suddenly, horse and rider rounded the bend at a gallop, the horse thundering past the spot where she was hidden. As if attempting to inspire even greater speed, the rider cracked a stick against the horse's flank, the callous cruelty angering Azhani even further.

The horse's light brown hide was mottled with sweat and Azhani was experienced enough to know that the animal was near foundering. As the rider turned to scan the road behind him, Azhani made her move. With almost casual skill, she fired the arrow, striking the rider in the shoulder, the powerful shot sending both rider and hostage tumbling off the horse.

With a scream of raw fear, the horse reared and galloped away.

Ignoring it, Azhani nocked a second arrow and carefully approached the rider as he cursed loudly and struggled to sit. Not far away, the bound stardancer lay sprawled in the dirt, moaning softly.

"Don't move, lawbreaker," Azhani growled. The irony of the situation did not escape her, though even her supposed crimes did not match the severity of what this man had done. Quickly, she glanced over at the stardancer, noted that it was a woman, and that she was, for the moment, breathing.

*I'd lay even odds that her skull will ache like a beast later, though.*

At the sound of her voice, the rider looked up and snarled, "And who would you be to say me nay?"

Azhani realized that she likely looked about as threatening as an old mop, but even as injured as she was, her aim had still been perfect. "Someone who could skewer your hide before you could blink twice," she replied evenly.

Anger twisted his features. Snidely, he said, "Doubtful," and reached for his dagger.

For Azhani, all she needed to see was the mark of the Cabal on his face. The brand marking him as one of Y'Myran's most despised villains stood out plainly and fouled her already dark mood to the point that when

he went for his weapon, she loosed her arrow, pinning his other shoulder to the ground.

“I warned you,” she told him, smashing the bow into his knees. The sickening crunch of bone, followed by his tortured scream of pain, was music to her ears. As he tried to curl up in a little ball and protect his face, she placed the tip of the bow against his temple and said, “Who are you? Why have you harmed one of Astariu’s chosen?”

He mumbled a reply.

She frowned, then rapped him in the skull sharply. “Speak up, scum!”

With a mirthless, hate-filled smile, he replied, “Dance in Hell, bitch,” as dark blood bubbled up and spilled over his lips.

“Astarus’ balls!” she shouted as he fell limp, the two halves of one of the Cabal’s poison amulets dropping onto the muddy ground. How many times had she seen this? Why had she not thought to shatter his hands instead of his knees? All she could do was blame fatigue and pain.

That, however did not ward off the rise of frustration and anger. Without thinking, she kicked the man’s body. The pain from that one random act of idiocy was like a blast of icy water to the face and, with a whimper, she collapsed. Fresh blood oozed through the rags binding her leg, staining the snow. Black spots marred her vision, nearly driving her into unconsciousness.

“Shyvot!” she hissed, the curse doing little to relieve her agony. If only the Y’Dani soldiers who’d done this to her hadn’t been carrying maces! Azhani was in no good frame of mind to accept that if it had been a sword that had done the damage she currently suffered, then she likely wouldn’t be alive.

In an effort to distract herself, she glanced over at the stardancer again and was heartened to see that the woman was still breathing. *Though I doubt she’ll be very grateful, since I’d wager that whatever rescue she prayed for, it was not one granted by an oathbreaker.* Azhani winced at all the bruises that covered the stardancer’s face and likely her body, as well. *Not that one of the goddess’ favored servants would have ever had cause to worry over such things. This is a stardancer, not some fluff-headed princess ripe for ransom.*

Gritting her teeth, she crawled over to the body of the kidnapper. Ignoring the blood staining his face and tunic, she searched the corpse, seeking clues as to why he’d broken one of Y’Myran’s oldest laws. Everyone from the wealthiest noble to the most impoverished of peasants knew that

stardancers and starseekers were sacrosanct. Even thinking about harming one chosen by the Twain made Azhani's stomach twist into painful knots.

Aside from her own arrows, the man's body yielded nothing beyond a bag of mixed coins, a vial of poison, and two knives. Keeping the dagger and the coins, Azhani left the hook-bladed knife that was the signature weapon of a Cabal assassin on the body. For a long moment, she stared at the bottle of poison, contemplating it, fighting the temptation it represented. Draining it would put a peaceful end to the pain that had afflicted her for weeks now.

*No, you're not a coward!* She chucked the bottle at a distant tree, smashing it. As the toxic liquid seeped into the ground, she tucked the pouch of coin into her tunic and made one last pass over the man's body. Though his clothes were both cleaner and warmer than her own, nothing in creation could convince her to don the garb of an assassin. She had no desire to draw the attention of the dark forces that had already played such havoc with her life. Pushing herself upright, she hobbled toward the stardancer, each step more painful than the last.

From behind her, a soft sound drew her attention. Turning, she found herself staring at the horse, which had returned. Startled, she said, "You came back?" and limped toward him. "That's a good lad. Just behave for me and you can help me get this young woman to safety." She reached for his bridle.

He tugged away, a sound of fear gurgling in his chest, but she patted him gently, continuing to speak softly, moving her hand up to scratch his ears until he calmed and sighed in pleasure. The bridle bore the starburst markings of Astariu's healer aspect, leading Azhani to believe that the animal in fact belonged to the stardancer.

"All right lad, let's see if I remember the proper commands."

His ears flicked forward.

"Support." Immediately, he lowered his head, making it far easier for her to grasp his mane and steady herself against his muscular bulk. "Step," she said, walking forward, moving like they were made of molasses. With the horse's aid, she made it to the stardancer's side. "Kneel." The horse obeyed, allowing her to move the woman's body from the ground to his back, though the action cost her dearly.

Before she could be overwhelmed by the pain, she dragged herself up into the beast's saddle, every motion sheer hell, but the benefits of having



a mount were far too great to ignore, though she nearly blacked out several times. Throughout the ordeal, however, the horse remained still, waiting for her next command.

Taking a deep breath to quell rising nausea, she wrapped her arms around the stardancer and pulled her upright, cradling her body as gently as she could before cutting the ropes that bound her wrists.

The woman's head lolled to the side, revealing her face. A dark, mottled bruise marred her alabaster skin, though nothing appeared broken or bloodied. Thick amber-hued curls framed her angular features and just brushed the tops of her shoulders. Graceful points topped her ears, announcing her half-elven heritage.

*She's beautiful.* It almost surprised Azhani that she could still think such things, could still see and recognize beauty when so much of her life had been made ugly. Taking the horse's reins, she gave the command for him to stand, and then clicked her tongue, hoping she could remain conscious until she reached her destination.

\* \* \*

Kyrian staggered into consciousness with all the skill of a first time drunk. *Really shouldn't have had that last ale...* Head swimming, stomach roiling, and body aching like she'd been the shuttle in a game of kick-it, she tried to understand her surroundings and was only able to capture a sensation of warmth, movement, and the unpleasant, coppery tang of blood and something unfamiliar coating the inside of her nose and mouth.

*By Astariu's grace, I never thought Kelderdon could produce something so foul.* Muzzily, she scrubbed at her face to try and scour the cobwebs from her mind. The motion heightened her sense of nausea, but also brought out the fact that she was mounted and moving, but not holding the reins and that they—she and her heretofore unseen companion—were riding through a thickly forested area that was nothing at all like Kelderdon.

Confused and growing fearful, Kyrian tried to figure out what to say in this situation. After all, she wasn't bound, gagged, or even truly lost, since even the littlest child could figure direction from the position of the sun, the growth of moss on trees, or the use of a simple compass. However, when the trees cleared and opened up to reveal the front gate of a small homestead, she was truly taken aback, for the rundown, ramshackle

appearance of the place more than suggested that it had not been occupied for many a long year.

This alone was enough to spur her from confusion to full on fear, and she reached for her baton. "What happened?" As soon as her hand closed on the leather-wrapped hilt of the two-foot long length of tempered steel, she relaxed fractionally. *At least I'm not unarmed.*

"Easy." The voice was deep, rumbling, and came from the person behind her. The speaker's hand descended to cover hers. It was large, calloused, and caked road grime.

With no sense of her companion, no memory of the voice or even a fragment of the last day at least, Kyrian craned her head around and was confronted by a dirty, rag-covered person whose only visible features were part of her nose, mouth, and chin—the rest of their head was shadowed by her threadbare hood.

Tightening her grip on the baton, she growled, "Who are you and what are you doing on my horse?" Kyrian was confident that the animal they were riding was definitely Arun. No other horse had a gait quite like his. Sadly, her ire was less about fear now and more about growing self-disgust. *Oh, by the Twain, what have I done? I'm not that lonely, am I?* As a traveling stardancer, Kyrian's dalliances were many enough, and yet, she had always prided herself on choosing partners who were at least *clean*. This person smelled like she hadn't bathed since before the last turning of the year!

An amused smile curved the stranger's lips. For several heartbeats, they sat until finally, she dropped the horse's reins into Kyrian's hands, tossed her bow to the ground, and, with a muffled groan of pain, dismounted.

In shock, Kyrian watched as she grabbed the broken fence and fought to stay upright. Everything that she was as a stardancer prodded her to offer help, yet the mystery of her situation kept her tongue still while the stranger sucked down loud gulps of air and then finally threw back their hood.

"Thank Astariu," the woman whispered as she studied the broken wall encircling the property.

More curious now than ever, Kyrian again asked, "Who are you?"

Sketching a shaky bow, she said, "I am no one, my lady," and then turned to hobble through the half-open gate. "I thank you for the ride. May Astariu guide your journey."

Confusion replaced curiosity and was itself overtaken by duty. “Wait!” Letting go of the baton’s hilt, Kyrian dismounted. “You’re injured. I’m a healer. Let me help you.”

Pausing, the woman looked back at her. “It is not necessary, my lady. The injury is nothing that cannot mend with time.”

“Time may do, stranger, but my hands and skill are far gentler,” Kyrian said as she took a step closer. Like a once-fed stray, curiosity returned and prodded her to add, “Besides, you owe me the tale of how we came to be doubling on poor Arun’s back, for I’m absolutely certain you were not among the revelers sharing mugs of Gregor’s finest in celebration of his daughter’s handfasting.”

Closing her eyes briefly, the stranger sighed, then pushed her matted hair away from her face, revealing an ugly, still-scabbed wound. “Would you give aid to an oathbreaker, my lady?”

Startled, Kyrian hissed and drew back, her hand falling once again to the hilt of her baton. *Do I know this woman?* She tried to guess at who she was, to put the details of a hawk-like face, brilliant blue eyes, dark, earthy brown skin, and thick, dirt-matted braids against the tales and songs she knew of the people of Y’Dan.

It was the eyes that did it. Not the color, for though they were vivid, Kyrian had grown up among the elves and had experienced their unearthly beauty for the entirety of her life. No, what held her attention was the way the stranger’s eyes never seemed to stop moving. It was as if she were trying to map and remap every inch of ground around her. There was a restlessness to that gaze that brought to mind many of the warriors who had passed through the gates of the abbey in which Kyrian had been raised.

Like herself, the stranger was half-elven, but unlike Kyrian, who bore the tattooed mark of a stardancer, the stranger’s face was ruined by a hideous wound in place of a tattoo that would declare her status as a trained warrior to any who cared to see it. The thick, gnarled chunk of scabbing below the woman’s right eye spoke louder than words at what kind of person Kyrian faced. This was no person of honor; this was a creature to be reviled and ridiculed, to be driven from sight at any opportunity. Unconsciously, Kyrian sought the comfort of touching the mark that declared her own chosen avocation before asking, “Who are you, that you bear the brand of an oathbreaker?”

Without hesitation, the woman replied, “I am Azhani Rhu’len,” and bowed with exaggerated grace. “At your service, my lady.”

A frisson of anger and fear shot through Kyrian at hearing the name. *I could kill her where she stands and no one would care.* Her oaths to Astariu prevented it, though. *I should kill her, by Astariu's bright fist! She deserves it!* Emotions tangled and twisted in Kyrian's breast and she sat there, staring at the woman who mocked her with her very presence. *What do I do?* It felt like the whine of a small child looking up at an implacable parent, but Kyrian was so lost and confused that all she could do was pray for guidance.

If the woman standing before her now truly was Azhani Rhu'len, then legally Kyrian could do whatever she chose, including walking away, allowing the wounds festering on her leg to kill her slowly.

*It's the death she deserves. But I'd feel shamed by it, that Astariu would view me through eyes tainted by my own guilt.* So much of why she was uncertain was bound up in what Azhani had done to be named an oathbreaker, though, which was why Kyrian struggled to push aside her anger, to let go of her hate, and see beyond the red haze that threatened to cloud her vision at hearing the woman's name.

Azhani had not moved. This struck Kyrian as odd, for why would a woman guilty of so many crimes not add one more to her tally? In fact, why bother to save her at all? Forcing herself to step away from her emotions, she tried to look past the dirt and rags, through the cocky, almost insulting smirk, and into the true heart of the woman who seemed content to await Kyrian's verdict on her fate.

*Goddess, it would be so easy to become the hand of justice. One or two well-placed blows and she'd be deader than last year's leaves.* Leather brushed Kyrian's hand. The muscles of her arm twitched, clenching painfully. She closed her eyes and was sucked into a visceral memory of...

*blood dripping from the end of her baton. Bits of bone and brain spattered the front of her robes and in the distance she could hear the sound of someone crying...*

Nausea washed over her. Drawing in a shuddering breath, she forced the terrible memories away. "No."

"Go, healer," Azhani suddenly snapped. "Give your skills to someone who is worthy of their gift."

The harshly spoken words brought Kyrian back to the present in time to see the woman limp away, leaning heavily on her bow. Every few steps, she stumbled and fell, crashing into the dirt. Yet, she continued on,

dragging herself upright and hobbling through snow and mud in an effort to reach the door of the cottage.

Training kicked in and forced Kyrian to realize that Azhani was in terrible pain. *I have to help her. Astariu teaches that those in pain deserve our care, no matter what crimes stain their souls. It is not for me to judge or to be the hand of vengeance. That is the domain of the Twain. Astarus with his magic, Astariu with her blade—they are the ones who weigh a soul's darkness and either wash it clean to be born anew or shred it into tatters, never again to curse our lives. My duty here is clear.*

Decision made, she dismounted, accidentally bashing her chin against Arun's saddle, jarring her jaw and sending a wave of pain through her skull. "Ow."

Tentatively, she probed the area, finding it soft, spongy, and a little warm, as well as quite tender. Curious and a little less willing to trust her instincts, she dug out a mirror and was treated to the sight of a large, purple bruise covering one side of her face.

*Well now, how by Astariu's glory, did that happen?* Kyrian tried to find truth in the morass of images that hazily played before her mind's eye, but couldn't seem to grasp them tightly enough to hold long...

*Cold, spiced ale tasted delicious, especially on a dry tongue. She'd spent candlemarks singing the prayers that would bind the happy young couple and her mouth had been so dry she'd have drained a bog. It was hot, she'd gone outside and there'd been a man...*

Kyrian blinked. Did he walk strangely? Stumble, perhaps? She couldn't quite remember. What she did recall, though, thanks to the slimy sensation in her mouth and acrid aftertaste still lingering on her tongue, was that the ale had been tainted, poisoned with something that had made her toss the mug aside and shove her fingers down her throat in an abortive attempt to rid herself of the fouled drink. That was when the man had struck her.

Rubbing her jaw, she sighed. That bit of memory was enough to explain how she left Kellerdon, but not how she ended up in the custody of the oathbreaker or why they were here, somewhere at the foot of the Crest of Amyra, and far too close to no man's land for her comfort. Much as she might like to ascribe all manner of evil deeds to Azhani's name,

kidnapping could not be one of them, for she'd gotten a very good look at the man's face before unconsciousness had settled over her.

Watching as Azhani continued to struggle toward the door, Kyrian felt surprise burble up within her as she began to realize that the warrior had actually saved her life.

"Now what kind of oathbreaker cares enough about anyone to risk their own lives for nothing?" It had been for nothing, too, because Azhani had already refused her offer of aid.

Part of Kyrian wanted to believe that perhaps Azhani wasn't the monster she'd been painted to be, that maybe it was some kind of mistake, but then she remembered that the woman had killed her friend Ylera. No matter what, the anger she felt over that deed alone was enough to send her riding in the opposite direction, or should have been, if she were a normal person whose entire life did not revolve around caring for others.

*Conniving bitch. I bet she saved me just so I'd feel indebted to her.* Unable to come to a decision, Kyrian stood there, rooted to the spot as Azhani tripped, staggered, limped, stumbled, and eventually crawled her way across the snow-laden ground. It seemed that no matter what truth her recent past bore, every tale of Azhani's strength of will was absolutely correct.

*And if those old songs and tales are right about that, are they also right about her honor? No one ever sang about the 'dishonor of the king's banshee'.*

Kyrian wanted to scream, to pluck out her hair in frustration or to fall to her knees and beg the Twain for answers. Was Azhani a hero or a monster?

Again, Azhani fell, this time, crying out in agony.

Before she could consider her actions, Kyrian took a half step forward. Duty, it seemed, was becoming clear again. *I have to help her. If I do not, her death will be on my hands as surely as if I had raised the baton myself.*

For all that she might want the woman's death, the simple truth was that Kyrian would not, could not, kill another. Her resistance crumbled. Whatever evils existed in Azhani's past could not be changed and right now, she needed healing.

Placing one hand on Arun's neck, she whispered, "Guard," and quickly strode to Azhani's side. Firmly, she said, "I don't care if you're a rimerbeast's spawn, I'm going to help you," and knelt beside her, offering her shoulder for support.

\* \* \*

In disbelief, Azhani stared up at the stardancer. “Is this a trick?” she rasped. “Will you stab me in the back when I am not looking? You could, you know.” She laughed mirthlessly. “I’m weak as a kitten.”

“You are injured. I am a healer.” She wrapped her arm around Azhani’s waist and waited for her to grab hold before pulling her upright.

The stardancer was stronger than Azhani assumed, but still, how could she dare trust someone who had so recently looked at her with such pure hatred on her face? It had been impossible not to see that the woman knew her, perhaps even had some reason to despise her. *Wouldn’t it just be my luck that one of those idiots on the field was her lover?*

“That does not mean you would not choose to do the kingdoms a favor,” Azhani said even as she attempted to find her balance.

“No. It is my oath to offer aid to those in need,” she replied, then lifted one eyebrow. “You would not have *me* become an oathbreaker, would you?”

The question struck Azhani like darts of acid, burning all the way to the quick. Stung, she looked up, met the other woman’s gaze, and found that all uncertainty was gone. All that remained was gentle concern and perhaps a touch of wry humor. An angry retort died on her lips and instead, she mumbled, “No,” and allowed the woman to support her.

Slowly, they began to take careful steps toward the cottage. “I would not dishonor you so, my lady.”

The stardancer smiled. “Good. Now, do you have a key to that door, or do I need to have Arun kick in the window?”

Despite herself, Azhani laughed. “There’s a key.” She reached up to fish a loose bit of wood off the doorframe. With only minimal tugging, it came free, revealing a rusty key. “This is my home, such as it is,” she said, taking the key and using it to unlock the door.

The stardancer frowned. “But I thought you lived in Y’Dannyv, with the king.”

“I did. This is my father’s homestead. I grew up here, in the borderlands.” Gesturing northward, she smiled wistfully. “Ride about three days that way and you’ll cross into the foothills of the Crest of Amyra.” She pointed south. “But if you go that way, you’ll end up back in Y’Dan. Right here is no man’s land—no laws, no rules, no kings to anger by offering aid and comfort to an oathbreaker. Satisfied?”

The stardancer did not reply and instead opened the door, which required some effort, as time and weathering caused it to stick. Eventually, it popped open, causing seasons worth of dust and dirt to explode outward. Waving their hands and coughing, both Azhani and the stardancer stood in the entry, blinking and sneezing.

The room revealed was dimly lit, littered with debris, and devoid of furniture. It was musty and thick with the fetid stink of old dung. In the dust was a variety of animal tracks. As they stepped through the doorway, cobwebs brushed their heads and faces.

Sneezing again, the stardancer said, "I thought you said you lived here?"

Azhani used the end of her bow to push some of the larger clumps of debris out of their way. "I do now."

Clearly taken aback at the condition of the cottage, she asked, "Why is there nothing here?" She gestured around the room. "This is all garbage."

As the stardancer helped her to sit near the cold hearth, Azhani said, "After my father died, raiders took everything that wasn't nailed down." Then she shrugged. "All I could do after that was lock it to keep the larger animals from making it uninhabitable. To be honest, I'm surprised it's not worse."

Looking at a massive pile of rodent droppings, the stardancer replied, "I suppose it worked—to some extent."

Her obvious revulsion stung, and Azhani mumbled, "It was all I could do at the time."

Perhaps sensing Azhani's humiliation, she quickly replied, "It will do," and began to inspect the fireplace, seeking any blockages in the flue. After a while, she pointed at the bow. "May I borrow that?"

Wordlessly, Azhani surrendered it, wincing as it was then used to poke and prod at the chimney. Several ancient bird and rat's nests tumbled into the hearth, sending a cloud of ash and dust billowing into the room.

Coughing and wheezing, Azhani snatched her bow back when it was offered it to her.

"Sorry." As apologies went, it was certainly sheepish enough, though it was distractedly given. Gathering piles of broken twigs, the stardancer began to lay out a fire.

Azhani had to approve. Most of the trash would easily burn and the rest could be buried in the middens.

Eventually, a small fire blossomed, allowing the stardancer to turn her focus back to Azhani. "Now, let me look at that leg."



As the room began to warm, Azhani yawned, but tried to comply with her request. She attempted to swing her legs around toward her, but right then, her muscles seized in a cramp so intense that she cried out. “Shyvot!” Taking a deep breath, she gritted her teeth. “I might need a little help.”

Gently, the stardancer helped her, stopping whenever Azhani couldn’t take any more, waiting until she signaled she was able to go on, and then, finally, getting her into a position where she could study the bandages critically, before pulling a small knife from her haversack and cutting them away, throwing the fouled things right into the growing fire. Under the cloth were several carefully whittled splints.

“This is terrible,” the stardancer murmured, pulling away the wood to reveal a mottling of bruises covering Azhani’s leg from the knee down. Thick yellow pus oozed from torn and putrefied flesh while the white ends of bone thrust up through a horrific wound.

Faced with the reality of her own injuries, Azhani could only stare, almost unable to discern bruise from flesh, the discoloration was so vivid and dark.

“Wasn’t this tended?” The stardancer’s voice was filled with shock and indignation. With practiced ease, she emptied the tools of her trade from her haversack, setting them onto a clean, dry cloth at her side.

Azhani shook her head. “Didn’t have much time.” Every whisper-light touch of the stardancer’s warm fingers sent daggers of pain shooting through her leg. “I had to leave Y’Dannyv in a hurry.”

The stardancer paused in the act of filling her mortar with herbs. “So it’s true then, what they say?”

Azhani didn’t answer and couldn’t meet her gaze.

“Why?” she whispered. “Ambassador Kelani and the soldiers—you killed them. Why, Azhani?”

Still, she could not reply.

With a sad sigh, the stardancer stood and walked to the door, then whistled for her horse. The beast trotted over, poked his nose through the doorway and got a snoot full of dust. She laughed as he sneezed, then removed her saddlebags, bedroll, and extra blankets from his back.

Azhani half dozed, watching as she scooped up snow into a pot and set it on the hearth to melt, then propped her up with the bedroll.

“I’m going to have to set your leg.” The stardancer’s expression was filled with regret. “It will cause you a great deal of pain.”

"I know," Azhani replied in a daze. Lurid red spots flickered in front of her eyes as waves of pain and nausea threatened to render her unconscious while cold chills wracked her body.

Softly, the stardancer told her, "Not much longer now," and added a mix of herbs to the pot. "Once this steeps, I'll put you to sleep and you can get some decent rest."

Azhani shook her head. "No. I'll stay awake. Don't waste your magick on me."

She stirred the tisane with her knife. "It's my decision to make. The magick is yours whether you will it or not." As the herbs steeped, she delicately patted Azhani's uninjured knee. "Close your eyes. I'll let you know when I'm ready."

Sinking into the softness of the blankets behind her, Azhani tried to close her eyes, but ended up studying the stardancer instead. The younger woman seemed incapable of sitting still. Rather than relaxing, she was up and searching the house, digging around in every nook and cranny, eventually returning with an old, battered broom.

"Looks like the bandits forgot something!"

Azhani grunted in amusement. "Trust a stardancer to make a treasure out of a broom."

She laughed, then dropped the broom to rescue the pot from the fire before it boiled over. "My apologies." She poured the steaming drink into a cup. "But this is going to taste like the bottom of a chamber pot."

"And I suppose you're familiar with such a flavor?" Azhani retorted as she accepted the mug.

"No!" she said, shaking her head. "Just drink it. I promise, you'll feel much better."

Azhani took a sip of the tea and gagged at the extremely bitter taste. "You don't honey coat the truth, do you?"

With a wry grin, she replied, "Why would I? You would not have believed me otherwise, or trusted my skills as a healer."

Azhani snorted. "True. Having dealt with my share of surgeons, I have come to know what to expect." Her eyes began to feel heavy and she almost cursed the stardancer's kindness. "I said I wanted to remain awake," she muttered as the sleeping herbs began to take effect.

Catching the mug, the stardancer helped her to lie back. "I know, but I need you to remain still in order to work this healing, and I'm afraid not

even the great Banshee could do such thing, not with that break. Now sleep. I swear by Astariu's grace, no harm will come to you."

Oddly, Azhani found comfort in the words and finally surrendered to the pull of the herbs.

\* \* \*

The surgery on Azhani's leg took several candlemarks. Kyrian was appalled at the extensive damage and knew that she would have to spend at least one session using Astariu's gift to repair the bones. Otherwise, the warrior would never walk properly again.

Her hard work had not gone unrewarded, though. With the necrotic tissue cut away, the angry red lines of infection were slowly receding and allowing good blood to flow through the leg. She was quite pleased. Azhani's leg had an excellent chance of survival.

While her patient rested, Kyrian kept busy by cleaning the small cabin and thinking about how in the hell she had gotten to a place in her life where she would put her skills to work healing someone like Azhani Rhu'len.

The name of Azhani Rhu'len was not unfamiliar to her. In fact, all the kingdoms of Y'Myran had heard songs of the warrior's courage and skill in battle. And yet, for the last three months, those tales had been set aside for newer, far more chilling stories of Azhani the oathbreaker, murderer, and perpetrator of horrendous deeds that had earned her new fame as the Banshee of Banner Lake.

Pausing in her thoughts, Kyrian ran her fingers through her hair and shivered, for the stories she'd heard of that day were enough to set her guts to lurching. Absently, she noted that though the interior of the cottage was a wreck, the actual structure seemed solid, which was good, as it was cold outside, and winter had barely laid its hand on the mountains.

*It wasn't winter when Azhani's story began, though, was it?* At the tail end of spring, Y'Dan's king, Thodan the Peacemaker, had lost his battle with a long illness and died in his sleep. His son, Prince Arris, had inherited the throne. Yet rather than swearing allegiance to the new king, as was her duty as warleader, Azhani had instead plotted to overthrow him. Every tale that reached Kyrian's ears carried the vivid description of how the young prince stood before the Grand Council, awaiting his confirmation, when the crazed warrior burst in and attempted to murder him in cold blood.

*Though it's hard to imagine her being so crazed—even when she knew I'd put the sleeping draught in her tea, she still drank it, and I doubt she's the type to surrender to fate unknowingly.* Kyrian stared at the woman and tried to equate what she was learning with what she thought she knew.

Faced with the attempt on his life, the new king had valiantly defended himself, and rather than slaying the traitorous warleader, he exercised true restraint and had her arrested. Investigation later revealed the horrific extent of Azhani's crimes, and treason had only been the beginning, for the former Y'Dani warleader had not only sought to claim the new king's life, but his throne, as well.

With these thoughts buzzing in her head, Kyrian wandered the cottage, cleaning as she went. There were three rooms to empty of debris, the hearth room where Azhani slept, a loft above it, and a storage area that appeared to have once been the larder. An outside door led to the back of the house where no more than fifty paces away stood a small stable and paddock.

*Such a low place for a woman whose station had been so high,* Kyrian mused while leaning against the door. Her eyes slipped shut and she drifted again into thoughts of the recent past.

There had been no choice for King Arris but to sentence Azhani to death, however she had not gone to the gallows easily. To the bitter end, she had chosen the route of defiance, breaking free of her jailor's bonds and attacking the Y'Syran ambassador, Ylera Kelani. The elven woman died, further compounding Azhani's crimes.

"Ah Goddess," Kyrian whispered, as grief and anger crushed her throat and pushed tears from her eyes. Months had passed and she still couldn't think of Ylera without breaking down. *Thank Astariu that it hadn't taken them long to capture the bitch!*

Once again in custody, Azhani had been led to the shores of Banner Lake where she was to have been hung, drawn, and quartered, but even then, she would not accept her fate. In an act of either sheer insanity or freakish cleverness, she had demanded the Rite of the Gauntlet, something not requested by any criminal, no matter how desperate, for decades. King Arris had been forced to grant the request, for though no one knew the rite's origins, everyone knew that invoking it would always be honored.

Many pitted their swords against Azhani's, but had obviously failed. *Had I been there, that might have not been so,* Kyrian thought, still seething with anger. Though she might not prefer to kill, and indeed, be utterly

sickened by the thought of it, if ever there was someone who needed to die, it was Azhani Rhu'len!

Kyrian was not present the day the banks of Banner Lake ran red with the blood of good Y'Dani soldiers, nor had she seen how Azhani won her freedom, but the songs and tales of the event had spread far and wide. Now the only consolation for her victims was that King Arris had declared Azhani an oathbreaker and had banished her from Y'Dan. A generous bounty for her head was set and the kingdom had moved on from that horrible event and into celebrating the coronation of its new king.

However, Kyrian felt no such lightheartedness, for one among Azhani's dead had been very dear to her. Grief sprouted anew at the memory of her friend, the only one she'd had as an acolyte. It had been many years since they had last spoken, but not a day went by when she did not think of the gentle and beautiful woman who had been so much to her at a time when she needed someone. Having her murderer asleep no more than twenty feet away opened fresh wounds, tore gaping holes of rage in Kyrian's heart, and left her standing there, nearly panting with the need to crush Azhani's head like it was a rotten pumpkin.

Retreating, as she so often did, into prayer, Kyrian sought solace in her faith, in the one constant of her life. "Astariu, grant me the peace of your love," she chanted again and again until something resembling calm descended on her.

Cold now, and wearied to the bone, but knowing there was still much left to do, she put aside all thoughts of the past and concentrated instead on the present and future. Whatever Azhani Rhu'len had been, she was now a patient, and therefore, Kyrian's duty was clear—heal her.

*Besides, Ylera herself would want you to hear both sides of the story before making a final judgment. How many times did she intervene in fights between acolytes, demanding both sides speak before deciding whether the issue should be brought before our teachers?*

Accompanied by this thought, Kyrian made her way to the stable and looked inside, relieved to discover that it would be more than big enough for her beloved Arun.

Fortunately, the stable was not as dirty as the house, and it only took her a short while to clear out a stall for the horse. "Here you go, Arun." Cheerfully, she led the horse through the door.

He immediately moved closer to the small hearth where a well-banked fire warmed the interior.

“Yes, I know, it’s cold out there, my friend,” she murmured while currying him. After draping his blanket over his back, she left him with a bag of oats and dusted off her hands. “Now, what else is there?”

Peering into the yard, she yawned, almost missing the outhouse in the glare of the setting sun, but there, squatting between two trees, set even further back from the cottage than the stable, was a small, ramshackle building. “Wish I’d found that earlier,” she said, chuckling as she wandered out and opened the door to see if it was functional.

The stale scent of animal habitation greeted her and she wrinkled her nose.

“Oh, that’s wretched. This will never do.” Even though it was late, she returned to the cottage, collected the broom and her lantern, and went back to the privy to clean it. *Of course, only I would be doing my chores so haphazardly. Starseeker Kaliya would have such a laugh at my expense!* Then she shrugged. *Who’s to know that I did not follow perfect protocol? The work is being done and that’s what matters most!* This, of course, was exactly what Ylera would have said, had the matter come up in conversation.

Once the privy was clean, she scrubbed her hands with snow and went back to the cabin. In the rear was a fenced off section which held a garden and a well. Propping the lantern on a fence post, she used the broom handle as a spade and dug up a small bounty of still-edible vegetables. The well held clear, potable water. Next to the well was a broken bucket in which she cleaned the vegetables.

“Thank you for your blessings, Astariu,” Kyrian whispered as she dried the last potato on her robe.

With her treasures in hand, she returned to the cabin. Inside, the firelight illuminated the stairs leading to the loft.

Her patient still slept, so Kyrian set the food near the hearth and headed upstairs. There she found the bedroom. Two pallets were built into the floor and a wood stove stood in the corner by a window. She strode over to the window to close the shutters and discovered that the floor was not very stable.

*I guess no one’s been up here in a long time. I’d better be careful.* In one section, Kyrian had to avoid a fist-sized hole where the wood had rotted through. She closed the window and quickly checked the stove. It was

functional, but the unsafe floor made it useless for now. Curiosity satisfied, she made for the stairs.

“Don’t need to add myself to the injured list,” she muttered as she gingerly avoided the rickety floorboards.

Working gave her a chance to reach a tentative peace with regard to Azhani Rhu’len. She would give her a chance to tell her side of the story, for Ylera’s sake. If, when she was finished speaking, Kyrian still believed her to be a murderess, then she would abandon her to whatever fate lay in store, but if she could somehow, some way, give her an excuse that would explain why she betrayed her oaths, then... Here, she stumbled, for what would she do, in the event that Azhani could muster such a seemingly unlikely defense?

Caught flatfooted by the thought, Kyrian paused on the stairway and stared at the sleeping woman. *I guess it’ll depend on what she tells me.*

The uncertainty of that decision bothered her so much that she hurried outside to check on her horse rather than face the possibility that Azhani would wake and want to talk.

After gathering gorse grasses from along the fence line, Kyrian made sure Arun was still comfortable and then put herself to work searching the stable and storage for more treasures. From time to time, the horse would look in his empty trough and then stare hopefully at his mistress, but nothing more was forthcoming.

Laughing, Kyrian shook a finger at the gelding. “Sorry boy, there isn’t much to eat. We have to ration for a while.”

Arun flicked an ear and huffed.

“I know. But you’ll survive,” Kyrian said, smiling at the horse’s antics. Arun was a good friend, smarter than most horses, and it showed in the way he responded her statements and actions. “I should go back to the cabin. Azhani will be waking soon.” There was just one last section of the stable to explore and she decided to examine it first.

One corner of the building was piled almost waist high with bits and pieces of wood. The heap appeared to be the discard pile for a carpenter and Kyrian almost dismissed it as simply a great source of firewood until she caught a glimpse of something metallic.

*Now what have we here?* Curiosity trumped exhaustion and Kyrian pushed up her sleeves and began to move the wood around. In short order, she had uncovered an old trunk. Brass fittings gleamed dully in the lantern

light. She whistled in appreciation at the ornate carvings that adorned the lid of the box.

There was no lock, so she lifted the top and peered inside. A cloud of dust rose and caused her to sneeze repeatedly, but when she could see again, the sight that greeted her was well worth the effort. Neatly folded and wrapped in decaying parchment was a surprising wealth of blankets and clothing.

At the very bottom of the trunk, under the clothes, she found a final prize; a long, thin package shrouded in ancient silk. With a deft twist of her wrist, Kyrian flicked away the silken covering and stared at the naked blade of a finely crafted elven longsword.

Her vision blurred and for a moment, she could almost see blood dripping down the steel and puddling at her feet. Disgusted, she swallowed back a mouthful of bile. *I should just drop this into the well.* Kyrian closed her eyes to block out the memories. *I can't. I can't throw away a perfectly good weapon. Just because I don't use blades doesn't mean that this doesn't have some value. After all, it could be sold or traded for enough food to get Azhani through the winter.*

Thoughts of her patient reminded Kyrian that she needed to check on her. Quickly, she wrapped the blade and gathered the textiles into a bundle. For now, she would keep the sword hidden. There was no need to hand it over to the injured woman right away.

Stardancers used no edged weapons other than the small knives made for eating, healing, and other mundane tasks. As servants of Astariu's healer aspect, they carried batons—long, stout rods crafted of highly flexible steel. The weapons were just as deadly as swords, but in the hands of a master, they could be used to disable instead of kill. The order firmly believed that death in the name of justice was the province of kings, not priests.

Once, Kyrian had taken a life, and that burden wore upon her conscience. Seeing the sword reminded her of her oath and of why she had spent the last two years of her life moving from place to place, wearing herself out by trying to heal enough people to atone for the life she had ended.

Stopping to pet Arun one more time, she left the stable. The sun had long since vanished and a cold, biting wind whipped her robes about her body as she hurried to the small house. Inside, she dropped the treasures near the sleeping woman and set her lantern in the center of the room.



Scavenged wood fed the fire, bringing welcome warmth. A meager handful of jerked beef joined the fresh vegetables in a pot of water and was hung from a hook over the fire. From her pack came a loaf of black bread and the remains of a crock of butter.

The loaf was a bit smashed and there was a crack in the jar, but it was intact enough to eat the contents. “Well, it’s not a dwarven banquet, but this should make a tasty feast,” she said while setting out the food.

Soon, the aroma of the cooking soup filled the room, chasing away the last remnants of decay and dust.

## CHAPTER TWO

AZHANI WOKE TO THE SCENT of soup. *Mmm...that smells...* Her stomach churned nauseatingly for just a moment until the odor registered as something tasty. The nausea vanished, replaced by sharp hunger. *Goddess, that smells incredible. I'm starving.* Slowly, she blinked her eyes open, surprised when there was no accompanying wave of horrific pain to torment her.

Lifting her head, she looked down at her leg and found it tightly wrapped in fresh bandages. In wonder, she gaped at the sight. *She did it. The stardancer saved my leg.*

"Thank you," she rasped, her throat raw and dry.

The stardancer jumped, nearly dropping her bowl and gave her a vexed grin. "You're welcome. Are you hungry? There's soup."

Possessed by an impish impulse to tease, Azhani said, "Does it also taste like yesterday's chamber pot?" Wincing as her bladder ached, she pulled herself upright and contemplated how she was going to make it to the privy.

The stardancer laughed. "No. But I could add some bitter root, if you'd prefer."

Azhani shifted uncomfortably, trying to decide how to answer the query in a way that would keep the smile on the stardancer's face, but her bladder was really screaming now and all she could think was how the heck she was going to crawl from her space by the hearth out to the privy in back.

Cocking her head, the stardancer offered her an amused smile. "I bet you'd like to take a walk, wouldn't you?" She stood and held out her hand to Azhani.

"I can do this myself," she replied stubbornly, making a face. Taking hold of her bow, she used it to lever herself upright, took one feeble step forward and glared when the stardancer reached out to steady her.

“Be careful, warrior. A standing nag still can’t run the race.”

Pain shot up Azhani’s leg as she put pressure on it. Hissing, she grumbled, “I am discovering this.” Dragging her splinted leg with every agonizing step, she worked her way to the back door of the cabin.

The stardancer followed her. “You’re quite a stubborn one, aren’t you, Azhani Rhu’len?”

Azhani ignored her. There was too much fascination twisting into the stardancer’s softly spoken words, too much interest. The woman needed to leave soon, or she’d be stuck there, forced to spend the winter with an outlaw and Azhani couldn’t allow that. She was grateful for the stardancer’s healing, but beyond that, she didn’t want her around, not when being close would endanger her.

Stepping out into the cold night, she took a deep breath, shaking with the effort it took to stay upright. If her bladder weren’t about to embarrass her, she’d have collapsed into a heap right there. Instead, she looked deep inside for the strength to continue, but found the well nearly dry. *Must. Do. This.* Pride and stubbornness carried her through the yard until she reached the privy. With both relief and even a little delight in proving her strength, she collapsed into the outhouse.

There were two pallets next to the fire when Azhani returned to the house. Near one was a bowl of thick, savory soup, a half round of dark peasant bread, and a cup of tea. In the other was the stardancer, apparently asleep.

Azhani lowered herself to the ground, letting out a soft groan of weariness. She ate, again silently thanking the stardancer and Astariu for the gift of food and healing. “Not bad,” she mumbled, finding the food more than just palatable. Using the bread to sop up the broth, she added, “Better than roots and bugs.”

“Why do I think you’d say that about food served at King Arris’ table?” the stardancer replied as she rolled over to face her.

Azhani’s face clouded with anger. “Anything served in that castle would taste like ashes to me.” Her voice was low and harsh. Appetite gone, she set the last portion of bread in her bowl and picked up the tea. Its pungent herbal odor promised the painkillers that she knew she needed.

The stardancer remained silent.

“You can leave tomorrow,” Azhani told her bleakly. “If you go north for a day and a half, you’ll find Barton. It’s a mining and trading town. You

can winter there. There'll be traders in spring who'll take you anywhere you want to go."

The stardancer looked around the room, one eyebrow arching upward. Azhani had prayed she wouldn't notice the terrible state of things, the lack of anything resembling food or supplies, and the absolute absence of hope, but that seemed unlikely now. "I'd like to stay and treat your wounds. At the very least, you'll need another week of care."

Azhani's jaw tightened. A week was too much. Didn't the stardancer understand she was being given a chance to get away? Arris would never let Azhani escape his grasp. This was the stardancer's only chance to flee before the boy king's troops appeared at the door, ready to murder them in their beds.

"I don't need your help." She yanked the blankets over her and glared at her mostly unwanted houseguest.

"I didn't say you did," the stardancer said with a calm smile. "I offered it. There is a difference, warrior."

"Don't call me that," Azhani snapped. "My days of fighting are over. I am an outlaw, a crazed killer hiding in the forest, nothing grander."

"Warrior or outlaw, you are wounded and will require someone to help make this place livable or you'll not survive the winter. You may command me to leave you here to rot, but my oaths as a healer will keep me glued to your side. I will be here tomorrow, and all the days after, until I've decided that you are able to care for yourself." The words made Azhani grind her teeth in frustration. Worse still was when the stardancer's smile grew even further as she added, "Besides, you still have yet to tell me why you saved me, and I think I'd like to hear that story."

As the stardancer shifted in her bed, Azhani stared at the ceiling and sighed. "I'm no tale-spinner, healer. The facts are quite simple: I saw one of Astariu's Own in need and I had the means to act. Any who had sworn the same vows as I would have done the same."

Glibly, the stardancer replied, "What care does an oathbreaker have of allegiances to Astariu's bond?"

Azhani grimaced. "I'll not be damned *and* banished."

The stardancer leaned closer. "I sense so much more to you than you project, warrior. I think now, even if you threatened to run me off with your bow, I would stay." Then she smiled crookedly. "I would regret breaking your hand, though." She licked her lips. "I touched your aura,

Azhani Rhu'len. Whatever happened, I can no longer believe the stories they tell. No one could carry as much pain and grief as you do and still be so evil. Thus, by duty and desire, I must help you."

Azhani sighed. She could tell the stardancer had wanted to hate her at first—there'd been rage in her eyes when she'd heard her name, but now, somehow, by whatever wild twists of fate Astariu had placed in their path, she was now willing to sacrifice her time to help. "Stay then, stardancer. I will not refuse you shelter." She wondered if she was being selfish. *I cannot make her go. The same oaths that compelled me to save her also demand I allow her to stay.*

"Thank you. In the morning, I'll see what the forest will yield, as what was carried in Arun's packs will not last long," the stardancer replied, yawning.

"You'll not find much," Azhani mumbled sleepily.

"Perhaps not, but still I will look."

There was nothing to say in reply, so Azhani merely allowed sleep to carry her away.

\* \* \*

Newly formed icicles glittered from the gnarled branches of a tree. Kyrian stared at the strange beauty, and then began to pick her way up the trunk, looking for any sign of a nest. A pile of sticks bore some promise, but, to her immense disappointment, yielded nothing more than some old feathers, a few twigs, and tiny bits of ancient rope.

Grumbling under her breath, she turned to head back to the ground and, by chance, spotted a large growth of mushrooms speckling the other side of the tree. *Oh, thank Astariu.* A quick examination proved them to be edible.

After carefully harvesting them, she put them in a pouch and set it onto a warped shelf that was tacked to the side of the cottage. Another tree yielded several small, reddish-yellow crabapples. By the time she was done gathering the tart fruit, her hands were aching from the chill. There was a bite in the air that spoke of the winter to come and she knew that their meager supplies would not last until spring. More food would have to be found if they were to survive.

It was her hope that Azhani would have a plan, though perhaps she should offer to visit the trading post—Barton, wasn't it? Her patient would be able to confirm the name. *Patient? Yes, she is my patient, much as she might wish me away from here. If she'd had a blade, she might've attempted to skewer me on it when I insisted on staying. Good thing the one I found is still hidden.* The sword had made for a strange bedfellow, and Kyrian hoped she wouldn't have to surrender it until Azhani was ready to wield it, otherwise, she might be tempted to drive Kyrian out of the cottage.

The question of the sword would have to be answered another day. Searching through the overgrown garden had turned up a few more withered vegetables and some wild herbs, as well as a rabbit rooting through the snow not far from where she knelt. It was a piece of luck she could not ignore, and, with a silent prayer to its spirit, she killed it quickly.

Azhani was just waking when she returned to the cottage.

"Morning, warrior," Kyrian sang out, feeling more than a little joyful over the small cache of food she now had to share. Setting aside her bounty, she warmed her hands at the hearth and then went to touch Azhani's cheek. No fever today, unlike yesterday, when touching Azhani's cocoa-brown skin had been like bathing her hands in a hot spring.

"Stardancer."

Kyrian just smiled and drew a pot of tea off the hearth, poured a measure of the warm liquid into a cup, and offered it to her.

Frowning, Azhani poked her tongue into it before drinking, her action clearly relaying her suspicion over the mug's contents. It was impossible not to laugh, but Azhani merely ignored her mirth, drinking down the entire cup before saying, "Not trying to poison me today, hm?"

"No, not today, warrior. Today, you get willow bark and boneset, to help you mend. And, to ease the flavor, I added a touch of wild mint." Holding up the pot, she offered it to Azhani, who nodded her acceptance.

"Please," Azhani murmured, then sipped from the second cup a few times before attempting to sit, waving away Kyrian's hands whenever she would try to help. It was frustrating to watch her fight so hard just to earn a few inches of movement, but by Azhani's expression of triumph, it was easy to see that even tiny victories mattered to her. Very softly, she whispered, "I won, you bastard."

"Pardon?" Kyrian leaned closer.

Azhani shook her head. "Sorry. I was just...thinking about King Arris. If he comes after me here, I have every right to defend myself." Her face

sagged into a rictus of grief then and she sighed. "It wouldn't change much, if he did." She said nothing after that.

She was silent for so long that Kyrian grew very uncomfortable and tried to find something to fill the arid atmosphere before they both turned to dust. "If you're comfortable, I'd like to look at your leg."

"Fine."

Kyrian set to work removing the bandages, frowning when she came to the mess of rags and rope that covered Azhani's feet. Most crumbled when she touched them, revealing skin that was so black with dirt that at first, she feared Azhani's skin had gone gangrenous. However, the smell that accompanied them, though quite rank, wasn't as disgusting as rot. Kyrian shook her head. "This just will not do," and got up, went outside, and fetched the battered bucket. After filling it with water, she returned, set it down beside Azhani and knelt by her leg.

As Kyrian gathered supplies from her haversack, Azhani watched her, saying nothing until she dipped a soft bit of cotton into the bucket. "What are you doing?" she asked, causing Kyrian to grin.

"Washing your feet," she replied. "They're disgusting."

When the icy water touched her flesh, Azhani scooted backward and hissed, "That's cold!"

Kyrian shot her an arch look. "Did you expect it to be otherwise? Now hush and let me work, warrior."

Even though she grumbled the entire time, Azhani did as she was asked.

\* \* \*

*Oh Goddess, I owe her far too much.* Every layer of dirt that was washed away made the gratitude go that much deeper. Azhani hated being dirty and just this one small kindness was enough to trigger a flutter of hope. *I might even be able to go out to the well and wash the rest of me later.* There was a pile of clothes on the floor by her pallet. She didn't even have to look at them to know they came from the stores in the stable. *Never thought I'd be grateful Father was a pack rat.* Trading her ruined things for the simple, but warm garb of a peasant would be a relief.

The stardancer was more gentle than she had any right to expect, taking her time in washing Azhani's feet, even going so far as to rub salve into the cuts and abrasions that covered her callused skin.

Putting aside the disgusting rags, the stardancer looked up and frowned. "When did you lose your boots?"

Azhani glanced away. "King Arris preferred me to go to the gallows on bare feet." She couldn't look at the stardancer's serene face, not with so much ugliness in her thoughts.

It was that serenity that called to her, triggering memories of another face whose eyes danced with laughter and whose lips spoke words of gentle love. The stardancer's vivid smiles were all too sharp, too strong, and could possibly shatter the shields Azhani had carefully built around her heart. No one could be allowed to get that close again. Part of her longed for a friend, though and without meaning to, she glanced at the stardancer.

She had quite a nice face. Full of innocence, joy, and even the beginnings of wary trust—though there was something about her eyes, a touch of shadow in the green, perhaps, that told Azhani that this stardancer was not as happy-go-lucky as she appeared. Still, there was a great deal of barely concealed mischief peeking out in the crinkles around her eyes and that smile, that damnably beautiful smile, could get even a dedicated curmudgeon to chuckle.

Azhani was almost afraid to look her in the eye, but she did, and was surprised to discover not contempt, but confusion and a touch of sadness.

"They took your boots?" she whispered, aghast.

Azhani nodded. "To teach me 'humility'."

To be branded an oathbreaker was to have not only pride and honor stripped and struck from a person's life, but also the very basic necessities of survival. It was one of the cruelest of punishments, outside of death itself that could be handed down to a criminal in Y'Myran. Looking away from the stardancer, Azhani stared at the heart, losing herself in the fire, seeing the past, hearing the screams of the dying, smelling their fear and blood, the piss and shit that stained their clothes, cloying her nose as the crowd screamed for her death.

The stardancer let out a long breath and reached up to massage her temples, obviously rocked by the simple statement. "Will you tell me what happened?" She asked, going back to cleaning Azhani's leg.

Even the very idea of pouring out her heart right now made Azhani queasy. "I don't want to talk about it," she growled, glaring at the stardancer when it looked like she might ask again. When she didn't speak, Azhani merely finished her tea and stared into the fire, brooding.



Again, the cottage echoed with the lack of their voices. Azhani wasn't so sure the conversation was over, though, because every stardancer she had ever known was like a dog with a bone when it came to getting things out of people that they wanted to know. This one would be no different, she was certain. *Which is why she has to leave. I can't have someone who can ferret out my secrets around me.*

The silence was good for one thing, and that was seeing to the restoration of Azhani's leg. It was tedious, finicky work to clean the wound and when it was obvious that there was still infection present, the stardancer wasted no time in summoning her gift, singing a soft lullaby to shape the power that easily directed Astariu's healing fire.

Awestruck, Azhani watched as a golden aura limned the stardancer's hands, the gentle words of her song soothing Azhani's ruffled nerves. Amazingly, wherever those hands touched, Azhani's flesh knitted together, returning the skin to its healthy, natural tones.

Little rivulets of power trickled away from the stardancer's fingers, skating up and down Azhani's leg. Though her fingers appeared to be engulfed in flames, her touch did not burn. Instead, it was warm and very relaxing. *She wields the Fire with the skill of a true master.* Under the stardancer's gentle care, the shards of pain that had been a part of Azhani's daily life slowly vanished.

*Goddess. My tongue is going to grow weary of saying, "Thank you".* Gratitude was fast becoming a heavy weight on Azhani's shoulders. Not many would risk the wrath of a king to aid an oathbreaker. At this point, she owed so much to the stubborn stardancer that paying her back would be nearly impossible.

*Her faith must be truer than her politics. Unlike so many others.* After Banner Lake, Azhani had made her way to a surgeon's school, only to be turned away by those too afraid to work with an exile. Only the generosity of an old beggar woman had allowed Azhani to survive this long...

*Delirious with fever, Azhani had raced through the docks of Y'Dannyv looking for a place to hide. Anywhere would do, even a midden heap, she just had to rest. Her shattered leg was bleeding profusely and leaving a trail that an idiot could follow. Suddenly, out of the darkness, a withered hand had grasped Azhani's belt and pulled her into a shadowy doorway.*

*"Rest warleader, I'll take the dogs off ye while ye bind yer wounds."*

*In too much pain to do anything other than nod gratefully, Azhani accepted a lump of rags that the beggar handed her and set to staunching the flow of blood from her leg. Her last three opponents had wielded maces and she'd been unable to dodge several crippling blows to her right shin.*

*"But I won," she muttered numbly. Blood coated her feet. Hers, theirs—it was impossible to tell whose lives she was grinding into her flesh. Even the clothes she wore were caked with a sickening mix of death and sweat.*

*It was too much. Unable to stand them any longer, she stripped out of the ruined garments that had once marked her as Y'Dan's warleader and donned the rags of a beggar, leaving the bloodstained silks to lie in a heap. Let them be burned in the ashes of her former life. At least the grime on the rags was honest dirt and not stained with the lifeblood of Y'Dan's soldiers.*

*"Hsst, warleader, follow me!" The old woman was back. Quickly, she lead Azhani on a twisting, turning route through Y'Dannyv's warehouse district, not stopping until they had reached a shanty town made up of broken cargo containers, trash, and the unwanted detritus of the sprawling port city. Those that lived here would care no more about Azhani than they would the king himself, for their lives revolved around the simplest of needs—shelter and food. All else were matters for those of much higher station.*

*In her years serving Thodan, Azhani had had cause to prowl these shanties and had always found the people here to be of a particularly honest bent—which was why she was so willing to trust the old woman who now offered her shelter.*

*"Here, sleep. I'll take yer weapons and get ye summat that'll let ye walk the roads easier."*

*Reluctance rose within her, but what need would she have of blades when her leg could barely support her body? Wordlessly, Azhani handed over the sword and axe. Suddenly, keeping them seemed like the last thing she could ever want to do. They were battlefield finds, taken from the hands of fallen soldiers whose lives Arris had spent trying to kill her.*

*The old woman vanished, leaving Azhani to curl up in a heap on the makeshift hearth, leaching what warmth she could from the pitiful fire. Her world was gone. Everything she had built had fallen down around her ears and all that was left was her honor, and now even that was lost, drowned in the blood and gore now covering the banks of Banner Lake. Azhani allowed herself a handful of sharp, bitter tears, and then slept.*

*She woke when the old woman returned. In her hands was clutched a simple hunter's bow and a quiver of arrows. A pack stuffed with thick round loaves*

*of peasant bread and a waterskin were the only other things her hard won weapons had bought.*

*“Bow’ll work as a crutch. Ye kin hunt wi’ it, too,” the old woman said as she thrust them at her. As Azhani studied the weapon for flaws, the old woman added, “Now, ye’ve got t’leave by midnight watch, an’ take th’ postern gate. Be quick about it, whiles I distract the guard!”*

*Nodding, Azhani replied, “Aye, I hear you. Bless you, granther.” Emotion choked her voice. “Will you be safe? By law, what you’ve done is a crime.”*

*The old woman held up her hands as if to ward her off. “Bless me not, warleader. ‘Tis a hard road ye’ve ahead of ye and I’ve naught to fear from the boy king.”*

*Forced to accept that the old woman could look after herself, Azhani bowed once, and bolted from the shelter, hurrying as fast as her brutalized leg could carry her. Behind her, fire roared and danced, consuming a portion of the southern gate...*

*A soft touch on the top of her foot brought Azhani out of the memories, drawing her back to the present. I owe that old woman more than she’ll ever know. May she be kept safe in Astariu’s hands. And the stardancer! I’ll never be able to repay this debt. She saved my leg!*

Suddenly, her options seemed so much greater than they had when she was fleeing Y’Dannyv. Then, she sought only to live, fighting Arris’ need to destroy her out of a desire to make him suffer as much as he had tormented her, but this, this utter miracle of healing meant so much more. If she could walk, she could run, and if she could run, she could fight and if she could fight, then she could wreak such vengeance on Arris Thodan that the bards would speak of it in hushed, frightened voices for the next thousand years.

*Wretched, wicked lad. Even his father saw that he was poison. On tiny feet, memory skittered in, whisking her off to those final months before her life was shattered...*

*The old king had withered, his skin hanging dull and sallow, his once robust figure now but a mere shadow of health. Azhani had knelt beside his bed, heart in her throat, fear clutching her belly as she watched the man she loved like a second father lose his battle with death.*

*“Oh, my friend,” he whispered, gripping her hand. “My regrets in life are few, but of them, I hold my son as my deepest.” He coughed and dabbed at his*

lips with a blood-spattered cloth. "I was not a good father to Arris." Azhani tried to protest, but he shook his head. "No, I know that I have failed in this. It is this ineptitude that has left him weak minded and malleable to the darker side of his nature, I'm sad to say." Grief shadowed his face as he bowed his head.

"Surely it's not so bad, my king," Azhani said.

"It is worse. That is why I must beg of you, daughter of my dearest friend, that you not allow my mistakes to bring suffering to the people of Y'Dan. My dreams—our dreams—of a kingdom of peace must live!" Sharp, wracking coughs shook Thodan's body and he tried to sit, clutching at Azhani until she helped him. "Arris must not rule," he rasped. Shaking so much that he could barely lift his arm, he reached for a brass scroll tube. and pressed it into her hands. "It will be you, my friend, daughter of Rhu'len DaCoure, who cares for my land when I am gone." His eyes closed and for a moment, Azhani feared the worst, but then, he took a shuddering breath and said, "I have done all I can. Now you shall reap the harvest of my sowing. I know Y'Dan will thrive under your care."

"My king..." Azhani murmured, tears burning her eyes. The tube in her hands felt like it was on fire.

"You must bear this to the Council upon my death, Azhani, for I have given Y'Dan to you. Swear upon your oath as warleader that you will keep her safe!" Thodan's eyes glimmered with a faint hint of his legendary fierceness as he spoke. His body, however, trembled with the effort.

Though tears scalded her face, she replied, "I swear, my king. Y'Dan will thrive."

Letting out a sigh of relief, Thodan slipped into sleep as Azhani crept out of the room. All she could think about was Ylera and how proud she would be to marry Y'Dan's next queen...

Blinking back tears, Azhani shied away from the painful images in her mind and tried to focus on the stardancer's actions, trying to become fascinated by the way the woman worked to tend her wounds, but too many years on the battlefield had made the sight of bandages and stitches all too common. Thoughts of all she had lost crept back in, pulling her into the constant stream of her memories.

All Thodan's plans had been for naught, as Arris and his followers had successfully overridden the great king's wishes and had taken all Azhani had loved from her in the process.

The stardancer sighed softly, drawing Azhani's attention. She appeared nearly finished. Wiggling her toes, Azhani grinned in fierce delight when there was no accompanying flare of pain. Joy made her want to dance. *Arris, you are doomed. You should have killed me when you had the chance, when I didn't care to live. Now, I will send you to Hell!*

As the stardancer cleaned her hands, Azhani opened her mouth to thank her and then realized she didn't even know her name. *Who is she, anyway? Why would the Cabal be so interested in her? Or had the assassin taken her for some personal reason? Had he been motivated by some promise of pleasure?* Suspicion began to brew in Azhani's heart as more questions rapidly presented themselves. *Could it have been a trick? Was the assassin merely a diversion? A decoy meant to drop my guard so I'd let the real killer close enough?* With each thought, she stared harder and harder at the stardancer, trying to see any sign that she might not be what she claimed. Had Arris sent her? Was the temple now dancing to his commands? Could he have bought their compliance? Offered them an even greater reward than she'd seen on wanted posters? Ten gold marks had seemed a small price for her life, but there were bounty hunters who would scalp a man for the price of a pitcher of ale.

When the stardancer looked up at her, Azhani asked, "Who are you?"

Startled, the other woman blinked, looking much like a pole-axed cow. Instead of replying, she fidgeted with the splints and straps around Azhani's leg.

Impatiently, Azhani stilled her hands. "Leave off! Answer me. Who are you?" she snapped, already planning exactly how she'd break the woman's neck if the answer didn't please her.

"My name is Kyrian," she replied, her voice low and tinged with a hint of fear. "I am a stardancer. I serve Astariu the Healer."

Azhani growled in irritation. "What would make you a target of the Cabal, Stardancer Kyrian? Who is your family?" With the quickness of an asp's strike, she grabbed her by the shoulders, digging her fingers deep into Kyrian's flesh as she shouted, "What have you done to cause someone to pay such a heavy price to take you?"

\* \* \*

Fear lashed through Kyrian. Flashes of the past, painted a dusky crimson by time, began to fill her mind. Lurid images of a bloody face

taunted her. With a choked whimper, she fought to push the nauseating thoughts away. *No!* Struggling against her captor, she cried, "Let me go, warrior!" When Azhani's grip tightened, she growled, "I'm nobody, I swear. Now let go of me!"

For several long, frightening heartbeats, Azhani stared at her. Then, as abruptly as she'd grabbed her, she let her go, mumbling, "My apologies."

Straightening her rumpled robes, Kyrian sat there, unmoving, lips pressed together, shivering as the last vestiges of her fear faded.

Clearly shamed, Azhani bowed her head. "You may leave any time you desire, I'll not stop you."

At the woman's words, Kyrian's eyes narrowed. "You keep trying to get rid of me. Do I stink?"

Frowning Azhani shook her head. "No, you, but I—" She rubbed her face.

There was so much raw regret in her tone that Kyrian almost felt sorry for her. Relaxed now, she placed her hand on the woman's knee. "Azhani." The name stumbled off her tongue somewhat drunkenly. It felt odd to speak it, to actually name the woman aloud, as if by doing so, she'd stripped away the protective armor of 'the patient' or 'the other woman' and made her into the truth of who she was, Azhani Rhu'len. Oathbreaker. Murderer. Person. A woman, not a demon.

This woman had risked death to rescue her, all because of the oaths she'd sworn to protect those whom the goddess favored. Unbidden, words tumbled from Kyrian's lips. "Why does it matter who I am? And why do you say that the Cabal took me? I only remember bits and pieces. Wine, dancing, good food...I'd had a mug of cool ale," she said absently. "It... didn't taste right. I'd just made myself vomit when something, or someone hit me." She spread her hands beseechingly. "So please, tell me what it is that you want, because I don't know."

She was met with silence. Kyrian's heart juddered in her chest.

Finally, Azhani nodded once. "About a half-day's journey south along the road, you will find the corpse of a Cabal assassin rotting in the woods. It was he who kidnapped you." Her gaze was sharp, almost angry. "Though you claim to be just a simple stardancer."

Kyrian gulped as Azhani just stared at her like she was stripping her down to skin and bones. Here was a woman who could murder, who could destroy, who could be the very oathbreaker Arris named her.

“The answers to your questions lie with the Cabal. Seek them if you will, but if you are wise, you will turn east and not look back.” Azhani broke her gaze and looked at the hearth.

Kyrian ran her hand through her short amber curls. “I’m not going anywhere until you’re well.” In exasperation, she added, “I am what you see—a stardancer who has no idea of how she ended up on the northern road.” Again, she touched the other woman’s knee. “Please believe me, Azhani. I have no wish to see you harmed.”

It was, to Kyrian’s great surprise, true. Whatever anger she’d felt before had vanished, replaced with a gnawing curiosity that pushed her to peel away the layers of Azhani’s secrets until she could understand what had turned her into the so-called, “Banshee of Banner Lake”. Though she had nothing but gut instinct to draw upon, somehow, she was beginning to wonder if Azhani was guilty of any of the crimes laid at her feet.

With a solemn sigh, Azhani said, “Forgive me, Stardancer. My actions must seem reprehensible, but I am a woman hunted. Yesterday, I killed a man of the Cabal and truthfully, I would have expected his target to be me, not one of Astariu’s Own.” Overcome by exhaustion, she sank back onto her pallet and closed her eyes.

*How can she speak so casually of killing?* Kyrian wondered, her gaze falling upon the pile of bloody rags she had yet to burn. *How could she ignore her wounds to save me? I’m not worth that kind of agony.* All the stories she had ever heard about Azhani Rhu’len, the finest warrior in Y’Dan, crowded into her brain, clamoring for attention. The woman had been a hero and the leader of King Thodan’s armies, famed for more than one battle against the kingdom’s most feared scourge, the rimerbeasts. Ignoring pain would be second nature to such a warrior.

“So, you stopped him, rescued me, and came here?” Kyrian tried to find some way to get Azhani to open up and tell what must surely be a spectacular story.

With an affirmative grunt, Azhani mumbled, “Not much of a hero, am I?” She indicated the rags that clothed her body.

Every time Kyrian looked at the woman, she saw a little bit more of her, peered deeper into the opaque window that shuttered who Azhani truly was, and nurtured her suspicions that the events at Banner Lake had no actual relation to the truth.

"You're enough of one for me." With a quick smile, she said, "Now, how about I repay you by heating some water so you can wash?" Glancing at the folded pile of clothes next to the bedroll, she added, "We can wait to finish splinting your leg."

A flurry of emotions flickered over Azhani's face. Pressing her lips together, she schooled her expression to a blank mask and said, "I don't care what you do with your time."

Irritated, Kyrian clucked her tongue. "Appreciation like that would give a snake hives." Standing, she exited the cottage briefly, returning with a large, rusty pot. "This was in the stable." She gave it a quick scrub first, then filled it with water and hung it over the fire.

As the bath water warmed, she turned her attention toward their next meal, humming as she chopped vegetables.

"I'll clean the rabbit."

As peace offerings went, it was quite small, but at this point, Kyrian was ready to meet Azhani halfway in order to begin building bridges of trust.

"All right, but try not to damage the hide. I'd like to make something with it," she replied, smiling brightly.

Nodding, Azhani took the carcass and began to meticulously skin and bone the animal, trading the finished fur wrapped bundle of meat for a plate of raw vegetables and a mug of fresh tea.

Kyrian covertly watched Azhani to make sure she ate before putting the meat and more vegetables into the pot with the remains of the previous night's soup. This she then set near the fire to simmer.

"You should eat as well, Stardancer," Azhani said after a short while. "I know using your gift can be tiring."

Kyrian smiled. "Oh, have no fear. I intend to stuff myself silly." She dug into her own plate of vegetables. "Later, I'll see what else I can find out there."

"You'll need the luck of Astarus himself to find much of use out there." Azhani pushed her empty plate away.

"Perhaps so." Kyrian placed her own plate atop Azhani's and unhooked the pot of hot water before setting it near the hearth. "For now, how about we see about getting you clean?"

Azhani proved to be very reluctant to allow Kyrian to bathe her, but the need to be clean won out over pride. Afterward, Kyrian cut the leg out of a pair of homespun breeches and helped her to dress. Only then did she



use the remaining water to bathe herself, exchanging her crimson robes for garments similar to the ones Azhani now wore. Without the heavy scarlet robes, the only way an onlooker would know Kyrian was a stardancer was by the tattoo inked on her cheek. The three teardrops had long since faded, a mark of the years she'd spent serving Astariu.

Deep in thought, Kyrian stared at the spot on Azhani's face that had once born a tattoo of its own. It was gone now, replaced by a dark, ridged scar. *I wonder if there's a mark to tell me what Azhani is now, if she's not a warrior?*

One thing was certain—clean, Azhani was a striking woman, though not beautiful by the traditional sense of the word. Still, Kyrian doubted she'd ever forget her face. Intense and grave, her eyes seemed to be painted into a singular emotion—abject desolation.

It was too much for Kyrian to bear. Healing that kind of pain would take more than she could give right now. Rubbing her hands on her legs, she said, "I'm going to exercise Arun, can you manage here by yourself?"

In a dull tone Azhani replied, "I'll be fine," as she practiced using her longbow as a crutch, hobbling around the area in front of the hearth.

*Why is she so damned stubborn? Is she planning to walk to that trader's village?* Kyrian couldn't believe how driven Azhani was. None of her former patients had half her dedication. Gathering her haversack, she shouldered it and headed out to the stable where Arun greeted her with a happy whicker.

"Hey boy," she called as she opened the door to the stable. The sturdy gelding came to her side, snuffling her hair and lipping her fingers as he hunted for his treat. Patting his neck, she chuckled. "Hungry? Come on, let's get you saddled up and see what's out there. Maybe you'll find something to nibble." It wasn't long before they were exiting through the ruined front gate and heading into the forest.

There were no words to describe how good it was to ride through the overgrown forest and breathe in the cool, clean air. It wasn't that she felt stifled by Azhani or even being in the cottage, it was merely that Kyrian still couldn't quite feel rooted in the moment. Part of her mind was still back in Kellerdon, enjoying the handfasting festivities. The giant hole in her memory bothered her and being near the other woman confused her a great deal. Azhani Rhu'len was supposed to be a monster, not a victim.

Soon, Kyrian dismounted and began to hunt for food. Surprisingly, the forest had plenty of bounty to yield to her experienced hands. Herbs for teas, including an abundance of one that was particularly efficacious against lung inflammations. A cold, wet winter could bring at least one case of the coughing sickness and it was best to be prepared.

No matter how confused she felt about Azhani's status, there was no question she'd be staying the winter. Years of experience had taught her that the other woman's leg would not heal overnight. No matter how much of Astariu's Fire she poured into the injury, there were just some things magick could not mend.

When Arun began to huff with excitement, Kyrian hurried to his side to see what had him so worked up and found herself looking down into a narrow, fast-moving stream. The banks on either side of the rivulet were packed with armfuls of wild grass and vegetation.

"By the blessed Twain, thank you," she whispered while pulling grass and loading it into a sack. There was enough here to feed the gelding for several days. As she worked, she was treated to several flashes of silvery scales glittering in the water. "Well, Arun," she said, scratching his nose. "I'd better learn how to fish."

The horse snorted and bobbed his head as if in agreement.

She laughed and continued her foraging. By the time she was ready to return to the cottage, her haversack was bulging with soaproot bulbs, wild parsnips, sweet onions, and four large potatoes. On the way back, she nearly tripped over a small bush bursting with tart purple berries.

"Now that is a truly blessed gift." She picked the bush clean and then gathered several pieces of deadfall and loading it on Arun's back. They would need the wood to keep warm.

\* \* \*

Once Kyrian had left, Azhani put aside the bow and forced herself to hobble about the cottage, cleaning up the mess. She made her pallet, fussing with the blankets until they were perfect, then tossed the disgusting rags that had covered her body for so long into the fire. As they smoked and sparked, filling the room with a noxious stink, she looked around and took stock of her childhood home.

Though there was a lot of cosmetic damage, the bones of the cottage were still sturdy. The roof was almost completely solid, with only a few

holes where the thatching had fallen through. A trip up the stairs to the loft educated her on the need for some repairs there, but as it was not a necessary portion of the home, it would fall to the bottom of her list. As long as the walls and roof were sound, that was what mattered.

There wasn't a shutter in the cottage that was perfect. Some were stuck shut, others flew open at the slightest breeze. Above the storage room, the roof had partially caved in, allowing a great deal of debris to collect on the floor. It would take more than one battered broom to remove the detritus that had become cluttered there.

The stardancer—Kyrian, Azhani told herself she must remember to address her by her name—Kyrian had made large inroads into the various piles of trash scattered about the house as she sought fuel for their fire, but it would take a great deal more work to return the cottage to the homey warmth Azhani remembered so fondly. A trip outside showed her that the stable and outhouse had fared the best as both were in solid condition and more than ready to face the coming winter.

As she walked the property, Azhani considered her future. The coins from the assassin's pouch would be a great boon, but they would hardly pay for all the supplies she would need to survive. Being barely able to afford bread meant nothing could be spent on frivolities, which in turn meant she would have to make do with whatever weapons she could manufacture.

Of course, her costs would be doubled if Kyrian really was determined to stay the winter. *Unless I can get her to stay in Barton. Pay her for her services and sever this connection before it becomes something beyond that of healer and patient.*

There were also dangers inherent in letting Kyrian out of her sight, as she could easily lead bounty hunters to the cottage, but she didn't think the other woman would do such a thing. On the other hand, there was nothing guaranteeing that one of the residents of Barton wouldn't attempt to collect that bounty.

Though it was technically not a part of Y'Myran, the trading village tended to honor the high king's law. Still, she was known there, and not just as a blood soaked villain in some minstrel's song. If she could get there, she felt somewhat assured of her at least tentative welcome.

Going, however, would mean she would need to craft a crutch, and not just hobble about with the aid of her bow. It was a serviceable weapon, but not suited for anything other than hunting. Her true weapons, the sword

she had crafted with her own hands, the daggers that had been love gifts from Ylera, and the armor her father had given her when Thodan had named her one of his warriors had been destroyed three months ago.

*Oh Arris, you bastard. You would piss on a flower and wonder why it had wilted when you came back to pick it for one of your lace-clad whores.*

Azhani pinched the bridge of her nose in a vain attempt to stave off the memories that seemed ready to creep up and clobber her with the pain of the past whenever she grew introspective...

*It had been one of the most unremarkable days Azhani had ever seen. Gray sky, gray lake, gray everything, but the gallows weren't gray. The gallows had been black and they waited, spindly arms of death seeming to reach for her, the noose swinging in brutal invitation of the crows of doom.*

*"Let the citizens of Y'Dan take note: On this day, nine hundred and thirteen years from the time our forefathers first set foot upon this golden land, Arris Thodan, rightful king of Y'Dan, has declared Azhani, daughter of Rhu'len, scion of DaCoure, an oathbreaker. On pain of death, let none give shelter, aid or sustenance!" The herald's words carried across the gathered crowd, drawing a collection of boos and hisses from those assembled. "Azhani Rhu'len, you have been found guilty of treason and murder. For these crimes you are sentenced to death. May the stain from the beloved Ambassador Ylera Kelani's blood never wash from your soul."*

*The mention of her lover's name was enough to make tears blur her vision. If she could have, she'd have shouted, "I did not kill her! I loved her!" but the wad of cloth Arris forced into her mouth just before the ceremony kept her silent.*

*He'd sneered as he'd yanked on the fouled gag, then said, "Let there be no false protestations of your innocence to confuse the sheep, you wretched bitch." Then he'd knelt before the Astariun priest, gloating as Thodan's crown was placed upon his head. "It's mine now," he'd murmured. "All mine."*

*The herald waited for the crowd to settle, then continued, saying, "Though our glorious king generously offered a painless death to the cursed oathbreaker, she has sullied the last of her honor by seeking the Rite of the Gauntlet. Thus, King Arris beseeches those who would be the hand of justice to step forward and receive his blessing!"*

*Azhani, however, knew that most gathered would not wish to cross her. Many had trained with her and would know that even beaten and battered, she would be a formidable opponent. One of her guards ripped the gag from her*

*mouth. Another severed the bonds pinning her wrists behind her back, allowing her to massage some feeling back into her fingers. A knife more suitable to the dinner table was thrust into her hand.*

*Flipping the blade around a few times, she looked out at the crowd, daring them to come at her, but no one moved. She grinned, convinced freedom was in her grasp. Slowly, she began to walk away, trying to ignore the sound of her armor being ripped apart and tossed onto a bonfire. In her head, she was already planning her next move, thinking she'd go south, to Y'Mar. High King Ysradan would hear her. Arris' actions would not go unpunished.*

*Then, his tone filled with pure malice, Arris snarled, "Oathbreaker!"*

*She turned around in time to see her beautiful sword thrown onto the fire, forever robbing it of its temper. A blacksmith then pulled it from the flame, laid it over an anvil and hammered it until it broke, shattering into pieces.*

*Gritting her teeth, Azhani stood there, refusing to let any emotion show on her face. This was not the time to break. She had lost everything, she would not surrender this, too.*

*"Again, herald, tell them again!" Arris commanded impatiently.*

*"The oathbreaker has claimed the Rite of the Gauntlet. Will any step forth to face her? Her only armament is a dagger," he added quickly.*

*Still no one moved. Then, from the crowd came a shout, "One thousand gold coins to the man who slays the oathbreaker! My word on it!"*

*Azhani's mouth dropped as the crowd gasped. That amount of money would turn a pauper into a prince. Half a dozen soldiers leaped forward, weapons raised, eyes glittering with the fire of greed. Gripping the dagger tightly, she readied herself. There would be no easy escapes this day...*

Shaking herself from the painful memory, Azhani told herself to let it go. Now was not the time to wallow, not when there was still so much to do to prepare for the future. Placing the assassin's pouch in a secure spot, she hobbled outside to search for a stout piece of wood to fashion into a crutch.

Behind the stable, under a rotting pile of leaves and debris, she uncovered an abandoned wheelbarrow arm. This would serve. The stable yielded an old beaver pelt that would be perfect for padding the brace. Returning to the cottage, she built up the dwindling fire, stirred the soup, and then took a seat on her pallet to begin the laborious process of transforming the wood.

\* \* \*

A broad sheet of stars was just unfurling across the sky when Kyrian returned to the cottage, Arun in tow. Inside, she found Azhani seated on her pallet, carving by lantern light, a pile of wood shavings gathered at her knee.

"You've been busy, I see." Kyrian bent over to stir the pot that had simmered all day. "Mm," she murmured, taking a whiff of the soup. "Almost done." Foraging had left her with an appetite.

"No busier than you."

Kyrian turned to smile at her, but found that the other woman hadn't even looked up from her work, though perhaps it was because she was working on a tricky area of what was to be a crutch.

Fascinated, Kyrian watched as each shaving curled away from the wood and slid to the floor. "I found a stream not too far from here," she said absently. "There's fish in it, but I'm not terribly good at fishing so, instead, we get to eat the scrawny rabbit I caught this morning."

Seemingly satisfied with her work, Azhani turned the crutch and began smoothing the rough spots with the dagger, glancing up only to say, "I can fish. I'll go tomorrow."

Kyrian frowned. "You really should wait another day before putting too much stress on your leg, Azhani." A touch dryly, she said, "We can live without fish for that long."

An expression Kyrian recognized from years of seeing it on many of her patients' faces creased Azhani's brows. Frustration for people not accustomed to idleness was not new to the stardancer.

Sourly, Azhani asked, "When can I travel?"

"To the stream and back? Two, possibly three days at least," she replied calmly, surprised and pleased that Azhani would not be one of those patients who took their frustrations out on her. As a reward, she added, "Unless you ride Arun, of course. Then your options expand."

Setting the crutch aside, Azhani indicated the cottage and shrugged. "This place requires repair." She reached over to the hearth, tugged at a loose stone and retrieved a pouch, emptying its contents onto her blankets. "And since the Cabal were kind enough to provide the means to affect those repairs, I'd like to see them done."

Kyrian stared at the small pile of gold on the bed.

“Barton’s just a day and a half north from here. There’ll be supplies, maybe some news—they don’t mind outlaws, since they’re not part of the seven kingdoms.”

“All right, we’ll leave in two days,” Kyrian said with an affable smile. When Azhani began to scowl, she held up her hand. “My horse is more than capable of carrying the both of us and, if necessary, I can walk. Unless you’re planning on buying an ox to plow the garden, he also carry us and any supplies we purchase on the return trip.”

With a heavy, irritated, but resigned sigh, Azhani retorted, “Would you use a feather to plug a dam? No, I’m not going to buy an ox!”

Kyrian chuckled. “If that’s all I had and the dam was leaking? Of course. It’s not the shape of the instrument that matters, but the will guiding it to its task.” Quoting Astariun proverbs to her patients was nothing new for her, but certainly having someone respond to them with a bright laugh and a smile was.

“So they don’t stuff your head with cotton in those monasteries!” Azhani said with a delightfully bellicose laugh. The change in the usually dour woman was enough to make Kyrian’s stomach flutter as she stared a bit overlong at the smile gracing her face.

*How does she do it? How can she go from frightening to beautiful with just a simple smile?* Thrusting that thought aside, Kyrian said, “No, we save the cotton for cranky old warriors with head injuries. After all, cotton swells.” She winked. “It lets them feel like they’re kids again.” *Ah, Goddess, I’ve missed talking to someone who can count higher than ten without taking their shoes off first!* In the monastery, there’d always been someone around who she could trade japes and banter with, though more often than not, it had been Ylera who’d borne the brunt of her jokes—or she’d carried the weight of Ylera’s teasing.

Outside the temple grounds, Kyrian found it difficult to connect with people who were more concerned about crops and children than about the latest cures for boils and pox, leaving her lonely and longing for friends. Perhaps Azhani could step beyond the daily tangles and meet her on a more cerebral level.

That she was even thinking of her as someone with whom she’d like to converse on a regular basis was shocking in and of itself, but then, Kyrian had always been told to trust her instincts. Maybe this time, they were right. Maybe she’d find a friend in the taciturn woman.

*Whoa, am I really thinking of ignoring everything that's said about the Banshee of Banner Lake? Am I going to just set aside the fact that she's an oathbreaker and a murderer?* To distract herself, Kyrian stirred the soup again, watching Azhani from the corner of her eye. She was armed and yet, she'd made no move to threaten her. Instead, she went back to working on her crutch, obviously attempting to make it as easy to use as possible.

*That's not the action of a murderer. She has what she needs off me and yet, she barely protests my presence. She tries to hide it, but there's a woman of many layers sitting on that bedroll. I need to take a chance. Forget rumor, story, and song, and concentrate on her words and actions. Stories are only as true as the deeds you witness for yourself.*

There was also the fact that when she wasn't being a sourpuss, Azhani seemed to be quite a pleasant companion. She was polite, if gruff, and she treated Kyrian like a person, not like the physical embodiment of Astariu herself. It'd been a long time since Kyrian had felt so unremarkable. *The last place anyone treated me like this was in Myr.*

Myr was a village in the elven kingdom of Y'Syr, a land not known for the tolerance of halfbreeds. The elders of the town had nonetheless welcomed her to their community, trusting her to care for their ill and educate their children. It was a peaceful, beautiful place, and for several years, Kyrian had lived comfortably. Each day granted her new opportunities to practice her gift and inspire young minds to explore the world around them.

Unfortunately, the spring of her fourth year as Myr's stardancer turned what had been a beautiful dream into a horrific nightmare...

*It had been a warm day, perfect for swimming lessons. She and her young charges had spent a long, pleasant afternoon at the river, keeping cool and having fun. Now, however, the sun was going down and it was time for them to return home. Keeping her students close, Kyrian smiled at their animated chatter, laughing whenever someone would brag of their aquatic feats.*

*There was nothing to warn of the approaching danger. One of the children screamed. Kyrian spun around and found herself facing a disheveled human male armed with a sword and a coil of rope.*

*She stared at him and he at her, then he grinned wickedly. "It must be my lucky day." His voice was a horrible whisper that sent chills down her spine. Licking his lips, he studied the line of children, then casually said, "I think you,*



and you," and pointed to two of them. "Yes, you'll do just fine." Launching his lasso, he captured them, reeling them in before anyone could move.

Rigid with fear, Kyrian watched helplessly, unable to react even when the children begged her to help them. The bandit bound his prizes tightly, ignoring the others when they raced off into the forest, leaving Kyrian and two of the children to stand there, quaking like leaves.

Once more, the lasso was launched, capturing the other two children, allowing the bandit to haul them to his side. They fought, kicking and screaming, but were no match for his brutal strength. Again, he bound each child, his leering grin surely a precursor for what was to happen to them. When he eventually confronted Kyrian, he looked her over and, dismissively, sneered, "Too old for the customers." Taking a step closer, he fondled himself and added, "But perhaps just right for Barrig."

Fear was a tighter shackle than any rope the bandit could loop about her arms, but when he advanced on her, one of the children yelled, "Leave her alone, you monster!"

Startled, Barrig spun and growled at them. "Shut up!"

"No! Go 'way, you mud-sucking pig swill!" the child retorted as she struggled to free herself.

Barrig's face twisted into a rictus of violent ire. He strode over to the girl, raised his hand, and smashed her face with the hilt of his sword. Crying out, she staggered back and he followed the first blow with a kick, driving his boot into her ribs as she fell to her knees.

Spitting on her, he said, "Beasts and bones, brat. I should cut off your head right now. Don't need the money so badly that I'm willin' to listen to yer lip, so shut up!" As the girl cowered, he raised his sword as if to strike off her head.

"I wouldn't," Kyrian said, her tone icily chill. Her fear was gone now. The moment he'd struck Patrys, it had melted away, leaving behind a clear, clean river of pure anger.

Barrig turned and laughed. "You think you can stop me?" Lazily, he twirled his sword, showing off his skill with the blade.

"No," she said, her admission wringing a nasty grin from the bandit. "I know I can." Moving from the shadows, Kyrian revealed herself, allowing the bright moonlight to fully display her scarlet robes.

Barrig was clearly stunned. Likely, he'd thought her to be just another robed scholar, since the darkness would have turned the red fabric to black. He cursed, but held his ground.

*"Let them go." Kyrian kept her tone almost gentle. "And you can walk away."*

*Glancing from his captives to her and back, the bandit seemed unable to make up his mind. His face was a study of conflicting emotion. Kyrian wondered if he was weighing the odds of winning a fight with her before the village elders arrived with soldiers in tow. If he were caught attempting to harm her, it would mean his life. A smart man would run away now.*

*Barrig, however, obviously wasn't very intelligent, for he laughed and said, "I don't think so, little priest." Moving closer, he wove his blade in a deadly arc, carving up the air like it was an enemy. "I've danced the gallows and walked free before. Don't see no reason why I won't again." He tugged on the collar of his shirt, revealing a thick band of scarring that circled his throat.*

*Hand hovering over her baton, Kyrian scowled. "Let the children go, Barrig." Rather than reply, Barrig struck, slashing at her ribs.*

*It was an opening feint she recognized from years of hand-to-hand practice. Ducking aside, she easily avoided the blow and parried his next attack. With a grimace, he used his greater size to push her back, but could not make himself fast enough to dodge her punishing strikes. Time was not on his side, and she knew it. All she had to do was keep him at bay until the soldiers from Myr arrived.*

*With every heartbeat that passed, Barrig's attacks grew more frenzied until spittle flew from his mouth as he sought to defeat her. Enraged, he gripped his blade in both hands and swung, the blow intended to cleave her skull in two.*

*Casually, she deflected it and kicked him in the shin hard enough to splinter bone. He howled in pain, then returned her kick with a vicious jab to the ribs that left her gasping for breath. Without thinking, she curled her hand into a fist and punched him in the mouth.*

*Spitting out a broken tooth, he touched his tongue to the fresh split on his lip and snarled, "Bitch," then rushed her, slashing downward with his sword. She turned to duck away, but the tip caught her shoulder and deeply scored the muscle.*

*"You bleed," he chortled and hit her again.*

*She kicked him in the groin.*

*He hit her so hard she swore her teeth cracked. Blow after blow, they went round and round, each covering the other in scores of bruises and lacerations. Both were bloodied from innumerable wounds. His nose was broken, one arm hung limp, and his reaction time was slowing. Kyrian's wounds seemed much graver but were, in fact, far less wearying. Tiny cuts covered her arms and legs and one long slash neatly bisected her abdomen.*

*Gasping for each breath, Kyrian fought to match Barrig's attacks, but fatigue and blood loss were her second enemies, causing her to be far less accurate with her blows. All the while she also had to try to hide the fact that Patrys was close to freeing herself.*

*Suddenly, the ropes went slack and Patrys leaped at the bandit, shouting, "Y'Dani scum!" and pummeled him with her tiny fists.*

*With a roar of anger, Barrig threw her off him.*

*She crashed into the ground with a sickening crunch and he was on her, slicing her from neck to hip. Blood spurted, coating his face and chest. Patrys shrieked and the other children screamed in terror.*

*Blood dripping from his blade, Barrig advanced on them.*

*"I'll kill you all!" he shouted, raising the sword above his head.*

*"No!" Fear and fury blended, overwhelming Kyrian. Time turned into molasses. Her arm became a blur as she leaped forward and slammed her baton into his arm, shattering the bones.*

*He staggered and half turned to face her and she punched him in the throat, crushing his windpipe. Gagging and choking, he stumbled about, wildly swinging his sword in a futile attempt to stave off her attacks, but she was blinded by her rage.*

*Over and over, she struck him, slamming her baton into his skull until it exploded in a shower of blood and gore. His lifeless body crumpled to the ground, leaving Kyrian standing in the moonlight, panting with exertion.*

*As though under a spell, she knelt and began administering aid to the girl. Soft words of comfort tumbled from her lips as she bandaged the child. "It'll be all right, Patrys. You were such a brave one. Shh, sit still now..."*

*The child's crying dwindled.*

*When the girl's wounds were bound, Kyrian turned and started to perform the death rites for the bandit. It was then that the reality of what she had done crashed into her, driving her to her knees.*

*Words chased themselves in her head like a hive of angry bees. I killed him. I made myself into his goddess and decided his fate. She stared at her bloody hands. I am a taker of lives now. This will always be a part of me. Every part of this night would forever reshape the path she would walk. All that I am is now sullied by this act of vengeance. I am tainted and not meant to be one of Astariu's Own. I should be struck down where I stand!*

*Wracked by terrible sobs, she threw her head back and let out a long, keening wail. Clutching her hair, she cried out, "Oh Goddess, I'm sorry!"*

*She collapsed, weeping uncontrollably.*

*Eventually, she and the other children were found by the soldiers from Myr. She never even noticed their approach. In fact, all she could hear was the sound of the bandit's blood dripping off her baton and puddling on the grass. It was the loudest sound she'd ever heard.*

*"Stardancer Kyrian?" The man's query was made of equal parts respect and concern.*

*She glanced up and watched as one of the village elders strode through the trees and headed right for her. It's over.*

*The ground rose up quickly as her sight and consciousness faded away...*

By the end of the week, Kyrian had left the once-idyllic town of Myr behind. It was too hard to live there, to walk the forest path where everywhere she looked, she saw the ghost of the man she had slain. Her nights were torment, her dreams chaotic and terrifying, and worst of all, everyone thought she was a hero.

"Stardancer? Kyrian? Are you well?" Azhani's voice, thick with concern, shattered the grip of memory and brought Kyrian back to the present.

Shaking her head, she rubbed her eyes, quickly brushing away the painful, bitter tears that had gathered. "Ancient history; it is of no matter," she mumbled, hastily turning to finish preparing their meal. She was grateful that Azhani did not press the issue. Instead, the other woman just nodded once and returned to the task of working on the crutch.

\* \* \*

*Ecstasy laced with the sharp edge of pain rippled through Kasyrin. This was how his master came and left him: whimpering for release yet begging for more of the sweet torture. A tracery of moisture scoring his face gave evidence to the purity of his pain. Ecarthus' love was awesome, brutal, and terrifying. Kasyrin would not surrender one moment of it for anything.*

*Not when the rewards were this delicious, this amazing. Standing there, body slick with sweat, groin tight, belly burning with ecstasy, Kasyrin wallowed in pleasure so intense that no woman, no drug, no single mortal thing could equal its intensity. This was the kiss of Ecarthus' touch, his reward for a job done well. The demon was pleased with Kasyrin's efforts in the mortal world.*

*The cursed DaCoure family was finally gone, allowing him ample opportunity to begin sowing the seeds of hatred and dissent so his master could*

*reap a harvest of beautiful bloodshed. In the capital, his servant, Porthyros Omal, lived up to his every expectation, proving himself worth ten and twenty times what he was paid. There was a moment when he regretted destroying the fierce-tempered warleader, for she would have been a powerful symbol in Ecarthus' plans, but it was not to be. Like so many other things he'd desired in his life, fate's machinations did not include his wishes. In this, the scion of DaCoure was beyond his reach, claimed by the gods as one stubbornly true to her oaths. Never would she turn her back on the people of Y'Myran or thrust herself from the light of the Twain. Ecarthus could not take her as his Darkchilde as he had Kasyrin. Because of this, she was dangerous. Properly forged, she would have been a formidable weapon in the hands of their enemies. Now, branded an oathbreaker, Azhani Rhu'len was gone and he was free to act as he pleased in Y'Dan. Revenge had been deliciously sweet, for he had enjoyed the brittle irony of seeing Rhu'len's child marred by the same infamy that her father had once forced upon him...*

As the last echoes of the pleasure faded, Kasyrin opened his eyes and smiled. Ecarthus' final words of instruction still echoed powerfully in his soul...

***::Send me rivers of mortal blood, my slave. Only a raging flood of crimson rain will give me the power to break the locks that bind me in hell::***

*For the demon he both loved and despised, Kasyrin would gather oceans of blood, claiming the rewards long promised. Every breath, every heartbeat, every quiver of his muscles rang strident with his unfulfilled need to have his revenge on all who'd wronged him.*

Ecarthus was waiting. He needed to speak soon or his pleasure would become pain trebled, and today, there was too much to do to be laid up recovering from the punishment.

Facing the ornate mirror that was his connection to the demon's underworld prison, he bowed deeply and said, "It shall be as you command, my master. I will begin immediately."

A face appeared, beautiful, terrible, unforgettable. He smiled cruelly and peeled the skin from an imp, squeezing its eyeballs from its skull, then tossed its lifeless body to a cluster of rimerbeasts. ***::My work begins as well,***

*my slave.:* He waved his hand and a bolt of energy shot out of the mirror and enveloped Kasyrin in an aura of brilliant red. *Visions poured through Darkchilde's mind, images of chaos and confusion spreading like a blanket over the eyes of the land.* Already, tendrils of Ecarthus' power were slithering out and touching the minds of his servants, waking them from their sleep that they might rise and do their master's bidding.

Ecarthus left and Kasyrin turned away from the mirror. It was time to begin the next phase of the plan. Moving to his desk, he whispered a word of power, lighting a nearby lamp. A chessboard awaited his attention. Choosing a piece, he touched it briefly, then chanted the spell that would send it to Y'Dannyv. Porthyros would understand the message and act accordingly.

\* \* \*

Clutching a tiny obsidian chessman, Porthyros Omal scurried through the corridors of Ydannocho castle. It had arrived earlier, and its appearance indicated that it was time to open the tube of scrolls that had long been prepared for this day.

Reaching his chambers, he hurried to his fireplace. There, at the base, was a loose brick. Behind it was a cubbyhole. Stored within it was a scroll tube bearing certain papers from his master. These were not the treatises of a sorcerer, however, but things one might expect to come from a master merchant and indeed, they had, for the world did not know the face Kasyrin Darkchilde wore in Y'Dan anymore. These days, the name he bore was that of the wealthy and respected gem merchant, Kesryn Oswyne.

Retrieving the scroll tube, Porthyros opened it, slid out several pages, and tucked the rest back in their hiding place. Quickly, he rolled the papers and placed them in his satchel. Soon, he would present them to the king, extolling the virtues of the words writ within the documents. He chuckled and took a moment to enjoy a draught of his favorite sherry. Young Arris was such a fool. He trusted his scholarly mentor implicitly and would, no doubt, be easily pressed into signing the new laws his master desired be enacted. Porthyros could hardly wait. Fear was about to make a home in Y'Dan, and with it would come many rewards.

With a furtive grin, he placed the chess piece on his mantle, standing it close to the other pieces that already had a home there, and admired the

way the light gleamed off the solid black surface of the tiny pawn. The other pieces seemed to press close, as if listening to gossip from a long-lost friend. “We begin,” he said, sipping his sherry and making plans. “This will be such fun!”

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# BANSHEE'S HONOR

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