

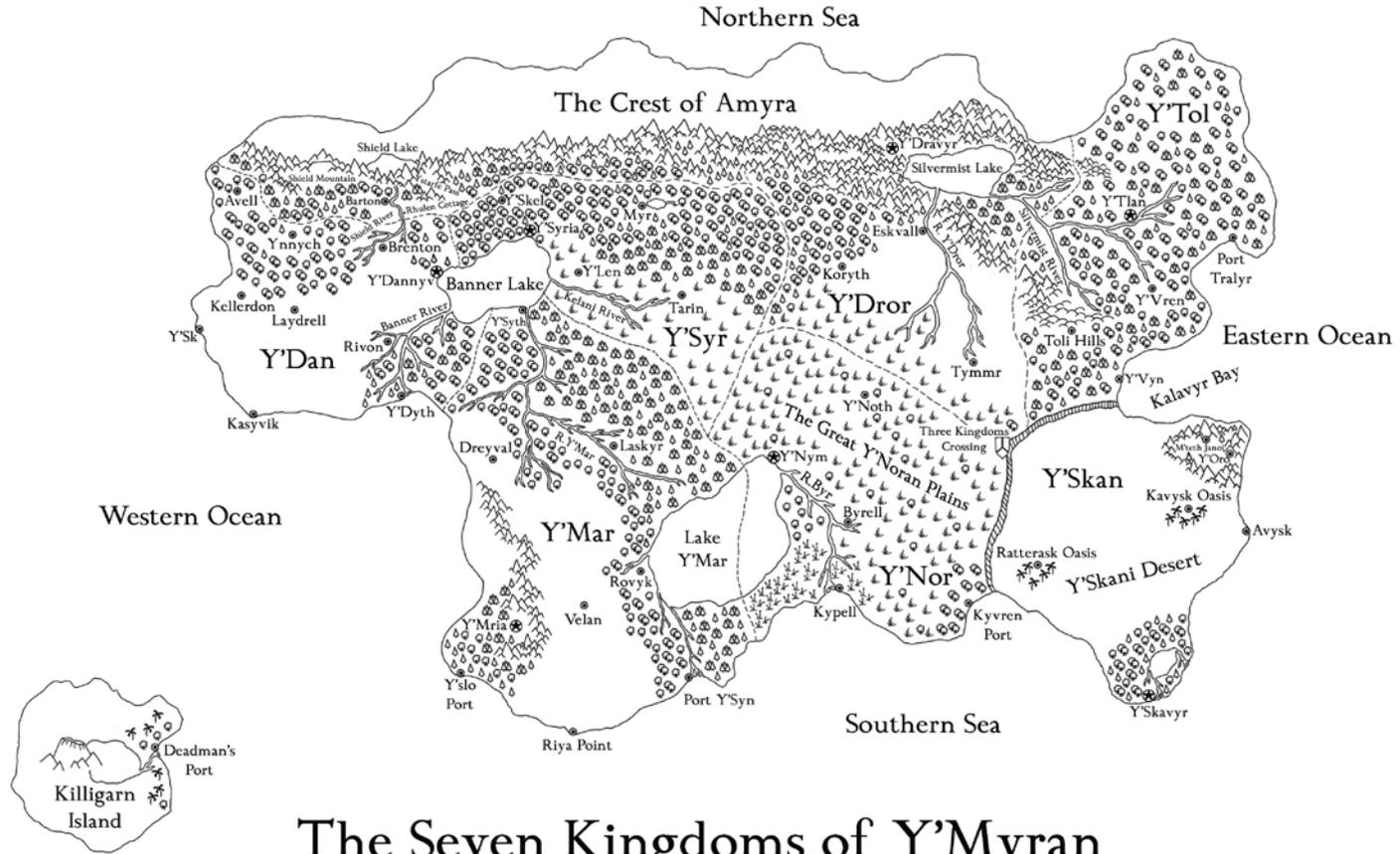


TALES OF YMYRAN: BOOK TWO

BANSHEE'S VENGEANCE



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The Seven Kingdoms of Y'Myran

CHAPTER ONE

STARDANCER KYRIAN CURSED AND SLID off her saddle.

“Trouble?” Azhani called as she turned to glance back.

“He’s taken a stone in his shoe. Again.”

Dismounting, Azhani quickly joined her. “Padreg did warn you he’d need new ones soon.”

“Aye, I know. But where was I to find a blacksmith in the middle of the Y’Syran plain?” Kyrian coaxed Arun to lift his leg so she could pop the culprit—a pebble the size of a child’s thumb—out from between the shoe and the horse’s hoof.

“Well, we’re not far from Y’Syria, though night is falling.” Azhani patted Arun’s flank soothingly. “Why don’t we find a place to camp? You can poultice that hoof, and in the morning, we’ll walk the rest of the way.”

“You can accept the delay?”

Azhani shrugged. “I’m not so eager to meet my fate that I’ll murder a good horse just to race to the hangman’s noose.”

“That is not funny, Azhani. Not even a little!” Kyrian straightened and glared at her. “You are not going to die!”

“So you say, but we both know Queen Lyssera isn’t going to welcome her sister’s murderer with open arms—even if I am innocent of the crime. She wouldn’t know that.”

“That’s why we’re going to tell her,” Kyrian said acerbically. “And why you should have asked Padreg and Elisira to come with us. Twain’s grace, Azhani, Elisira lived in Ydannoch! If anyone had any inkling of the truth, she did!”

Azhani sighed heavily. “Aye, she did. Padreg said she was...that she likely witnessed something, but I couldn’t ask her to speak for me, not when doing so might tar her from the same pot of guilt that has already been poured upon me. No. If Lyssera wants me to hang, then so be it. She will either hear me

because she is willing to grant me the honor of speaking for myself, or she will not. There is no other way.”

“You are so damned stubborn!” Kyrian said in frustration. “I swear, if you let them kill you, I will *find* a way to save you, you silly warrior!” Taking Arun’s reins, she pointed to an area off the side of the road. “There’s a clearing over this way. I saw it earlier. Be useful—go find some wood for a fire.”

* * *

It was an uncomfortably quiet camp. Azhani stared morosely into her bowl of stew and tried not to drown in guilt. Ever since parting from Padreg and Elisira, she and Kyrian had spent almost every night of their journey to Y’Syria arguing about what she was planning to do. *Oh Ylera, I wish you were here. You’d know how to fix this, how to help me make her understand why I must do this alone.*

She desperately wanted to say something to break this box of angry quiet and bring back the laughter and joy they shared in winter, but it seemed a near-impossible task. After scraping the last of the stew from her bowl, she stood and walked to a nearby stream to rinse it. The water was snow-melt and painfully cold, but she plunged her hands into it, accepting the ache as penance.

Moonlight made the water glitter, but something shone even brighter under the rippling current. Curious, she grabbed for it and came back with a strange, battered old coin. Octagonal, gold, and smaller than her thumbnail, it bore an unfamiliar device on one side and a sigil she did not recognize on the other. For a long while, she stood there studying it, trying to puzzle out its origin. Unable to do so, she returned to the fireside and thrust it at Kyrian. “Ever seen one of these?”

Kyrian looked up from mending her velvet robes. Putting aside the fabric, she took the coin and considered it with a frown. “No...but I know it. This is Alyrran. These coins are very, very rare,” she said. “Y—A friend once told me that Queen Lyssera has a small collection of them.”

“Alyrran?” Azhani replied as she settled on her log seat.

“An ancient, powerful people. They’re long gone now, but before the Firstlanders—humans—came to this land, they were the ones who ruled it. I don’t know much; the records of their lives and deeds are few. You might learn more in Y’Skan, for it is said their magicks are what destroyed the land in that kingdom.”

"I've heard a little about them, but was never interested enough to pursue further knowledge," Azhani said with a casual shrug. "It's enough that you recognized the coin. Keep it. Maybe it'll bring some luck."

"Then you should have it," Kyrian said softly. "For you are the one who needs it."

"I don't need luck," she replied. "I have you."

Grimacing, Kyrian shook her head. "Damn it, Azhi! How can I stay mad at you when you say things like that?"

She chuckled. "I would hope you wouldn't, especially since I am glad you are here, my friend."

"Oh, Azhi," Kyrian murmured as she moved to sit beside her and rested her head on Azhani's shoulder. "I don't want us to be fighting."

"Neither do I, but I must do what I must, and I know it bothers you."

"It does, but you are right—you have made your choice. All I can do is support you."

"Thank you."

A new silence wrapped around them then, but this time, it was calm, warm, and full of promise. Azhani only hoped that it would not revert when Kyrian learned of her true plans, for there were things that had to be done, paths that only she could walk.

But I swear I will not forget you are behind me, my friend. I only hope you will wait for me to find you when I have need.

* * *

Y'Syria rose before them, climbing out of the horizon and spreading its branches until all that was visible was the tree-dwellings of Kyrian's ancestors. Even though they were still most of a day's travel away, she could see where ground-bound homes hugged the great oak and aspen trunks while above, bridges of rope and vine linked one great tree to another.

"Twain's grace," she whispered, clutching Arun's reins and gaping in shock. "It seems so massive."

"Have you not been to the city?" Azhani seemed surprised.

Kyrian smiled. "Infrequently. I've traveled, but mostly in Y'Dan. Once to Y'Dror and once to Y'Mar, but rarely have I visited Queen Lyssera's court."

"It is a beautiful sight, I suppose. Ylera spoke often of how dear it was to her. I guess... I guess it just hurts to look at it too closely. We might have

lived here, once my service to Y'Dan ended." The depth of sadness in Azhani's voice made Kyrian want to grab her and drag her off into the forest where they would never again look upon anything that could cause her such pain.

If Ylera had actually married you. Though she knew Ylera had been a good person, Kyrian found it hard to believe she could divorce herself from the bigotry of her elven peers. I believe that she loved you, but she was a creature of her court, and the elves of Y'Syr don't take kindly to Y'Dani interlopers. Even Kyrian had suffered the snide remarks and ugly scowls of her companions growing up, though her human parent was not known to be Y'Dani. Just the implication of such was enough to tarnish her in the eyes of some.

Still, it did no good to say these things to Azhani. Instead, she touched her arm and said, "Tell me about it. The city, I mean. You must have many stories."

Azhani gave her an odd look, then laughed briefly. "You are so fond of stories, and yet you rarely tell your own. Why is that?"

"Because yours are far more interesting, of course," she said with a winsome smile. "Unless you think learning how to set a broken bone or which herbs to mix to fight a pregnant woman's nausea are as fascinating as tales of intrigue and heroism?"

"Well, they're certainly more useful than hearing about skulking in shadows and shoving three feet of steel into someone's belly for looking at you cross-eyed!"

"Something I'm sure you've never done." Kyrian began walking toward the city. "You're too damned honorable to kill someone for spite."

"You'd think so," Azhani said. "But you've never met his honor, the great and mighty Lord Flagan Vildefleur."

"Who in Twain's name is that?"

"Was," Azhani replied dryly. "Most definitely was."

"Oh, now you must tell me!" Kyrian elbowed Azhani eagerly. "Please?"

Azhani made a face, but merriment sparkled in her eyes. "Very well. It was...oh, about ten years back. My father and I were in Y'Syria on Thodan's business, and I was frequenting a rather seedy little dive on the waterfront. I'd gone there to search for some information that would tell us which of the elven lords was sneaking across the border to break into the homes of the wealthy and steal their valuables. You see, one of the bastards was not only thieving but raping the servants of the households."

Kyrian gasped in shock. "Goddess! But why?"

Azhani shook her head. "Why do Y'Danis and Y'Syrans ever fight like cats and dogs? It was a habit, a terrible, ugly habit, and the humans weren't guiltless, for there was plenty of trouble on the Y'Dani side of the border, as well. Cattle rustling, for one—and more than a few elves found themselves waking up in Y'Skan on the wrong side of a slaver's whip."

"How did peace ever happen with all that stacked against it?" Kyrian whispered sadly. Ylera was a fine, fine speaker, but even she would be hard-pressed to soothe the frayed tempers of families who'd lost loved ones to such tragedy.

"Patience, a lot of gold, and Thodan's sheer force of will. And the work Father and I did finding the perpetrators and bringing them to justice." There was fierce pride in Azhani's words. "Lord Flagan was one of them. Young, stupid, and full of his own self-importance."

"I know the Vildefleur name—they're perfumers, right? Elisira has a bottle with that name on it." Smiling, Kyrian closed her eyes at the memory of the sweet, light fragrance.

"Aye, but Flagan was a younger son of a younger son—and no heir to the fortunes of his better relatives. So he, along with others who shared his idleness, worked up the brilliant plan to raid Y'Dan to fill their pockets. As long as the two kingdoms were content to cordially loathe each other, he could get away with it." Azhani stopped to kick several stones from their path. "But once the idea of peace started spreading, his activities needed to be stopped. Or rather," she added, giving Kyrian a nasty smile, "I needed to find out who he was, first, then stop him. Permanently."

"And did you?"

"Yes. We fought a duel. He lost."

"That simple?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "It's never that simple."

"Then tell me."

"Are you sure? It's ugly."

"It's important."

"All right."

They started walking again, and slowly, Azhani told her tale. "I paid a lot of good gold to get his name. When I found him, he was drunk, half naked, and making free with one of the pot boys out behind the Blue Dove. I didn't give him much chance to spin pretty lies. The pot boy ran off as I drew my blade."

Kyrian found herself filled with rage. Though Azhani had used gentle words, she knew what was being implied. “He was...was...with a child!”

“Aye. It was the last time,” Azhani said darkly. “We dueled—or rather, I ran him through while telling him I was challenging him to a duel. No one bothered to report my haste.”

“Goddess,” she said softly. “Did the attacks stop?”

“Immediately. I left Flagan’s head sitting on the doorstep of another of the other culprit’s houses.”

“I can’t believe you’d do something like that!”

“I did. My king ordered it of me.” Azhani looked out across Banner Lake. “Those girls and boys, they were broken by what he did to them. They needed vengeance. I gave it to them.”

Kyrian swallowed heavily. “You... I can’t say you did the right thing, but you did the *just* thing, and that, in this case, was right.”

Azhani looked at her. “Now perhaps you can see why I do what I must. What is right and what is just aren’t always the same, but justice is closer to honor in Astariu’s eyes.”

Kyrian could not argue that, not with a woman who had taken the mark of the goddess’ warrior. “What happened to the boy?” she asked then, hoping something good had come of that night.

Now Azhani smiled. “Eskyn grew up. Got strong—put on a lot of muscle working on the docks. Last I heard, he was making extra coin as a wrestler at the Blue Dove. He’s given me a lot of good tips over the years.”

“I hope you’ll introduce me,” Kyrian said as they started down the road that would lead them to the city gates long before the sun set.

“If you’d like.”

“I would. Will I meet anyone else you know?”

“Of course...so long as they don’t throw us to the guard the moment they see us.”

Kyrian grimaced. “Is that something I should worry about?”

Solemnly, Azhani replied, “Probably, but we’ll cross that bridge if we must. For now, just pray to the Twain my old friend Tellyn Jarelle still likes me enough to give us shelter.”

“Old friend? Is this going to be another story?”

Azhani laughed. “Maybe for another time. How about we find a place to sit and enjoy a bit of cold stew, hm? It might be the last meal we get for a while.”

CHAPTER TWO

LEANING FORWARD, ARRIS GLARED DOWN at a grubby, cowering lad who was panting heavily and clutching a mud-and-snow caked cap. "You're certain of this, boy?" he demanded.

Winter's grip still choked the lowlands of Y'Dan, and the messenger had run himself near to death. Quavering before the Granite Throne, he stammered, "Y-yes, Your M-majesty. The mayor of Ynnych hisself gimme th'message. R-rimerbeasts hunt!"

At the boy's fearful outburst, the court gallery erupted in a cloud of panicked gasps.

"What?"

"That's impossible!"

Seizing the opportunity presented, Porthyros leaned close to the throne and whispered, "And here, my liege, would be yet one more example of the treachery of Azhani Rhu'len. For did she not lead the last battle against our ancient foes? Did your beloved and esteemed father not command her to 'rid the lands of the beasts for the season?'"

Jerking as if prodded in the privates by a very sharp implement, Arris shot to his feet. "Here, people of Y'Dan! Here is more proof of the incompetence of that most despicable of women, the harridan and whore herself, Azhani Rhu'len!" He paced, nearly foaming at the mouth as he spat, "I know some of you felt my actions harsh, but now, can you not see the wisdom of your wise and beneficent king?"

There was no one among the gathered nobles who did not appear utterly shocked.

Voice pitched to carry to the king's ears alone, Porthyros murmured, "We must discover the truth of the messenger's words, so that Y'Dan can be protected from this horrible menace." Again, Arris jerked slightly, though no

one but Porthyros noticed. *I must lower his dosage. He is growing ill. Perhaps I shall blend in a pinch or two of vortrix chitin.*

“Scouts will be sent at once to verify the boy’s tale! No one in Y’Dan shall suffer for that traitorous bitch’s failure!” Spinning on his heel, Arris marched out of the grand hall.

Quickly, Porthyros followed. “Abylly spoken, my king!”

“Yes, I was particularly good, wasn’t I?” he said, puffing out his chest in pride. “And now, it’s time to send for Captain Niemeth, that he may inform me of his plans to defend my kingdom.”

Porthyros bowed deeply, pleased with how these events were turning out. “Of course, my king.”

Without further conversation, Arris headed for his chambers and Porthyros sought out a page. Once the boy was sent him to find the captain, Porthyros then scurried off to his rooms to look for his next set of instructions.

The note he found in its hidden cubbyhole was simple, the script plain, stating only,

“Direct the boy to a winter campaign. I will visit on the morrow.”

After burning the note, he made a fresh pot of the king’s tea, adding in just a pinch of the vortrix chitin and tasting it to be sure it hadn’t changed the flavor. Arris, having had many years’ experience with the brew, could notice the subtlest of differences. Sometimes, this was fine, as he would ascribe it to too much honey, but some additives were bitter or tart, and Arris liked neither. The vortrix, however, only sweetened the tea, so Porthyros added a touch less honey than usual and took himself to the king’s chambers. There, he found him standing with Captain Niemeth in front of a table covered in maps of the kingdom.

Rubbing his chin thoughtfully, Arris tugged on his short, manicured beard and frowned as he eyed the maps. “Ah, you’re here,” Thyro. Good. The captain was just about to tell me what he knows.”

“I made you some tea, Your Highness,” Porthyros said quietly, offering him a cup.

Arris took it and sipped the brew, but focused his attention on Niemeth.

Clearing his throat, Niemeth straightened. “Well, we all know the traditional cycle of a beast season, my king. Once the demons are spotted, we

send men into the hills to search the caves. It could be weeks before we know anything for certain.”

Excitedly, Arris asked, “And if rimerbeasts be present?”

“Then I pray we shall drive them from our land, as we have always done before,” Niemeth said proudly.

“Of course we will! Y’Dan is mine!” Arris snarled. “By Ecarthus, I’ll see them rooted from every glen and dale, cave and hollow.”

Porthyros shivered. *Perhaps we pushed too hard—if he’s so determined to destroy them, he may do something we cannot control!* Still, he had his orders. Softly, he said, “My king, perhaps it would be the better part of wisdom to be sure we have the supplies to begin a winter campaign?”

After draining his cup, Arris set it aside and began to pace the chamber restlessly. “You are absolutely right, Master Porthyros. Captain, I order you to outfit my armies with the finest supplies—when it comes to war, I must have all I require to defeat the foul creatures!”

“Of course, my king. Have you any further orders?” Niemeth asked respectfully.

Porthyros studied the captain, wondering again if it had been wise to leave someone who had been vocally in support of Azhani Rhu’len in such a position of command. And yet he seemed to be quite loyal to Arris—so much so that the king was becoming very reliant upon the man for his wise counsel regarding martial matters. Thus far, Porthyros had not been commanded to change this, so he allowed Niemeth to live. *But if I must slip a dagger between his ribs or poison his nightly wine cup, I will, for the good of the plan and the gold in my purse!*

Arris grinned. “Yes. I wish you to find me a decent sword master—that last barbarian couldn’t be bothered to make me into the hero I know I’m destined to be! All he wanted me to do was scrub floors and wash windows. Pfagh! I am a king, not a scullery boy!”

Bowing, Niemeth replied, “Of course, Your Majesty. I’ll see to immediately.”

“Thank you, Captain.” As the man turned to leave, Arris smiled. “Oh, and Captain, please remind your men that my laws extend to *everyone* in my kingdom, even the relatives of my soldiers.”

Porthyros nearly laughed aloud at the look on Niemeth’s face. It was no secret that under Thodan’s rule, the men and women who served his banner received honor and special treatment. Nor was it uncommon for their families to accrue some of that honor to themselves, using it to further their place in

Y'Dani society. Not so anymore, not when they were doing their best to purge Y'Dan of all nonhumans. Porthyros himself was unsure why Ecarthus disliked the elves, dwarves, and halfbreeds—despising morgedraal most of all, ordering that any of the desert-born people be fed to his fires on sight—but he was not about to argue the point.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Niemeth said. This time, his reply was taut and tinged with a hint of hatred, as Porthyros expected, since the captain’s half-elven wife had been one of those who had fled Y'Dan, taking their children with her. Bowing once again, Niemeth quickly exited the room.

After he'd gone, Arris prowled around the table, picking up his empty teacup and absently stroking it. “I will be a part of the cave expeditions. Y'Dan must see its king doing his part to defend them from evil. My people must know that I am the one chosen to lead them to their grand destiny. They must understand that the Twain are lies constructed to hide us from the glory of Ecarthus, our one true god!” He grinned gleefully. “And how better to do that than to be the instrument of his glory myself!”

Arris' words nearly caused Porthyros to choke. Letting the boy play at being hero was one thing—actually allowing him to put himself in harm's way before they were done with him was inconceivable. Calmly, he took Arris' cup and filled it again. “What a thoroughly splendid idea, my king—for a scullery boy.” After stirring a sizable portion of honey into it, he presented the drink to Arris and said, “Digging around in dirty caves is a task for a servant, not a king. A king leads armies, not spelunking expeditions. Your people need you to rule them, not clean up after them.”

Eyes narrowing, Arris said, “You are right. I am their king. Thank you for reminding me. I will not have the gossiping nags of the court mocking me and telling all and sundry that I am no better than a common kitchen drudge!”

“Winter, my king.” Porthyros kept his voice soft and compelling, using the same tone he had always employed when coaxing Arris to come to heel. “That will be the time of your great glory.” *For by then, we won't need you, you useless, sniveling, brat—though I may keep you around to amuse myself. There are so many things I've yet to try with you.* Porthyros' feelings for Arris had always been deeply mixed. On the one hand, he felt a great affection for him, for never had anyone been able to practice the apothecary's art upon another as he had on Arris, but on the other, he loathed the boy for his simple-minded need for affection and praise. “For if the rimerbeasts truly be rising, then winter is when heroes will be called to ride forth and lead your army to blessed glory!”

"Yes! Yes, winter!" Arris eagerly drained a second cup of krile-laced tea.

"And I have the best of tidings for you, my king, for I have had word that Lord Oswyne has returned and will seek you out for yet another game of chess tomorrow."

"Has he? He will? How wonderful!" Arris replied happily. "I know I'll beat him this time!" Yawning, he rubbed his eyes. "You think he'll tell me more about Ecarthus? I do so wish to be a proper servant to Him."

Smiling, Porthyros said, "Almost certainly, Your Majesty. After all, it is by your grace and wisdom that Lord Oswyne has given Ecarthus the temple that was prophesied so very long ago."

"Ah, yes. The great temple." Arris let out a wistful sigh. "I am so pleased to attend services that do not bore me with pablum and pageantry, as the worship of that useless pair of upstarts that call themselves the Twain once did!"

Ah, but you have only seen what we want you to, my king. No sacrifice services for you yet, not until we know your bloodlust is as strong as ours. Porthyros nearly laughed aloud, but kept himself serene, saying only, "As I said, my king, your wisdom knows no bounds. I am certain that Lord Oswyne will be quite pleased to know that you have become filled with such warm feeling for his god." *Feelings which I, of course, have taught you to hold. Ah, Arris, you are my greatest creation. More my son than Thodan's, for certain! Look upon him, Ecarthus, and see how I have served you—reward me, oh yes, reward me!* The pleasure with which Porthyros eyed his future once Ecarthus was freed could only be described as orgasmic.

* * *

Coins spilled from Kasyrin's hands, filling his minion's lap. "I am beyond pleased with your efforts, Porthyros."

Standing in the prelate's office of the newly formed Temple of Ecarthus in Y'Dannyv, Kasyrin Darkchilde looked down at the other man and smiled. "Tomorrow, I will bring a most wondrous gift for our would-be hero of a king. See that it occupies as much of his time as possible, but do not tamper with it yourself, for I will not be responsible for the consequences." The enchantments he'd placed on the game board and pieces were contrived to snare Arris in a variety of spells, including those that would build upon the krile poisoning to make him even more Kasyrin's creature—and push him right toward certain doom, for soon, they would have little need for a puppet.

Once Ecarthus is free, Y'Dan—and all of Y'Myran—will tremble before us!

Bowing his head, Porthyros murmured, “Yes, Master. I will do as you command.”

Kasyrin poured a few more coins into the man’s lap. “Excellent. Now, is there any news of Rhu’len’s bitch of a daughter?”

He shook his head. “Nay, Master, but my spies may have been hampered by the weather.” Though spring’s thaw had come to the mountains, winter had given the kingdom a parting gift of several inches of fresh snow on the lowlands.

Dismissively, Kasyrin said, “No matter. She will be found and sent screaming to the lowest pits of Hell soon enough. For now, return to Arris. See to it that he learns all this new weapons instructor has to teach—I need him to be inspiring enough that thousands will flock to his banner to die for his glory.”

Gathering his gold, Porthyros said, “It will be done as you command, Master,” and bowed his way out of the room.

The moment he was certain the sniveling cretin was gone, Kasyrin stepped from the office and into a small antechamber, triggering a complex lock that none but the most skilled of thieves could open without a key, of which there was only one—his. This was a room he had built himself, transforming what had been an acolyte’s bedchamber into his private place of worship. The walls had been scrubbed down to stone, then consecrated in his own blood. Carving the protection circle in the center of the chamber had cost him more magick than he usually liked to spare, but now he was glad of the effort. Not even a master mage trained in one of the grand Y’Skani schools would detect what rested here, hidden away from everyone but himself. At the center of the chamber sat a small obsidian obelisk. The glowing artifact was his masterwork, and deep in the bowels of his soul, he sensed Ecarthus’ pride in this place.

Stepping into the circle, Kasyrin shed his clothes and felt the runes inscribed on his body burn to life. Power drained out of him and activated the protective magicks in the room. He began to chant, the words seeming to echo as they tore open his mind, allowing Ecarthus to possess him.

Kasyrin’s lips moved, but the voice coming from them was like nothing heard in Y’Myran. It boomed hollowly, making his ears ring. **::Thou hast become a worthy vessel, my toy::** Ecarthus’ pleasure was so strong that Kasyrin could hardly bear the demon’s fervid joy. Every word struck him like a drover’s whip, opening wounds that covered his body from neck to knee. **::My**

children shall breed soon, for they are well fed. Each passing day sees the barrier between the lands of the mortals and my prison become thinner. I take great pleasure in harvesting the power of thy sweet offerings. It serves me well, for I have begun to forge the key that will unlock the gates that bar my return to thy world. Soon I will come and lay my love upon the land like a lash.::

Kasyrin's strength was beginning to wane, for Ecarthus' touch was powerful and painful. Often the demon did not care what condition he left his toy in, but today, much to Kasyrin's relief, he chose to withdraw early.

::Find the child of Rhu'len,:: he commanded sternly. **::Only her death will insure that I will be truly free. Give her soul to me, and thy reward will make what thou hast now seem as but petty stones from a pauper's pocket. And remember, my Darkchilde, thy vengeance is my vengeance—the screams of the Scion of DaCoure shall offer us pleasure for eons!::**

With that, he was gone.

* * *

Several hours later, Kasyrin crawled out of the antechamber, his body riven with bloody gashes, his muscles weakened from the torturous pleasures Ecarthus had visited upon him. Panting heavily, he lay upon the warm wooden floor, waiting for the power twisting about him to settle. Eventually, he dragged himself onto the desk chair. From a drawer he removed a small vial and drank from it, the bitter, sharply scented fluid restoring much of his vigor. Fresh robes waited for him, no doubt left by one of the acolytes.

Dressing, he considered his every option, making plans faster than a shuttle could fly across a weaver's loom. Over the years, he'd placed trusted operatives in major homes and courts all over Y'Myran. With the magickal abilities Ecarthus granted him, he would be able to swiftly set those plans in motion. He took a series of scroll tubes from the desk, laid them out one by one, and then studied them. Each was marked by a special sigil. After examining them for cracks and tampering, he opened them and read the messages contained within before replying and sending them off.

No other gift could be so wondrous as this, for who else could boast of near-instant communication with their spies? All they had to do was read his instructions, burn the messages, and send their replies, and none would be the wiser. Many of Ecarthus' magicks had been remarkable beyond compare—

things Kasyrin found himself likening to legendary objects created by the mythical Alyrr themselves. However, this device of seemingly simple cantrips had changed everything for him, and he would never dismiss its significance.

A scream echoed faintly from outside the room and he smiled. The sacrifices were becoming much more frequent. His handpicked cadre of priests were growing steadily as those dissatisfied with the shackles the virtuous Twain placed upon the dark desires of the human soul came flocking to Ecarthus' banner. Every death reaped rewards of gold, lust, or luxury for them to share, inciting further greed. Knowing they could earn even greater rewards, his priests had become very creative when extracting the blood-soaked power from their victims.

Never before had Kasyrin been in the company of so many who were dedicated to the art of torture. It gave him great pleasure to know that not far away from where he was now, someone was carving tiny strips of flesh from the body of one sacrifice while others burned, whipped, beat, and strangled their offerings.

There must be more—more death, more torture, more suffering if Ecarthus is to be freed! Soon the temple would open its doors to everyone. Once within, they would find dark halls stained with sigils and runes meant to stir fear while carefully crafted incense filled the air with narcotic smoke. Those who entered Ecarthus' temple would be infested with visions of horror upon horror, making them scream out their prayers, begging to be released from Ecarthus' loving embrace.

A draught of drugged wine would erase all but a sense of vague pleasure from their minds, and the more they visited the temple, the more they would crave its environs, for the smoke was disastrously addictive. Both smoke and wine had been a gift to him from Porthyros, and for that alone, he would see to it that the man had command of whatever he desired when victory was finally assured.

Kasyrin was pleased with how things were progressing. By the end of spring, his little "presents" to each of the kingdoms should be arriving just where they would do the most good. The bearers of these gifts knew little of what they carried, only that the reliquaries were to be entombed at the center of each kingdom. These talismans had cost quite a bit of magick to create, but inside they bore the seeds of doom for Y'Myran. By winter's next calling, Y'Dan would stand alone against a hoard of his master's beloved children that waited high in the mountains.

So much death would come, it would be as an ocean of blood descending on the land, and Kasyrin would ride its tides of power, harnessing it to free Ecarthus from his long imprisonment. He was close. All that was left was to see to his latest efforts to destroy the Cabal. If he could get Y'Dan completely under his control, he could access the kingdom's archives to discover his old enemy Istaffryn's true identity. After that, he would drag him from his beloved shadows and unveil him for all to see—then take everything the bastard ever held dear.

Then and only then would he consider killing him. First, though, he must suffer, just as Kasyrin had. It was, after all, only fair.

Revenge was within his grasp. Nothing could be allowed to take it now.

A horrified scream echoed through the temple, and he smiled in euphoric sympathy, drawn into memory. From the very first time since Ecarthus had come, pain had become Kasyrin's chosen pleasure and reward, for from pain had come power, and he was extremely fond of power. The screams faded. After enjoying a cup of restorative wine, he headed out to the temple. Today Kasyrin's underlings would have the privilege of watching their master lead the next ceremony.

* * *

Nervously looking over his shoulder, Hardag the fruit seller loaded the last of his belongings onto a cart. Over the winter, he and his wife had sold what they could, and now all they had was what would fit on a small, fast wagon that he hoped would get them to Y'Syr before week's end.

Just down the street sat the still-smoking ruins temple of the Twain. It had burned to the ground two nights ago and no one had bothered to see if there were any priests left inside. Nothing else around it had burned, either; not even a single blade of grass was scorched. Terrified, no one spoke of it, not even Hardag himself, for to speak out was to draw attention, and the last thing he wanted was the gaze of Ecarthus' black-robed priests falling on his house.

Sooner or later someone—a friend hoping to avoid a similar fate, an enemy seeking to gain prominence—would recall that Hardag's great-grand sire had been half-elven, and then those black robed bastards would come and drag him and his wife away.

Nelia was pregnant. She'd shared the news with him over winter solstice. It should have been a time of great celebration. Instead, he'd spent the night

huddled in a ball before his secret shrine to Astariu, sobbing, begging her for help. The next night, and every night after, he dreamed of going east, to Y'Syr, home of his great-grandsire's people and their queen, and begging her to let them take shelter in their lands.

Fear now drove his hands to move faster, his fingers shaking as he tied down the last package. There, across the way, was that a black robe? Were those priests? He ducked to avoid notice. He was just a simple merchant heading out to a provincial market. That was his story. It wasn't wise to invite scrutiny, to announce that he was leaving, for then he would have to pay the departure tax and he and Nelia needed that money now more than ever.

Maybe I should go south instead? Maybe Ysradan hasn't gone mad like Arris. No. No, my dreams said east. We must go east, to Y'Syr.

Across the way, the robed men moved on, and he let out a sigh of relief. It was time, they must go. There would be no more chances. He only prayed that the Twain had not forsaken the whole of Y'Myran as they had Y'Dan.

CHAPTER THREE

EVER SINCE ELISIRA HAD SO boldly defied him, Derkus Glinholt was a changed man. His power in Arris' court dwindled until he was little more than a wraith summoned to do his master's bidding. Today, though, he had come to lay himself before the Granite Throne and beg for a chance at redemption. Today, he had received word of his errant daughter's whereabouts.

"Please, my glorious liege, I do humbly beg of you, lend me but a score of men and I shall lead them into the wilds of Y'Nor and fetch my ungrateful child and that scoundrel she ran off with! I'll drag them both back here to face your wrath!"

Arris, however, was not listening. From the corner of his eye, Derkus watched as the young king stared in mute fascination at an object that had become the marvel of the court. A gift from the merchant Kesryn Oswyne, it was an enchanted chess board and it, like all other toys sent by the proud popinjay that often graced the king's right hand, was now a favorite.

It was clear why Arris was so consumed by the game, for unlike a set of simple ivory and dark wood, this board's pieces were gloriously carved gems that moved themselves as though controlled by the hands of invisible players. One could play alone or with an opponent by means of issuing various commands, though Arris rarely bothered with living antagonists, preferring to pit his skills against those of the spirit Derkus assumed was trapped within the cursed thing.

When his plea got no response from the king, Derkus turned to First Adviser Porthryos Omal, who merely said, "As you can see, our king has much on his mind, Councilor. I am certain, however, that he will take your offer under advisement. For now, be content with the knowledge that King Padreg has not defiled her pure Y'Dani soul by marrying her."

Sourly, Derkus replied, "Yes, it is such a comfort that he has only stolen her body."

Much as he was loyal to his king, this new faith, this Ecarthan religion that had supplanted his beloved Twain, left a bitter taste in Derkus' mouth. Many times, in the secrecy of his own bed, he had lain awake silently praying that someone would come and end Arris' foolishness before High King Ysradan took notice of the goings-on north of his borders and decided to put a stop to it himself. Derkus had a strong feeling that any who had stood on Arris' side against Azhani Rhu'len would not fare well under the high king's chastisement.

Frowning, Porthyros stared at Derkus for a long, long time. Sweat began to pool in the small of his back and fear made him shake. It was certain death to irritate Porthyros, for those that annoyed him soon found themselves faced with the blades and fires of the Ecarthan priests.

"Go now, Lord Glinholt, and tend to your duties. Word will be sent if there is any news." With a dismissive flick of his fingers, Porthyros looked away, the arrogant sneer on his face so filled with cruelty that for just one heartbeat Derkus actually considered leaping up and punching him.

Instead, he slunk away, retreating from the throne and bowing, mumbling, "May you walk before the lash of His love."

* * *

With Councilor Derkus' departure, open court was finished for the day. As the guards ushered the courtiers from the chamber, Porthyros signaled a man in elaborate black and gold robes who was nearly lost in the shadows at the back of the room. The man nodded, and once everyone had gone, made his way to the throne.

Arris still watched the game unfold. Had his master not warned him against tampering with the chess board, Porthyros had to admit he might have been tempted to try a game, for it was a marvel to behold. The pieces had been carved to resemble Arris and his armies on one side of the board and on the other, there were rimerbeasts, led by a queen whose face bore a near perfect likeness to Azhani Rhu'len.

"King takes pawn," Arris murmured. The king piece glowed, drew its sword, and then marched across the board to the last rimerbeast pawn and skewered it. "I'm going to do that," he said, smiling gleefully. "I'm going to kill them all. One by one, they will die, until there are no more threats to my people." Absently, he drained his mug and shoved it at Porthyros to refill.

On the board, a rimerbeast knight moved toward one of Arris' pawns and slew it. Arris merely smiled, and Porthyros could hardly understand why until he sent his king over to destroy the knight. Laughing softly, Arris said, "And once I'm done with them, I'm coming for you." The queen, the only remaining rimerbeast token, stood alone. Her stone features were drawn in a mask of terror as she faced Arris' king.

Porthyros cleared his throat. "My king, High Priest Lundovar has come."

Instantly, Arris turned away from the game and stood to greet the priest. "Lundovar, it is good to have you with us again," he said warmly. "Have you come to regale me with more stories of how I was chosen to be Ecarthus' first king? I am pleased to be able to serve him so well." The grin that lit his face when he embraced the urbane priest was almost painfully bright.

For his part, Porthyros could barely stand being in the same room as Lundovar, for the man was overly fond of certain expensive perfumes that aggravated Porthyros' delicate sense of smell and made it difficult for him to practice his arts as an apothecary.

"I am here, my king, only to report on the progress of our great temple, but of course, I will be happy to offer Ecarthus' praises and blessings once more." Lundovar's eerily soft voice made Porthyros' skin crawl.

"Please, please tell us how the project fares," Arris replied expansively. "And of course I will take your blessings! I shall need them all if I am to make my enemies cower before my might!" He turned and grinned boyishly at Porthyros. "And get that bitch Azhani to come crawling back to me, begging me to make her my slave!"

Porthyros refrained from groaning, but only just. If Arris' fixation on the Rhu'len woman had returned, he would have to see about upping his krile dosage again. The last thing they needed was for Arris to suddenly decide to go off hunting for her.

Lundovar, however, was as educated on their master's desires as Porthyros and neatly distracted the king by laying a series of elaborate, and likely fake, blessings upon him, then giving him—and therefore Porthyros—a thorough report on the temple. By the time he was done, Arris was drowsy from his tea and more than pliable enough for Porthyros to control. Once Lundovar left, Porthyros set to the task of having Arris sign several new decrees into law. Taxes to fill the temple's coffers, new crimes to fill the city jail—and eventually feed Ecarthus' never ending hunger. *Master Darkchilde will surely be pleased today!*

Toward afternoon, the krile wore off and Arris perked up, allowing Porthyros to send him to meet with his new sword master. It was a little strange to watch as Arris, who had always been clumsy, was transformed into a competent swordsman. Somehow he had developed an ability to focus on his lessons that was almost preternatural. Porthyros suspected it had something to do with the chess board, but could not bring himself to ask Master Darkchilde about it. He had a feeling he wouldn't like the answer. That board was uncanny enough as it was.

Some things aren't worth knowing.

* * *

After treating them to the best that spring had to offer, Y'Syr turned around and slapped Azhani and Kyrian with a vengeance. They were still some distance from Y'Syria's gates when heavy, cold rains suddenly drenched the land. After two candlemarks of suffering through it, Azhani called a halt when Kyrian found an abandoned barn that would suffice as shelter. Though the roof was only partially intact, there was an area that they could huddle in to stay dry, if not very warm.

As she wrung out her robes, Kyrian sighed and hoped they would have a fire soon. "Good old soggy Y'Syr. I did not miss this part of my homeland."

"I've campaigned in worse than this," Azhani muttered while she took out a bag of supplies. After emptying it, she unlaced the heavy leather and used it to create a lean-to to block off a portion of their shelter. Shortly, she had a small fire going.

"You know, I didn't think you'd get a fire started without Devon around to light it," Kyrian said after warming her hands over the flames. "I'm impressed."

Azhani smirked. "If you can't make fire in everything from a monsoon to a blizzard, then you're not much of a warleader, are you?"

"Good thing we've got a warleader with us, then," she said with a cheeky smile.

"Hmph. What's for dinner?" Azhani replied sourly.

Investigating their supplies, Kyrian made a face. "You have your choice of soggy bread, smashed fruit, and whatever this green, fuzzy thing is." Delicately, she lifted something shaped a bit like a wedge of cheese from the bag and held it out to her. "Or dried beef. We ate the last of our stew this morning, remember? You thought we'd be in Y'Syria by now."

"Damn. All right. You stay here. I'll be back." Azhani grabbed her bow and ducked out into the rain.

Frowning, Kyrian watched her go. "Right, fine, if she's going to fetch us something for the pot, I'd best try to have something to add to it."

While Azhani was gone, Kyrian mixed the bread and fruit together, added honey and nuts to it, and then set the resultant gooey mess in a covered pot near the fire. She found a few potatoes at the bottom of a sack, sliced them up into a pot of water, and set it on the fire. After that, she got out their bedrolls and made a place for them to sleep.

By the time Azhani returned with a single rabbit, already cleaned and ready for the stew pot, there was a cozy little camp awaiting her. "Very nice," she said with an approving smile.

"Thank you." Taking the rabbit, Kyrian added it to the pot with some herbs and a bit of wine, leeks, and chopped mushrooms. "Shouldn't be too long before we have something edible."

"Good." Azhani pulled off her armor and put it by the fire to dry.

"So, once we get to Y'Syria, what then?"

Azhani regarded her for a moment, then shrugged. "We seek sanctuary with Tellyn Jarelle until we have had a chance to gauge the queen's mood."

"I could go and petition her alone, you know," Kyrian said. "It is my right as stardancer."

"No!" she snapped, turning and glaring at her so intently that Kyrian felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise in fear. "I will present myself to Lyssera on my own terms. She must know that I come to her of my own free will."

"Damn you and your stubborn pride," Kyrian muttered. Crossing her arms, she returned Azhani's glare. "I won't let you leave me out of this, Azhi. We face it together!"

Tension formed around Azhani's jaw as she pressed her lips together. "Fine. But on *my* terms."

"Of course. But just remember—I didn't save your life so you could throw it away for some stupid act of self-sacrifice," Kyrian replied quietly.

Lowering her head, Azhani sighed. "I know." Hesitantly, she reached out and put her hand on Kyrian's arm. "Trust me to be chary of your gift, my friend. I'll not throw it away needlessly."

"That's all I can ask," Kyrian whispered, trying to ignore the faint tingle that formed in the pit of her stomach at Azhani's touch.

* * *

Though they stood wide open, the heavy oak and gilded steel gates of Y'Syria had never seemed so foreboding. Flags bearing the arms of all the Y'Syran noble houses within the city snapped and fluttered in the wind while guards stood at the ready, watching as travelers made their way along the road. A dark flag of mourning flew just below the Kelani banner. Kyrian stared at it for a moment, then resolutely focused on following Azhani. Long shadows cast by the setting sun danced along the walls as Azhani and Kyrian slipped through on the heels of an Y'Skani caravan. It had taken the better part of a day just to slog through the rain to get here and now, exhausted and soaked through, all Kyrian wanted was a warm fire and a hot meal.

To the west, lake birds flew in formation, performing their sunset ballet of feeding, filling their bellies while looking for a place to roost. Banner Lake shimmered, its glassy surface seeming to trap the fires of doom, though it was merely an illusion made by nature. The city itself ringed the shore of the lake, a glorious web of massively tall trees all linked by ancient bridges, some connecting the treetops themselves.

Looking up, Kyrian shaded her eyes and gaped at the command of magick her ancestors must have had to create such pure magnificence.

"Haven't been here in a while, have you?" Azhani asked softly.

"Not for a very long time, and when I last came, I was too young to care about anything beyond my next meal." Kyrian shook her head slowly. "Y'Len is nothing like this. I'd forgotten what it was like. Y-No one ever talked about it much at the temple," she murmured, completely at a loss for words.

Azhani chuckled softly. "This is definitely not my first time, though I still remember the first. Never quite ceases to leave me feeling..." Letting out a slow, contented breath, Azhani looked around and smiled briefly. "I like it here. The only place I've ever felt more comfortable was the cottage. I might have enjoyed visiting, with Ylera. Had she invited me."

Instinctively, Kyrian reached out to put her hand on Azhani's arm. "You know she would have. You were to marry her, right?"

"Yes. It's hard to be here, now, without her. But not as hard as it would have been had we been here together." Briefly, Azhani closed her eyes. Kyrian wondered if the pain was too great for words. "Maybe it's for the best," she finally said. "I don't see her everywhere here. Just memories of working with my father, with Thodan, and with Lyssera. Nothing of Ylera exists in this place for me."

Oh, but it does for me, my friend. Goddess, no wonder Ylera always thought Y'Len was such a boring backwater. We had nothing like this there, nothing at all! Kyrian just couldn't believe what she was seeing. Homes, businesses—they all seemed to blend together. An entire second city of buildings existed at the base of the trees, though had there not been people obviously going in and out of them, Kyrian might well have assumed them to be some kind of shrubbery. The structures were simply far too natural-seeming in appearance to stand out. It was the same everywhere she looked. Even the docks echoed their surroundings, being constructed in sinuous, fish-like shapes.

To Kyrian, the city was an impossible maze, but Azhani seemed to have no trouble at all navigating the streets and even through some of the lower bridges between the trees, stopping only when they reached a mighty aspen. Here, they found a shop that bore an apothecary's sign. Tiny magelights illuminated the path and continued up the side of the tree, tracing out the shape of the inhabitant's home. The air was rich with the scents of fresh herbs and Kyrian grinned, knowing there must be a garden near. Dismounting, they tied the horses to a hitch and approached the shop.

A single knock brought an elven boy with a mop of curly black hair and a dusting of freckles over his long, narrow nose. He stood in the doorway staring at them a moment before saying, "Yes? May I help you?"

"I am here to see Tellyn Jarelle," Azhani replied.

The boy rolled his eyes as if this were a most impossible request. "She's busy. Come back tomorrow." The door closed on them.

Azhani glanced at Kyrian, who shrugged and knocked again.

Once again, the door was opened. This time, the boy took one look at them, scowled, and said, "I told you, she's busy. Go away."

Before he could slam the door, Azhani shoved her foot against the frame and grabbed his arm. "Get your mistress now. I won't ask again."

At the boy's squeak of pain, Kyrian softly said, "Azhi, we can come back."

Azhani glared at her. "You're welcome to find an inn."

The sharp tone stung. Stepping back, she was just about to give up when someone yelled, "Gyp? What is it boy? Shut the damned door! You're letting out all the warm air."

"Visitors, Mistress," Gyp replied, a touch of fear in his voice. "They won't go away like ye told me t'say."

"Well, if they're so damned intent on interrupting an old woman's work, let them in," she called irritably. "Just stop letting out all the heat! My bones can't take the cold!"

Gyp looked up at Azhani, smiled sourly and jerked his arm free. “Be welcome to Mistress Tellyn’s house, my lady.”

Smirking, Azhani strode in as if her entry had been a foregone conclusion. Kyrian crept in behind her. As she passed Gyp, she murmured, “Sorry to disturb you.”

“Ye best be tellin’ that t’her,” he said, nodding in the direction of an elderly woman who was busily scrubbing a vat full of clothing.

Kyrian nodded, but it was Azhani who said, “I am very sorry to call on you right now, old friend, but I thought perhaps the welcome I received here would be a touch less *pointed*.” She touched the hilt of her sword for emphasis.

Looking up from her chore, the old woman merely stared at them. Finally, she shook her head. “Azhani Rhu’len. Astarus’ balls, you always did have more courage than sense! Come, come, have a seat by the fire. My home is your haven—as it has always been.”

Well, this didn’t start off half as badly as I feared. Kyrian looked around the herbalist’s shop, taking in the racks of dried herbs, vials and jars of unguents, balms, and curatives. Most she recognized, but there were several preparations she either did not know or only half recognized from descriptions in ancient Firstlander texts. *Goddess, she has everything here, even a pill press!*

“Come, let us repair to a more comfortable space,” Tellyn said, leading them to a sitting room. Here, there was a wood stove that put out very welcome heat. Opening the grate, she added a log to the fire and then warmed her hands at it, saying, “So you’ve finally come to Y’Syria after all that mess in Y’Dan.” She sighed sadly. “Have you seen the queen?”

That Tellyn didn’t sound accusatory or even terribly angry with Azhani made Kyrian wonder if her countrymen weren’t as convinced by Arris’ tales of deception and treachery as everyone else seemed to be. If so, it might mean a slightly easier road for Azhani to follow now that she was here.

Azhani shook her head. “No. I wanted to ask a favor of you, first.”

Clearly surprised, Tellyn said, “A favor? You might be welcome here, Azhani, but I won’t hide you from the guards if they come seeking your head. I am loyal to my queen.”

“I would never ask you to betray your honor, Tellyn,” she said. Gesturing to Kyrian, she added, “This is Stardancer Kyrian. She is a friend. We need a safe place to stay until I’ve seen Lyssera.”

As soon as Tellyn looked at her, Kyrian knew she was being measured—but against what, she could not know. Feeling nervous, she nonetheless offered

the herbalist a warm smile. "Thank you for welcoming us to your home on such a chilly night."

"You would always be welcome here, Beloved One," Tellyn replied, bowing respectfully, though moving clearly pained her.

Hurrying to her side, Kyrian put her hand on her back. "No, you need not be so formal, Mistress. Please, call me Kyrian. Let me help you sit."

"No, no, I'm fine, really. Once you've had a sore back for a few hundred years, you forget it exists," she said, her gruff manner returning. Shuffling over to a tray, she poured herself a draught of some fiery orange liquid, drank it, and said, "You may stay. Take that room there." She pointed to a door that had been stained berry purple. "I have customers six days of the week. On the seventh, I clean." Glaring at both of them, she added, "I don't wear mystical robes, I don't make love potions, I don't give deals to handsome men, and I absolutely cannot stand the stench of rotting food." Now she looked to Gyp, who shuffled his feet ruefully. "Which is why Gyp is not allowed near the laundry. Boy can't be bothered to scrub properly."

This room, unlike the shop area where Tellyn had been doing her laundry, was filled with an absolute jumble of things—more jars, chairs, tables, shelves containing books, curios, and even a few soot-stained paintings and tapestries hung from the walls.

Wryly, Azhani said, "I think I agree more with Gyp. I'd rather not go through all the bother, even though I do." Then, she smiled. "Come Kyrian, we should unpack. I'll move the horses to a stable afterward."

"You might want to collect us some supper as well, for I had planned on a light meal," Tellyn said calmly. "I doubt you'll be wanting to sup on dry toast and tea. Oh, and fetch us a bottle or two of good wine. It's been a while since Gyp and I have entertained company. We should celebrate. Gyp! Find my warmer slippers. These are all wet and I need to finish the washing."

Shaking her head, Azhani chuckled as the boy grabbed a fresh pair of slippers from a basket near the door. "Is there anything else I should get?"

"Well, since you're offering, here." Tellyn shoved a scroll and a sack of coins at her. "I was going to send Gyp with this tomorrow, but if you run, you can get it all tonight. And hurry! I'll be needing some of that first thing in the morning!"

"If you're doing the shopping, then that means I'll be helping with the laundry," Kyrian said with an amiable chuckle.

“Tellyn, you haven’t changed a bit,” Azhani replied fondly. Patting the elven boy on his shoulder, she said, “Gyp, you’re with me. I’ve a feeling you’re going to be very handy.”

When Gyp looked over at Tellyn for confirmation, she nodded and waved him off. “Yes, yes, go! You need the exercise.”

Swiftly, he ducked outside, leaving Kyrian to say, “Be careful out there, Azhi. I know you want to see the queen, but it’s best if you don’t do so in irons.”

Azhani nodded. “I know. I plan to keep my head low and let the boy do most of the talking. It shouldn’t take long. Don’t let Tellyn run you ragged,” she said softly. “She’s more capable than she lets others see.”

“She’s an herbalist, Azhani. Her knowledge makes her one of the deadliest people in all of Y’Myran—and also one of the safest, since I doubt she wants to poison herself,” Kyrian said. “And she’s earned my respect because she has the good sense to be your friend.”

“Or the lunacy,” she said, winking at her. Gyp returned wearing a hooded cape and carrying a large pack. “Ah, there’s my porter now. We’ll be back.”

Kyrian chuckled ruefully as they exited the shop. “Just let me see to our gear, Mistress Jarelle, and then I’ll help with that laundry.”

“Oh, take your time, take your time. The old have nothing but time,” Tellyn said as she stirred the laundry pot.

Three days passed—days in which Azhani calmly asked Kyrian to wait for her at the shop while she “discovered the lay of the terrain”, whatever that meant. She never spoke of what she learned, which made it all the more frustrating for Kyrian, who only wanted to help. It was Tellyn who managed to discover that none of the Cabal operatives in the city had heard of a contract being offered for a stardancer, leaving them to speculate that Kyrian had been taken for pleasure, rather than monetary gain.

Learning this brought back all the confusion Kyrian had felt when she’d first awakened, so many weeks ago, in Azhani’s arms. She remembered Arun’s swaying gait, the pounding headache, the rush of fear and relief and then, upon learning her rescuer’s identity, the tumbler’s dance of emotions that started her on the path that led here, to Y’Syria.

Damn you, Azhani Rhu’len! Irritation sizzled through Kyrian as she looked down at the note in her hands once more. *I thought we had agreed we were doing this together!*

Although the text itself was plain enough—

Kyrian, I pray you'll understand. The wrath that falls upon my shoulders is not yours to bear. Azhani

—the meaning behind it, the lack of faith, trust, and above all, courage Azhani showed by leaving such a thing behind rather than speaking to Kyrian directly was so deeply wounding, Kyrian wondered if she'd made a mistake about the other woman.

Are we truly friends, then? Has anything I've said or done been more to her than a simple cobblestone on her road to vengeance? Kyrian fought not to cry.

Heartsick, she stuffed the note into a pouch and tried to forget anything but the work at hand. Sadly, poor Gyp ended up feeling the sharp side of her tongue for much of the day.

Twelve candelmarks passed, and then a full day—making this the fourth they'd been in the city and, aside from the brief note, the first without word from Azhani. At breakfast, Kyrian sat and stared at her food, lacking an appetite and beset by the beasts of rage and utter frustration.

Leaving the table with her meal uneaten, she stomped back into the room and immediately tore the note to shreds, tossing each piece into the fire and watching it burn. It offered little satisfaction and when it was over, she wanted to take it all back and cherish the script, just in case it was the last thing she had of Azhani's.

"How could she do this?" she whispered, scrubbing at tears that scorched her cheeks. "How could she treat my friendship like a joke?"

Later, as she was helping Tellyn prepare an unguent, she blurted, "I should go find her!"

"No, child, you should not. That one has a head like a mule," Tellyn said dourly.

Driving the pestle into the herbs in her mortar, Kyrian replied, "I can pull a mule to water."

"Aye. But you cannot make 'er drink—or like the journey. Be content to know that Azhani is cut from stiffer cloth than you or I...and Lyssera knows this. You've got to trust in our queen, my friend, for she is not some grief-maddened half-wit ready to ignore all signs of innocence. Trust in her, for she is wise well beyond her years."

Kyrian blew out a breath in frustration and stared at the mashed herbs for a long moment. “I feel like all my promises meant nothing.”

Sadly, Tellyn patted her shoulder. “I know. But she tried to spare you troubles, which tells me she cherishes your friendship above your aid. So think on that when you curse her name afore you sleep, lass.”

“I’ll try.” She scraped out the herbs and then wiped the mortar down with a dry cloth. As she added fresh leaves to the vessel, she asked, “How did you meet her, anyway?”

Tellyn chuckled softly and touched the side of her nose. “Azhani’d not thank me for telling you this, I think, but it’s a story worth the knowing. So, settle in and hear then, of a wildling child, her noble warrior father, and a series of dares that ended up with that child attempting to swim the whole of Banner Lake!”

“Oh Goddess,” Kyrian muttered as she listened to the tale weave itself. Eventually, she found herself smiling, even laughing along as Tellyn told of a proud, stubborn, and brave child’s struggle to prove herself to her elven peers—especially to those who claimed kinship with the Oakleaf family. As Tellyn paused to take a sip of her drink, Kyrian asked, “Why that family in particular?”

“The Oakleafs? I’m not sure, though as Azhani bears a rather striking resemblance to Kadrevan, the family patriarch, I might suspect that she be the child Ashiani was rumored to have birthed before she died,” Tellyn said solemnly. Turning to pour herself a fresh cup of tea, she added, “Of course, this be little more than an old woman’s speculation, and would not carry any weight with the Queen’s Council.”

Kyrian made a face. “Of course not. All right, what happened next?”

Tellyn chuckled. “Well then, that’s when Rhu’len brought her to me, for though he was proud she were so determined to stand her ground against the bullies, the water here is terribly cold in winter. Thus, he thought it best she learn herbcraft to create the brews she would need to cure herself of any ills.”

“Smart man,” Kyrian said quietly. “Perhaps there’s some advice in those actions—if Azhani’s pride pushes her to do something stupid, it’s better to stand back and be ready to catch her than to shove her aside to avoid the trouble altogether.”

“I cannot find fault with such wisdom, child,” Tellyn said as she stirred honey into her tea. “Not one bit.”

* * *

Seated on a pile of soft carpets, surrounded by the familiar scents of grass, horse and cooking meat, Padreg Keelan sipped at his cup of dark tea and looked at his companion as if he were a few nails shy of a fully shod horse. As he was his oldest and most trusted friend, Aden had been sent on to Y'Nym, Y'Nor's largest city, while Padreg stayed out with his clan, roving the plains and introducing Elisira to the life she had agreed to share with him. It was a selfish choice, really. Perhaps he should have gone to Y'Nym instead, but he'd wanted Eli's first taste of Y'Noran life to be truth and not the pretty lies of its largest and therefor most cosmopolitan city.

Still, it wasn't the city nor its export tallies of horses and grain that had him so shocked, but rather the contents of Aden's report on the activities of the other kingdoms. Shaking his head slowly, Padreg said, "Sea monsters?" and tried to make the words make some vestige of sense, though really, how did one envision such horrific creatures as kraken, leviathans, and sirens without calling upon the fireside stories of youth? "Are you sure?" He stared at his mug and wished it was something with a bit more kick. "It's not like Ysradan to go chasing after myths."

Through the open flap of his tent, he could see his mother, Ketri, teaching Elisira how to cut and fashion a saddle the way their clan had for centuries.

It pleased him that Elisira sat and listened to his mother with a look of complete concentration on her face. The smile on Ketri's face spoke volumes, for it boded well with regard to her approval of her son's choice in mates.

"Aye, Paddy. I be certain," Aden said, drawing Padreg's attention back to the conversation at hand. "Had it from Cragus One-Eye hisself. Near a month ago, Ysradan took his best men, boarded the *Ymaric's Hammer* and headed out to hunt down giant, tentacled beasts that had already torn apart two ships bound for Killigarn Island, killing most everyone aboard."

Padreg blinked in shock. "A kraken? By Astarus' balls! Would that I had not pledged myself to Azhani's side to strike the rimerbeasts, for to hunt kraken would surely be a feat seen only once in all of history!"

"I don't know, Paddy, it seems to me that the hunting of kraken, if that is what these be, must be a simple thing, for 'tis said the bodies of the beasts now litter the shores of Y'Mar."

"What a thing! What a terrible and incredible thing! Just as rimerbeasts come out of season, now there are kraken?" It was too hard to grasp, and yet, he knew there was more. Aden had barely begun to give his report.

“Aye,” Aden said darkly. “And if even a piece of the old tales of kraken are true, then it’ll be a long while afore Ysradan will have the time to deal with Y’Dan.”

“You’re right, of course. Who is regent? Perhaps I can appeal to them for help,” he said, knowing that Ysradan’s son, Prince Ysralan, was too young to hold the throne. “Would that it was Queen Dasia, but we both know that’s unlikely. Last time Ysradan went charging after brigands, I hear she chased after the *Hammer* in a canoe.”

Aden laughed. “Ah, that must be *korethka* at work, eh, Paddy?”

“Tis a powerful thing, old friend. Love like that is the truest gift of the Twain. Ysradan is wise to cherish it.” Soberly, he said, “So, with the high king and queen out to sea, do we then turn to Princess Syrelle?”

Wincing, Aden replied, “Nay. Ye know the high council’d sooner shit in a grass pot than look to a willowy girl for guidance. Ysradan made Count Madros his regent so his kingdom wouldn’t scheme itself to pieces.”

Shock piled on shock. A heavy slap of disgust made Padreg spit as he replied, “What? How could he leave that overgrown windbag cousin of his in charge?” Jumping to his feet, he began to pace irritably. “Everyone knows Pirellan doesn’t tie his own boots without first consulting his astrologer, two priests, and the village idiot! How can a man like that rule a kingdom?” There was little room to truly vent his aggression, forcing him to take careful steps lest he topple the brazier in his anger. “The bloody high council won’t be any help, either. Those old men care less for justice than they do gold and glory. Oh, by the hooves of my herds, Aden, the Twain have not played us easy, have they?”

“Indeed not, but there may not have been another choice. If Dasia would not stay, and Syrelle couldn’t hold the council’s respect, who else could Ysradan trust? Pirellan Madros might be an idiot, but at least he’s Ysradan’s man through and through.”

Padreg sighed. “Aye. I suppose it could be much worse. He could have chosen one with a heart like Arris’ and not had a kingdom to call home once he returned.”

Still, it rankled him to think of the high king so far from his throne, and he knew Aden felt the same. As boys, both had spent time living in Ysradan’s palace to learn the ways of nobles. They’d started as pages and worked their way up to becoming squires. The experience had given them a deep insight into a monarch’s duties and taught them just how difficult it was for one man

to balance so many responsibilities. It was the alliances made with others that ensured a kingdom's prosperity and success, not the glory won on battlefields. Power came from respect that was given and received. With that kind of command, a king could be capable of great things.

Sitting down again, he sighed. "All right, you've told me of Y'Mar. What news of the rest of the kingdoms? Surely they have had some inkling of the madness plaguing Y'Dan?"

"Oh aye," Aden replied. "But it seems Y'Mar be not the only kingdom to suffer the sting of strange invasion."

Padreg's stomach turned sour. "Your smile bodes ill."

"Aye, and what I have to tell will like your ears no better than it did mine, for had I not heard it from those I know to be tellers of nothing but the solid truth, I would think them madmen," Aden said quietly. "Monsters have come to Y'Myran, old friend. Monsters the like of which populate our myths and stories, whose bones rot in inns and taverns, moldering on shelves, and whose origins are known only to the sages."

Weight wrapped about Padreg's shoulders. This was responsibility coming to call. "What monsters, and where do they hunt?"

"In Y'Dror, there is a dragon—they say it crawled out of a crack right in the middle of the kingdom and flew up, breathing great torrents of fire and ashen smog, choking and burning all in its path. In Y'Nym, there's a man who was caught in the beast's breath, and Paddy, ye know me to be no coward, but I'll gladly face rimerbeasts over this thing, for his skin had been boiled from his body and he were yards from the blast!"

"Twain's grace," he whispered, unable to imagine such devastation. "Can we send aid? Has Y'Dror's king asked anything of us?"

"Stefan Payle sent two hundred of our finest horsemen to aid both men and dwarves. Much more, we cannot spare."

Nodding, he said, "And Y'Skan, what of the desert? Or Y'Tol? Surely fair Y'Tol has escaped these tragedies?"

"Sadly, the Y'Tolians face beetles the size of birds—King Naral sent word that their crops are decimated. There'll be no wine this season or the next, and little food, as well. We've heard only rumor from Y'Skan, but travelers have reported being attacked by scorpions the size of horses. Most of the nomad clans have been forced into Ratterask Oasis."

Padreg stared at the brazier and tried not to feel as though the weight of hundreds of thousands of lives were suddenly crushing his spine. "We stand

alone then, we of Y'Nor, for Y'Syr will have rimerbeasts come winter. And Y'Dan has both the beasts and a madman for a king."

"Aye, but we are strong, Paddy. Our warrior's blades are sharp, our horses are fleet, and we alone of Y'Myran are ready to send aid where we can," Aden said proudly.

Bolstered by Aden's courageous words, Padreg smiled. "Aye, we are. And we will. Come, let's seek out Stefan and see to sending more of our forces out to help our brother and sister monarchs."

Just as he reached for the flap, there was a commotion outside the tent, then a shout. "Ogres! Ogres attack Y'Nym!"

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BY SHAYLYNN ROSE

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