

SCARS



SCARS

A Lost Novel of Earthdawn



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per Aspera
SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

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For Sam Lewis,
who took the chance.



Introduction

by Sam Lewis

Twelve years ago I had a problem. I was series editor of two lines of shared universes novels. One was a military sci-fi line, called BattleTech. The other took place in a dystopia that was a blend of magic and cyberpunk, known as Shadowrun. My problem was that we had started a third line, this one a fantasy universe called Earthdawn. I had four books underway and I needed two more.

This was not your normal “men-in-tights” fantasy setting. The Earthdawn novels took place in a land called Barsaive. Five hundred years before, a magical apocalypse had driven humanity deep into the bowels of the earth while demons scourged the land above. These demons included the normal “big teeth and claws” types. But there was a special type of demon as well, demons known as Horrors. Horrors fed on fear, terror and the black lunacy of mankind. Horrors preferred to possess, trick, and manipulate their victims, rather than rend, slash, and tear them.

For five hundred years humanity remained huddled, sur-

viving as they could, in terror of what was outside and what could be locked inside their shelters with them. Then humanity emerged from the shelters, quite a bit the worse for wear. These children of the Scourge were trying to reestablish their domination of the surface. They were also looking to regain the humanity that they lost during their years locked in the depths below.

A great setting, for some great stories. But my problem was that I couldn't find any authors (other than the two I already had) who understood that I was not looking for a typical sword and sorcery novel. I was looking for stories about people who made horrible choices in order to survive. I wanted tales of people who literally and figuratively locked themselves away from one another. I was looking for stories grounded in Faus-tian legends. I wanted stories about deals with literal devils. I got overly muscular barbarians winning the princess.

Then Caroline Spector sent some writing samples over. The stories were filled with twisted, amoral and conflicted heroines. They also had a disturbing touch of surrealism. I immediately called and we arranged a meeting. To make a long story short, the meeting went very well. I filled Caroline in on the universe's background and asked her for a story synopsis. Caroline sent me a synopsis of *Scars*, and then suggested that she make it a trilogy. I was excited enough about the synopsis that I agreed. The deal was that the novels would follow the heroine through the ages, the first two taking place in the Earthdawn universe, while the last took place in our Shadowrun universe. The revelation for the audience was going to be that the two settings, fantasy and cyberpunk, were the past and the future of our current world.

The first draft of *Scars* arrived and Caroline proved that I had not misplaced my trust in her. Aina's story was everything I had hoped for. Conflicted, scared, self-loathing Aina struggles with redeeming her past and finding forgiveness.

Her conversations with herself and her Horror made the hairs on my neck stand up. The honest treachery of Ania's Horror left me stunned. This was not your typical fantasy novel.

The problem was that the Earthdawn novel series faltered on the first four books because the setting was not typical fantasy. Seems the audience expected barbarians and princesses. A decision was made to get a more traditional feel for the setting. Two novels with more standard themes were inserted in the schedule ahead of Caroline's novels. Then, after those two novels were released, the decision was made to kill the line. Only Caroline's third novel in the trilogy, *Worlds Without End*, was published, because it was part of the more successful Shadowrun cyberpunk series. Strangely enough, French translations of both *Scars* and the second novel (*Little Treasures*) were published.

But now you have a chance to read some of the most delightfully disturbing and emotionally evocative fantasy writing that I have ever had the pleasure of reading. It took twelve years for it to see the light of day, but like the survivors of Barsaive, *Scars* has finally emerged. Enjoy.

— Sam Lewis
May 2005

Foreword

Normally, I don't like to read author forewords. They're usually windy, overblown, and full of information you're just not interested in reading. The foreword is the speed bump on the road to the good stuff — the fiction.

That said, I'll try not to bore you too much, but I'm making no promises about the windy, overblown part.

The *Scars* story began about eleven years ago. I wanted to get serious about writing fiction, but I also needed to make some money. I decided that the best way to combine these goals was to get a work-for-hire contract. I'd already written three computer game hint books, two of which had a fictional narrative as part of the hint path.

I knew that FASA, Inc. was starting a new fantasy line — Earthdawn — and I hoped to write for them. I'd met Sam Lewis, the president of FASA, a couple of times and figured he'd at least look at my work. So I cornered him at GenCon and gave him copies of some of my short stories as well as copies of my hint books to show I could work at novel length.

And then the waiting began. Being a neurotic writer, my

memory is that it took a loooong time for Sam to get in touch with me. More likely it was only a couple of weeks.

Anyway, I came back from the store one afternoon and there was a message on the answering machine: “This is Sam Lewis, just calling to say I’m interested in you writing a novel for us.” It was one of the best moments of my life. Of course, this left me with one small problem: now I actually had to write the thing.

I started working on the plot. I can’t recall who twigged me to the fact that Earthdawn was supposed to be Shadowrun’s past, but that got me thinking about a crossover trilogy. I pitched the idea to Sam, and before I knew it I had a contract for a trilogy of books — two in Earthdawn, one in Shadowrun.

I started writing *Scars* and thought that I was amazingly lucky. First time out of the box, and I had a three book deal!

Fast-forward about a year. *Scars* was written and *Little Treasures* was well underway. I met my editor at ROC, who really liked *Scars*. But the previous Earthdawn books weren’t faring as well as everyone had hoped. The editor told me she planned to re-launch the line using my books, hoping to draw some of the Shadowrun readers to Earthdawn. Pretty heady stuff for a first-time novelist.

And then everything...kinda blew up.

Higher-ups at ROC cancelled the remaining Earthdawn books, including mine and several others, choosing instead to do reprints of BattleTech books. This happened while I was writing *Worlds Without End*, the Shadowrun (and final) book in the trilogy. FASA said they planned on self-publishing the Earthdawn novels as they had with BattleTech and Shadowrun. The only complication was that *Worlds Without End* was going to come out before the first two novels. And some of the larger revelations that I was planning for *Worlds Without End* were nixed because of game-related decisions within FASA.

So, in the middle of my final book in the trilogy, I had to

make a decision: Should I tell all the big revelations and ruin the first two books? Or should I play it obscure and muddy the waters, hoping readers would be intrigued enough to pick up the first two books? I chose the latter route.

Meanwhile, I discovered that though ROC wasn’t going to publish the books, the German and French publishers of FASA’s books were happy to print them. FASA sent an absolutely gorgeous set of galleys for *Scars* which made me almost not mind that ROC wasn’t printing the books.

And then nothing happened. For a long, long time. We’re talking years here.

What I didn’t know at the time was there were forces at work within FASA I knew nothing about. Eventually, FASA closed down, and the unpublished Earthdawn novels — well, they remained unpublished.

Over the next nine years, various people contacted me wanting to publish the books. Nothing came of any of it. *Worlds Without End* came out and pissed off a lot of Shadowrun readers...and actually pleased a few, too.

Then, about two years ago, Jak Koke called and told me that he planned to print his unpublished Earthdawn book, *Liferock*, and asked me if I would be interested in having him publish *Scars* and *Little Treasures* as well. I was dubious. After all, this wasn’t my first time at the rodeo. But Jak sent me a copy of *Liferock*, and it was A Real Book. My hopes rose.

So, at long last, here is the first book in the Immortals Trilogy. I resisted going back and doing rewrites. This is the book you would have read eleven years ago. And you wouldn’t be seeing it at all if not for the FASA guys: Sam Lewis, Lou Prosperi, and Tom Dowd.

It’s been a long road getting here. And now I’m pleased to share the best part of the ride.

— Caroline Spector
April 2005



Prologue

“Tell me who it is,” she said.
“Why is it so important to you?” he asked.
“If I tell you, then I wouldn’t have any secrets, and you would grow bored,” she said.

He rolled over, covering her body with his. White skin against black. Looking down into her eyes, dark as night, black as a bitter heart, he shuddered as if possessed by a Horror.

“I could never grow tired of you,” he said, convinced he spoke the truth, at least for now.

“Then tell me,” she said, pulling his head toward hers. He murmured a name against her lips: *Javan*.

“Ah,” she said. “Javan.”



He awoke as the first faint streaks of morning slipped across the night sky. The bed beside him was still warm, but she wasn’t there. A faint noise came from the shadows across the room. He saw her then, her white hair a shock against her dark skin. She was cloaked in a gray robe covered in darker

gray embroidered geometric patterns he didn't remember her wearing before.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Out," she replied absent-mindedly. With deft fingers she continued to place items into her small pack.

"I'll go with you," he said, rising from the bed and reaching for his clothes.

"I think not," she said. He frowned. The cool tone in her voice, as if she were talking to a stranger, made him angry.

"I'm going with you," he said more forcefully.

"No," she replied as she closed the pack and tied it shut. "And you won't follow me, or try to keep me here, or do any of the other foolish things that may occur to you to try and stop me."

He sat up, surprised at the indifference he heard. Looking at her then, he saw her as if for the first time. Beautiful, yes, he knew that, but there was something else, something he'd refused to recognize. Or maybe she had hidden it from him. A coldness about her that froze him in place. No heat came from her glance, no passion, no contempt, just a lack of feeling.

"But what about us?" he asked, hating himself for how pitiful and weak he sounded.

She smiled faintly then, and had he not been looking so intently he might have missed it. Not a smile of victory, but a sad, remorseful smile.

"That is an illusion you created," she said.

"You let me make it."

"Yes, it was simpler that way," she agreed. "But it always is."

"Always," he began. A terrible notion skitted into his mind. "This is about that thief, Javan, isn't it? I'll tell him about you — what you do."

As the words left his mouth, she crossed the room to him. The air above her began to shimmer and glow. In her hand a

small silver needle appeared; with a quick motion, she drew it across the skin of her left wrist. A thin ribbon of blood welled up from the scratch and clung to the needle like a bit of thread. She began to whisper a soft incantation, making sewing motions before his lips. He felt his mouth go numb, tongue dead in his mouth as if asleep.

With terror snaking through him, his hands flew to his mouth. His voice was his stock and trade — giving and receiving gossip, asking the right questions, telling the right tales, and being paid handsomely for the exchange. She stopped whispering, glancing into his eyes with her night-dark ones.

"This will last for a year and day," she said. "By which time, I suspect Javan will have little use for anything you might want to tell him. It would have been much simpler to let me go."

He wanted to scream, to cry, to make any sound at all, but his mouth was useless flesh. She turned and gathered up her pack. Without a backward glance, she left the room. He sank to the floor cradling his mouth in his hands, his body shaking with silent tears.

Much later, a shadow fell over him; he looked up, hoping it was her returning to undo this prison. But it wasn't. It was a tall man dressed in rich velvet robes. The man's voice was fine and beautiful, and he said there was an answer — a way to be free of the spell.

Then he saw the shining blade in the man's long-fingered hand. Then the blade was in his own hand, and placing it across the thin skin of his wrist, he knew what he had to do.

PART ONE



Chapter One

“How much will you give me for it?” Javan asked. Misha looked down at the jewels Javan had laid before him. His stubby fingers caressed the inlaid stones like a blind man stroking a cat. Picking one of the pieces at random, he raised it to his mouth, and bit into it. The metal gave slightly against his yellowed teeth. Misha grunted and tossed it back onto the heap.

“I don’t want it,” he said.

“What!” Javan grabbed the piece Misha had just discarded and shook it in his face. “This is the best lot you’re going to find. Look at the workmanship — it’s pre-Scourge. The stones — see how they catch the light!”

Javan held up the piece, and it glowed in the lamp light. Even at mid-afternoon in Bartertown, the sun didn’t penetrate Misha’s tent. The red and white stones caught the light of the lamp in their facets and reflected back a fragmented rainbow. Javan heard Misha catch his breath.

“The jewels’ value isn’t the problem,” Misha said abruptly. “You know as well as I do that jewels like this come with a

price attached. More often than not, that is someone willing to relieve you of your life.”

Misha ran his fingers across the matching bracelet and ring. Regret and avarice crossed his face, but he swept them and the rest of the pile up and dumped it into Javan’s old leather bag. Then he shoved the bag at Javan.

“Try your luck elsewhere, Javan,” he said. “As good a friend as you are, I can’t afford the price you’re asking.”

Irritated, Javan turned away and flung the flap back on Misha’s tent and stepped outside. The smells and sights of Bartertown overwhelmed him for a moment. Makeshift stalls and tents lined the narrow street. Brightly colored fabrics vied with each other for the attention of buyers. The fetid odor of unwashed bodies and dung hung in the still, hot afternoon air.

It always took Javan a few days to readjust to the noise and the crowds in cities. Most of his time was spent alone and it always shocked him to realize how loud, smelly, and physical people were. Elbowing his way through the crowd, Javan headed toward the other side of town. There was another trader who dealt in these kinds of things, one less cautious than Misha.



“Ah, Javan, it’s good to see you again,” Kraag said in his oily voice. His leathery face split into a sharp-toothed smile. Javan smiled in reply, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

The ork was stuffed into a chair too small for his bulk. The chair had originally been built for an average-sized human, not an obese ork. Javan had never seen a fat ork before meeting Kraag, but having heard of Kraag’s swiftness and deadliness with a garrote, he knew better than to let his guard drop.

“Kraag, thank you for seeing me.” Javan and Kraag were seated at a small round table in the back room of Kraag’s shop.

The air was still and sluggish, which didn’t help Javan’s dislike of small, cramped places.

Most of the shops in Bartertown were temporary structures like Misha’s, little more than tents piled up next to one another. It was a testament to Kraag’s business that he had managed to acquire such a stable place and keep it.

“So, you have some goods to sell me,” Kraag said.

Javan nodded and lifted his shirt to untie the bag fastened about his waist. The jewels slithered out of the bag and onto the table like glistening snakes. Kraag gave a soft sigh as he reached forward to touch the gems.

“Lovely,” he said. “Quite unique. Where did you say you came by these?”

Javan laughed. The jewels must have had quite an effect on Kraag for him to be nakedly interested.

“Oh, here and there,” Javan said waving his hand casually. “I find things. You know how it is.”

Kraag raised his eyes from the gems and stared at Javan. His gaze made Javan uncomfortable in a way it never had before. Those yellow-green eyes were suddenly malevolent and frightening. Javan froze and shivered despite the heat. Then, as suddenly as it had occurred, the danger passed. Kraag looked again like a well-fed merchant, not a murdering assassin. But the chill didn’t leave Javan’s bones.

“Are you interested?” Javan asked. His throat was dry, and his voice came out in a hoarse croak.

Kraag smiled slightly. “Javan, you know how much I like your merchandise — you always have such unique items — but I’m afraid this batch would be particularly difficult to move.”

Unease spread through Javan’s body. The transaction was getting strange. *Is there something else at work here?* he wondered.

“Why are you turning them down?” Javan asked. “I know

you've seen nothing this valuable in the last year. What do you know of these jewels?"

Kraag leaned back in his chair. His eyes had taken on a flat, murky pus color and Javan's unease threatened to flower into something wild and uncontrollable.

"Javan, you know you're like a brother to me," Kraag began. "But I'm afraid you've gotten yourself into quite a scrape."

"What are you talking about?" Javan asked.

"You're quite lucky actually," he continued as if Javan hadn't spoken. "Most anyone else would have been dead already. These pretties you've got for sale, they have quite a reputation."

Kraag paused for a long moment. Then he shook his head and smiled. *Orks shouldn't smile*, Javan thought.

"You really don't know what these are, do you?"

Kraag picked up the necklace with the red and white stones.

"This one in particular," he said as he held the stones aloft to catch the murky light. "Belonged to a wealthy Throal merchant, made it for his daughter's wedding. The wedding didn't happen and the poor girl fell into despair. Went quite mad — not the sort of thing that you expect from dwarfs. Anyway, this necklace and these other jewels eventually fell into the hands of one of Varulus's nephews. And the nephews are who *you* stole them from. Let me tell you, he's not at all pleased."

Javan snatched the necklace from Kraag's grasp and stuffed it into his leather pouch. With a few quick motions, he swept the other pieces into the bag as well. Kraag came to his feet pushing the table toward Javan, nearly pinning him against the wall. Kraag's lips peeled back from his sharp teeth in a snarl.

"Don't be an idiot, Javan," he said. "Hand over the bag. The word is out about you. So far only Misha and I know that you've got these. He's your friend, he won't tell. Give them to me and

I'll keep you alive. But only if you don't give me any trouble."

Javan chose that moment to shove the table toward Kraag and dash out the shop's back entrance. With the ork's hoarse shouts ringing in his ears, he sped down the alleyway. Night had come, causing Javan to slam into the tents on each side as he ran. Cries came from inside the tents as some toppled down. Javan ignored the sounds, knowing that Kraag would be after him. A small opening appeared on his right, and Javan jumped into it.

Gathering the shadows around him like a friend, Javan melted into the darkness. He held his breath, trying to silence his frantic panting while pulling his dagger from its sheath. In a moment, he heard Kraag's footsteps. The ork was trying to walk silently, but had no talent for it. It sounded to Javan as if Kraag was lumbering down the alley toward his hiding place. Javan let Kraag pass, then stepped behind him.

Slipping his free arm around the ork's neck, Javan pulled Kraag's head back. Kraag grabbed Javan's arm, but Javan was too quick for him. With a single stroke Javan sliced Kraag open from one ear to the other. Warm blood spurted into the night, ink dark and glorious. Kraag gurgled, then dropped to his knees, hands clasping his wounded neck. Hideous gurgling noises came from the ork's wound, as if he was trying to make a final plea. His thick hands reached toward Javan, clenching convulsively into fists. Then, with a pitiful wheeze, he fell forward, his body going still.

Javan stared dispassionately at Kraag's body. The thief magic was hot in him now. He didn't care about the ork. He didn't care about anything but keeping the jewels and getting away.

Wiping as much of the blood as possible off his hands onto the ork's coat, Javan quickly searched Kraag's body. All he turned up was a bag of coins, none of particular value. The question now was where to go. It wouldn't take long for

Kraag's absence to be noted, and Javan had been seen visiting him. Even the Council of Merchants, a divided and bickering group, would have no difficulty in deciding to hunt him down. Luckily, the city guard was understaffed, and that would give him enough time to leave town.



The night was dark and moonless; only stars shone in the sky. Javan saw more and more of them as he made his way toward the edge of the city. The guard was out, but they were clumsy, loud, and easily avoided. He glided from shadow to shadow, contemptuous of people who moved through the light. The streets widened and the moon was hiding, helping Javan by covering her face.

He stole what he could as he made his way from the city. The jewels were to have helped him retire from thieving, but apparently the magic didn't want him to go yet. And here he was, in the middle of the night, taking what he could to eke by like any common thief. But the magic didn't care. It just wanted to take.

In the silent hush of the night, Javan found a secluded place far from the road leading away from Bartertown. Wrapping himself in his stolen blanket and eating his pilfered dinner, he settled down for the night.



When Javan awoke, the sun was barely up in the sky. He stared up at the canopy of leaves over his head and tried to figure out what he was doing here. It took a moment, and then he remembered. He threw off his blanket and was about to jump to his feet when a voice stopped him.

"I think it would be best if you stayed where you are for right now."

Javan sat up and looked at the owner of the voice. Across

the small clearing from him was an elf. She was standing a few feet away, her gray robes severe and rich at the same time. He noticed that the patterns running across the hem and cuffs of her robe undulated more and more the longer he gazed at them. The fabric looked soft, a weave so fine he could barely see it.

His eyes rose to her face. She returned his stare without a waver. Though he'd been a thief for almost twenty-five years and had coveted many things in that time, he'd never before wanted a person like he would want a jewel or gold. The adept in him rose up, reminding him that he needed no one — he took what he wanted. Still, the thought wouldn't go away.

Her skin was black — not dark brown, but pure ebony as if carved from wood. Against the darkness of her skin, her white hair was startling. She wore it long, gathered into a thick braid. Her eyes — cold and equally dark as her skin — held his.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Aina," she said.

"What are you doing here?"

"I need your help," she said.

Chapter Two

Javan laughed. It wasn't a pleasant laugh, and there wasn't a glimpse of humor in it. The elf didn't say anything, just continued to stare at him with that unreadable expression on her face.

"You want my help," he said finally. "Why do you need it?"

"That isn't important," she replied. "The question is, are you interested?"

"I don't know what you want me to do. How could I know if I was interested?"

"Of course, how foolish of me," she said. Javan suspected she was rarely foolish. "There is an item of some importance to me that is currently being held in Blood Wood. I would like you to retrieve it for me."

Javan picked a leaf from the forest floor. With quick, systematic motions he took it apart. "Why don't you just go into Blood Wood yourself and get it back?" he asked. "Don't you elves all think of yourselves as one big family?"

Her lips tightened when he said that, Javan noted with some small satisfaction. It was always advantageous to know

where people's weaknesses lay. You never knew when it would come in handy.

"Obviously, if I could get it myself, I wouldn't have any need for your services," she said. "But I can tell you where the item is and help you get it."

"And if I did get this item for you, what would I get in return?"

"Enough gold to allow you to retire. I understand that was your intent when you stole those jewels from Valurus's nephew."

Javan's eyes narrowed. "How did you know about that?"

Aina smiled. "If I told you, then I wouldn't have any secrets left and you would grow bored. Let me say that you aren't always as circumspect as you believe yourself to be. Killing Kraag was clumsy of you. Leaving the body where it could be found was even worse."

"What do you know about it?"

She leaned back against the tree and crossed her arms. Her smile grew, becoming more smug and knowing.

"It's the blood," she said. "It will always tell. Now, will you help me?"

Javan stood and brushed dead leaves off his pants. He shook his head. "I don't think so. You have too many secrets for my taste."

"And you don't? Think of what I'm offering. The opportunity for an impressive finale to your illustrious career."

"You're forgetting that I'm thief — we don't have much use for letting people know what we've been about."

"You will know."

"What is so impressive about taking something from Blood Wood?"

"That's what makes this interesting. You see, the item I want is currently being held by Alachia in her palace."

Javan stopped gathering his belongings and turned to

stare at Aina. “You want me to break into Alachia’s palace? Are you insane? Or maybe a Horror has gotten inside you.”

Aina’s eyes narrowed and her expression grew stony.

“I’m neither insane nor possessed,” she said. Her voice shook as if she were barely controlling it.

At that moment, a shout came from the south. Javan and Aina turned toward the sound. The noise of someone crashing through the dense forest was close.

“I believe they are on to you,” she said.

Javan looked over his shoulder. She had moved silently behind him. She stood close enough for him to touch, and the greed rose up in him. Heat radiated from her; it warmed him, and he wanted to touch her. But the sound of the men coming through the forest was nearer and the magic grabbed him now. *Run*, it said. *Leave her behind*.

Aina smiled, as if she could hear his thoughts.

“Running won’t do any good—they’re almost upon us.” She pushed him down onto the ground then bent and picked up a handful of the soft, brown dirt. The air around her began to shimmer as she rubbed a bit of it onto his chest. Strange, guttural noises came from her.

“Don’t move, or you’ll break the spell,” she said.

She threw leaves on top of him. A moment passed, then she lay down on the ground next to him, pulling leaves over herself, repeating the gestures of the spell. Javan stared as she seemed to fade, then blend into the ground.

There was a curse, then a group of four dwarfs broke into the clearing. They were well-armed and looked angry. Javan thought one of them looked familiar. Then he remembered: Tiber Flamebeard. How could he have forgotten? But that had been a long time ago, when they were both much younger.

“Nothing here,” snarled Tiber. His hair was a shocking red and stood out from his head like a bush. “He wouldn’t have stopped so close to town. He’s probably halfway to Travar.”

“Then why are we going toward the river?” asked one of the other dwarfs. This one was pale — pinkish-white skin and light yellow hair. His eyes were a milky blue.

“Because, lame-wit,” said Tiber, “Kender sent us here. And we’ll keep going until we find that thief or we run out of land.”

The two dwarfs who hadn’t said anything looked at each other and made faces. They were brown — brown hair, eyes, and skin. Like they’d been carved from a walnut shell.

The dwarfs argued for a few minutes, then stomped off to the north. Javan released a deep breath that he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. Aina moved and he could see her clearly again. She was brushing leaves off her robe. One was stuck in her hair, and Javan reached over and pulled it free. The braid came loose and his hand sank into the cool strands for a moment until she pulled away and began to tie it up once more.

“Those dwarfs are in the pay of Kender, King Valurus’s nephew,” she said. “He’s quite greedy. It isn’t so much what he has as that he has it. In his eyes, you’ve not only taken something he values, but you’ve deprived him of its presence. Of course, you should know about greed.”

Javan shrugged, not wanting to answer her. He brushed the leaves off his pack. It was a pitiful sight. The only things he had in the whole world right now were the few things he’d stolen the night before. It made him even angrier that strapped about his waist was a small fortune in jewels he might never be able to sell.

Aina crossed the clearing and stepped into the underbrush. Javan watched as she rummaged through the deadfall, then produced a moderate sized pack. She lifted her robe as she picked her way back to the clearing, and Javan could see her legs. Beautiful legs, long and muscular, as if she’d spent a great deal of time walking and running. He wondered if she was deliberately showing herself to him.

“If I were to help you get this object, how much would you be willing to pay?” he asked.

Aina smiled faintly. “The jewels you have strapped around your waist,” she began. “I know of a person who would be happy to acquire them. And I might be able to make Kender’s interest in finding them fade.”

“And how would you manage that?”

“My secret,” she replied. “Besides, what other choices do you have?”

He looked at her for a long time, weighing his options. Then he said, “What is you want me to find?”

Chapter Three

Aina didn’t answer for a moment. She knew she had Javan now. The greed she’d seen in his eyes was as powerful as she’d suspected. And another avarice was there as well, one she would be able to use if he was difficult. Though she hoped it wouldn’t come to that; loose ends in such situations were inevitably messy and annoying.

Her face broke into a predatory smile. “I knew you would help,” she said. “I want you to retrieve a locket. Finely made of wood and silver. Inside are two portraits, of an elf male and female. She is fair as a summer’s day; he is her opposite — dark as midwinter’s night.”

Aina’s voice softened as she described the locket. Javan noticed and hoarded this fact like a miser.

“They were important to you?” he asked.

“No,” she said, and when she looked into his eyes it was as if she were talking about strangers.

“Then why do you want it?” he prodded. “You’re going to a lot of trouble to retrieve something you claim is of no importance. It doesn’t make any sense.”

Aina's eyes narrowed. "My interest in this item is no concern of yours. You're being paid handsomely for your help. I owe you no explanations."

She turned and strode into the forest. Javan shook the leaves off his blanket, tied it into a makeshift bundle, and then set off after her.



They headed north, making good time that day. The dwarfs had hacked clumsily through the forest, leaving a path even a child could follow. It gave Javan a cold satisfaction that he was trailing the dwarfs Kender had sent to kill him.

Aina frowned at the ugly scars their swords had made in the brushes and trees. They had even gouged chunks into some of the trees, apparently to mark where they'd been in case they got lost.

"Dwarfs aren't too fond of the forest," said Javan. He was still following Aina. Her stride was longer than his.

She made a non-committal noise. Javan was growing tired of her silence. There were things he wanted to know about her. She was like a lock whose secrets he hadn't yet explored. He wanted to find the right key and open her up. Were there treasures hidden in the silence? Or maybe just a musty interior. Either way, he was determined to find what hid there.



"Were you born in Blood Wood?" Javan asked. The sky had turned pale gray-blue, a twilight where no shadows fell. Aina looked over her shoulder at Javan. They were making camp in the branches of a large tree. He was looking at the hammock she'd made out of his blanket with an expression of doubt on his face.

He'd been asking these sorts of prying questions for the last few hours. Aina had tried to dodge them as best she could,

but he was persistent. The questions didn't bother her as much as the feelings they stirred up in her. Feelings that made her uncomfortable, like a heavy weight had settled onto her heart.

"No," she said at last, "I wasn't born in Blood Wood."

"So where were you born?"

The memory came then, swiftly, leaving her with no defenses against it.

Wind blowing through trees, sighing like a baby falling asleep. The sky, when she could see it through the thick canopy of leaves, was clear blue. Like her mother's eyes.

Aina hadn't thought of her mother in years, but here was her mother's face smiling at her, crystal clear and bright as day. All the edges sharp, not blurred at all by time. Aina tried to forget then, but the image hung in her memory.

"I don't want to talk about where I was born," she said. Her movements became sharp and brisk. She forced herself to slow down, to relax, but still her hands trembled.

Javan smiled at her, but she didn't return it. She knew he had seen how his questions upset her and that worried her. The thief was necessary, but she hadn't counted on his interest in her. She'd been able to manipulate interest in her before. Suddenly she felt like things were beginning to spin out of control.

And don't forget where you're going, a voice inside her said. As if she could ever forget what had happened a few days travel to the east. She had tried as best she could never to return there, but something seemed to be pushing her back. And she tried to forget that memory, too.

Aina forced herself to smile back at Javan. It was a seductive smile intended to distract him, and it did. His eyes dilated, and he suddenly looked down as though he were shy. Aina finished securing the ropes that held her blanket in the branches of the tree. They would spend the night in makeshift hammocks suspended fifteen feet off the ground.

The smell of the forest dredged up more memories. That warm, earthy scent with the faint hint of decay underneath reminded her all too clearly of places she wanted to forget. At the same time, there was a yearning inside her, but for what? She wasn't sure she wanted to know.

A short distance away, Javan climbed into his own hammock. She sensed a need in him — greedy and consuming. What he wanted he took. She often wished it would be that simple for her.

But she knew better than to get caught up in the past. That was one trap she had studiously avoided whenever possible. For her, it was a prison she kept in her mind, and once she stepped in, there would be no release.

The hammock cradled her and its gentle rocking soothed. She drifted into that shadow place between dreams and reality. The images came then, like they always did.



She stood alone on a barren field. The Scourge had ended, but the world was still more dead than alive. In the kaer behind her lay the bodies of everyone she had known from before. She'd stayed in the kaer with them long after they were gone, until their flesh shrank and pulled away from their bones. Until the bones fell apart, and she could no longer even remember the faces. The only memories she had were of their decaying flesh and smooth white bones.

When the loneliness finally drove her from the kaer, the world was arid and parched and big. So open after all that time underground. That frightened her almost as much as what had happened in the kaer, but she told herself she didn't have to think about that anymore. She would will it from her mind.

Then he was there, as he always was, standing just out of the corner of her eye. But his presence was like the sweet-putrid

smell of her friends' decaying flesh. It filled her, and held her, and permeated her until she didn't know where she began and he ended anymore.

"Did you really think we were through?" he asked.

Aina closed her eyes and pretended not to hear. He laughed as if this were a trick he was accustomed to. Then his voice was in her mind and more real than her own thoughts.

"It was kind of you to stay and watch over their remains, although I doubt it makes much difference to them now," he said.

"Be quiet," she said. Or thought she said. The voice in her mind stroked and prodded and touched her in ways she hated. It invaded her and she couldn't make it stop.

"What do you think it was like for them to die?" he asked.

"Everyone dies," she snapped.

"No," he replied, "not everyone."



Aina woke with a start. Her robes stuck to her back, and she felt hot all over. The sky was pale gray; it was just before dawn. The forest was still and quiet as if nothing lived there. She could feel her heart pounding and thought she would never be free of the dream. Quietly, she pulled herself from the hammock and stepped onto a lower branch. She glanced down at the ground and froze. Standing at the base of the tree was a figure. She knew who it was; he had finally come for her. Her legs felt boneless and her insides were suddenly heavy and full. A terrified moan slipped from her lips and she closed her eyes.

"What's the matter?"

It was the thief. Her noise had awakened him. She forced herself to open her eyes again. There was no one standing at the base of the tree. A flood of relief made her weak and shaky.

"Are you all right?"

Aina stared at the spot where the figure had been, then turned back toward Javan.

“There’s nothing wrong,” she said. “Nothing.”

Chapter Four

“Let me do the talking,” Aina said, her voice sharp and clipped.

They were approaching a small town. Javan had noticed a tension building in her. Aina’s expression was one of dread, as if the very land they walked upon held terrors for her. She peered into the forest lining the road as if she expected to see something popping out at any moment.

Javan shrugged and said nothing. For the last few days, she had avoided all his attempts to draw her. His questions were answered with non-committal murmurs or silence. The farther they walked, the more quiet she became, as if her words were being swallowed by the road.

They’d made good time at first, but now, when they were almost halfway to their goal, Aina’s steps slowed. Javan was shorter than she, and he had been winded for most of the first nine days of their journey. But now he could keep pace with her easily, occasionally striding ahead of her.

It was misting, and their clothes were heavy and damp. Aina’s hair was plastered against her skull, making it appear

very fragile to him.

The small village was little more than a handful of dilapidated buildings that looked as if they would collapse in a high wind. The path widened only slightly here; the road was muddy and slippery.

Javan wanted a bath, and he sighed with anticipation upon spotting the tavern sign above the town's sole two-story building. As they got closer, he saw that the sign, reading Fellon's Tavern, was bleached white-gray with some small patches of faded blue and red paint. Weeds grew between the cracks in the tavern's walls. One of the shutters was hanging cockeyed from a rusty hinge. No baths would be had here.

Aina pulled her hood over her head, then pushed open the front door of the inn. Javan followed her. He blinked for a moment; the light from the hearth was puny and cast the corners of the room in shadows. The smell of rancid burned grease hung in the air.

The room fell silent as the other patrons sized them up. Javan and Aina made their way to an empty table and sat. Javan tried not to fidget, but those watchful eyes made him feel itchy, like spiders crawling across his skin.

Aina looked vaguely bored. She pushed the hood of her cloak back from her face. A murmur ran through the room, and Javan wondered if there were bad blood between the townspeople and the elves.

She pulled a small bag from her pack. Javan had tried to search the pack a few nights ago, only to have his hand fiercely attacked by a small rat-like creature. It had gibbered like a monkey and made such a hellacious racket that Javan was certain it could be heard all the way to Bartertown.

Aina had rolled over and placed her hand into the pack and murmured something. The creature quieted immediately. Javan stood there with a hot blush creeping up his face, thankful she couldn't see him clearly. In the pale starlight,

Aina looked at him with an unreadable expression on her face. Then she took his hand and pulled him down to her.

Javan trembled. It was too sudden. He was confused. Her reaction wasn't what he expected. Anger, coldness, but not this heat and passion. She pulled her robe over her head exposing her long, thin body. Javan expected her skin to be cold; it looked as if it would be, but it wasn't. It was warm, then hot, and he felt the old surge of excitement rushing through him.

She pulled his garments off one by one, then he lay over her, his skin touching hers, being warmed by her flesh. She kissed him then, and ran her hands slowly over his body. Javan's hands trembled as he touched her. He felt greedy and filled with a need to covet, then take. He slipped inside her and forgot everything but the need.

Afterward, she pulled her robe back on, then lay back down to sleep. Javan spent the rest of the night staring at her still form. As the thin wedge of morning lightened the sky, Javan noticed her arms. Before, they had been hidden by the sleeves of her robe; now they lay stretched out over her head. The sleeves had slipped down, revealing the flesh on the underside of her arms. Terrible scar tissue ran the entire length of both arms, as if hundreds of cuts had been made over and over again. He touched them, thinking they would be hard, but they felt soft and smooth as a child's skin.

He looked down at Aina's face and found she was awake and watching him. He wished he could read her expression as easily as she seemed to read his. She made no comment, but simply sat up, pulling her sleeves down at the same time.

Javan wanted to know what had happened to cause such terrible scars, but he couldn't bring himself to ask. Part of him didn't want to know. Now all he wanted was what he could get from her. He pulled her against him, stroking and touching where he might. She allowed him to caress her and made no effort to stop him, but when he was through, he felt emptier

than before and more alone than ever.

“Are you still here?” Aina asked.

Javan started and then realized he had been staring off into space for some time, caught in his memories. Aina now held a strip of finely woven cloth between her hands and was intently stabbing a needle and thread through it. Under her deft fingers a complex pattern was emerging. The conversations around them had resumed.

A few moments later, a gaunt man scuttled up to the table. His apron was splattered with a variety of stains — some of them recent, too many of them old.

“What can I get you?” the tavern master asked.

“Supper and two drafts of ale,” said Javan. He didn’t hold much hope for the meal and wanted only that the ale not be too sour. The supper was worse than he expected, but the ale wasn’t sour—it was watery and flavorless. But after the meager rations they’d had over the last few days, it was good enough.

The front door swung open, letting in a blast of chilled air and rain. The mist that Javan and Aina had walked through had turned into a full-fledged storm. There was a clatter of boots and sneezes.

“Don’t turn around,” Aina said.

“Why?” asked Javan.

“Your good friends have come back to haunt you.”

Javan frowned. “The dwarfs?”

“In the flesh.”

Javan sat very still and tried to remember all he could about the inn. Had he noticed a back entrance when they had come in? He didn’t recall. Foolish of him. Being tired and hungry didn’t excuse being sloppy.

The tavern once again fell silent. Aina put away her needle and thread, then leaned toward Javan.

“Things are going to get interesting in just a moment,” she said.

“May I help you?” the tavern master asked the dwarfs. He rubbed his hands together nervously.

“We’re looking for a thief,” said Tiber. “He’s short and answers to the name of Javan. His face is clean-shaven, though he might have a beard now. His hair is brown and he has brown eyes.”

“That could describe half the humans in Barsaive,” said the tavern master. “Besides, we don’t get many travelers here anymore. In fact, other than you, the only travelers we’ve seen in over a month are those two sitting at that table.”

Javan groaned softly. If they had hung out a brightly painted sign, they couldn’t have made themselves more conspicuous. Aina was nodding at the dwarfs. Javan wanted to choke her. Run, said the part of him that had managed to stay alive for the last forty-odd years. But there was nowhere to run to.

Then he heard the faint snick of steel being pulled from a scabbard. Sweat broke out along his back.

“Time for running is over, Javan,” said Tiber.

Javan turned slowly around and looked at the dwarf. “Tiber Flamebeard,” he said. “Given up the free life to be a slave to Kender?”

The dwarf frowned. “Those days were long ago,” he replied. “Best let them alone. I have my orders.”

“What a nice lap dog you make. Tell me, do you sit up and beg when he asks you to?”

“Let me run him through,” snarled the blond dwarf. His eyes had narrowed into thin slits and his hand clenched his sword tightly.

Out of the corner of his eye, Javan could see the other patrons of the bar pushing themselves away from their tables and moving to the edges of the room. They looked as if they were trying to fade into the dark corners.

“I think we’d better leave now,” said Aina.

Javan looked at her with disbelief. "Are you mad?" he said.

Aina reached down and picked up her pack, then touched the table top with a strange gesture. At once, the room was blanketed in blackness. Javan felt as if all the air and light had been driven from the room, and there was nothing in the world except the blackness. He felt her hand grabbing his. She pulled him to his feet, but he knocked the table over. She cursed and let go of his hand for a moment. Then her hand was back and she was tugging him along. He staggered and waved his free hand in front of him, afraid he might run into another table.

"Let me lead you," she whispered. "I can see where I'm going."

The cries of the other patrons mingled with the shouts of the dwarfs. Javan bumped into someone, then realized it was one of the dwarfs. Jerking his hand free from Aina's grip, he drew his dagger and grabbed hold of the dwarf. The dwarf struggled, twisting and flailing about with his sword. The tip caught Javan's leg and he cried out in pain, but he didn't let go.

He slid his hand to the back of dwarf's thick neck, then discovered his long braid. It was one of the brown dwarfs—they wore those long braids. And Javan was excited by this. He jerked on the braid, then pulled his dagger across the dwarf's throat, reveling as the blood washed across his hand.

The dwarf gurgled and slid to the floor. Javan barely heard the death rattle, his hearing numb from the wild roaring in his ears. Then Aina was grabbing his hand again. He wondered how she could see. The darkness was pressing against his eyes like a weight, but his other senses were razor-sharp now. He could smell the blood on his hand, the scent of fear from the other tavern patrons, and the faint, musky smell of Aina as she dragged him along.

Then they were out in the night and finally he could see again, but it was still raining and they slipped in the mud and fell.

"Come on," she said fiercely. "We can't stop; they'll be on us any minute."

Aina pushed herself up, then gathered the edge of her robe in her hands and hiked it high enough that it wouldn't trip her as she ran. They dashed through the muddy street, then broke away from the village toward the woods. Someone shouted behind them and Javan swore. They plunged into the forest. Branches smacked their faces. Heavy vines tripped them as they ran. Javan felt as if the vines were malicious hands, grabbing, slowing him down.

It seemed to Javan that they ran for an eternity. His breath was hot and dry in his mouth, and his calves ached.

As they ran, the ground began sloping upward. The trees started to thin, and the rain let up. Javan wanted to find someplace to go hide. Everything in him shouted out to leave Aina and go to ground, to burrow where annoying dwarfs and tortured elves wouldn't bother him. He hated them both at that moment and couldn't decide which he hated more.

Then he saw it. It surprised him that he could see anything in the rain, but there was a cave between one of the crevasses to their right. It was partially hidden by leaves and fallen branches, but it was there.

Javan grabbed Aina's hand and stopped her. He pointed toward the cave.

"We can't run all night," he said. "There's a cave over there."

Aina pulled back, but Javan dragged her along after him. The entrance to the cave was only big enough for one of them to pass through. He shoved Aina through the opening, then he piled branches behind him to hide the cave's entrance.

Javan slipped deeper into the cave. It was dark, but not the same kind of blackness which had enveloped him when Aina had cast her spell.

"We need some light," he said.

"No," Aina said flatly.

“Why not?” he asked, annoyed and impatient now.

“I know where we are and I don’t want to see it. We must leave.”

Javan reached out toward her voice. His hand closed around her upper arm. Deliberately, he squeezed as hard as he could.

“You don’t understand,” he said. “There are three very angry dwarfs out there. One of whom I’ve already had dealings with. So I don’t care that you don’t like it here, we’re staying.”

He gave her arm a shake before he released it.

“Now give us some light.”

She didn’t reply, and for a moment he thought she might just leave him there. Then he heard her murmur, and light burst into the darkness. He threw his hands over his eyes against it at first. Then, as the light filtered through his fingers, he could bear it more. Blinking, he looked around.

They stood at the mouth of a long corridor. The corridor sloped down into the darkness not illuminated by the small sphere Aina held.

“After you,” Javan said.

Aina shook her head. Her mouth was pulled in a thin line, and her eyes turned down slightly. He knew she was shaken, and he was pleased by the thought.

“No,” she said. “I’ll follow.”

They walked down the corridor; the air grew mustier as they went. No sound penetrated from the outside. All Javan heard were the sounds of their footsteps and Aina’s uneven breathing.

Suddenly the corridor bent at a ninety-degree angle, and as Javan rounded the corner, he was astounded by what he saw. They were in a massive room carved from the stone, but this was no natural formation. The walls were smooth with curious glyphs carved into their faces. The ceiling rose up, towering into murky shadows, and he could just make out the

faint outlines of balconies.

This had once been a *kaer*. A massive one at that.

He saw Aina then. She had followed him into the chamber, silently slipping by him. She stood in front of a row of statues lining the far wall, her face frozen of all expression, but tears were slipping down her cheeks.

Her tears surprised Javan, but he found nothing in him to comfort her. He stepped next to her and looked at the statue in front of her. It was a woman; she wore beautiful robes which flowed around her as though blown by a gentle breeze. In her right hand was a staff; her left held a skull. He looked up at the statue’s face. It was Aina.

Chapter Five

Aina stared at the statue of herself. It had been so many years. She'd thought the *kaer* no longer had any hold over her, but as she felt hot tears sliding down her face, she knew she was wrong. It would always hold her like the desperate grip of a dying man.

Javan stood beside her now. For a long time, he looked at the statue. Then he turned toward Aina.

"Who are you?" he asked.

She wiped the tears away with the back of her hand. "I've already told you," she said.

"No," he said. "You've told me your name. You've told what you want me to do. You've even lain with me at night, but you've never told who you are."

"I am nobody," she said. "Not anymore."

"And those scars on your arms? Are they nothing too?"

"Yes," she said, her voice tight with anger. "I owe you nothing, no explanations. You're a thief. You're paid to take things. Nothing more."

She turned away from him. The fear was shooting through

her; he was too close. She was too close, too close to telling him the truth. It was being in this place. The *kaer* where she'd vowed never to return.

But you are here, a voice inside her said. *You knew where you were and still you came back. Maybe you wanted to return.*

Silence stretched between them. Aina looked around the room. It smelled stale from years of disuse. And there was another scent, one she remembered all too well. It was his aroma. Was he here even now? Was this another of his well-laid plans? He was cunning, she remembered. Cunning and brutal and patient. So very, very patient.

"We shouldn't sleep here tonight," she said.

Javan didn't reply.

Aina turned and looked at him. He'd wandered off into the shadows that lined the perimeter of the room. For some reason the sight of his pale face floating in the shadows frightened her.

"I said, 'I think we should leave.'"

"I heard you the first time."

"Well?"

"I don't agree." He reached out and ran his fingers across the carved stone of the wall. Aina remembered the masons carefully carving each glyph. Then she and the other magic users had come forward and cast their spells. They'd been so confident, thinking that they would thwart the Horrors with their carved signs and magical wardings.

"This place isn't safe," she said.

Javan shrugged. "Thanks for the information," he said. His voice was nasty and petulant. He moved further into the shadows.

Aina closed her eyes and tried to stop the memories, but they bubbled to the top of her mind like a pot boiling over. How long had she tried to forget the faces of the people she'd lived with? How many of them had she buried?

"We built this *kaer* a few years after the Therans last made contact," she said softly. Her voice echoed through the cavern, and she sensed Javan's attention.

"There were four of us who fled Wurm Wood," she began. The story bubbled up in her, wanting to be told. "Eventually, we split apart, only to come back together many years later. The building of this *kaer* was what brought us back together.

"It was an ambitious undertaking, or so we thought at the time. We used a combination of techniques for stopping the Horrors and protecting the people inside. We also planned to preserve all that was important about our various societies. We thought that when the Scourge was over, we would emerge fully possessed of all the talents needed to create a new world. One full of beauty and hope.

"We brought together sculptors, painters, musicians, and artisans of all varieties and races. For the first few years after we sealed the *kaer*, we created an amazing world of productivity and communion. It was as if we were recreating the universe of ideas."

Aina stared blindly into space, seeing how the *kaer* had been then. Laughing with Pever Tollins as he carved her features into the smooth white rock. The sounds of the children shouting and shrieking as they played games. The smell of cloth being dyed and bread baking. She was deep into the memory, and it seemed more real to her than anything that had happened since.

"What happened?"

Aina shuddered and pulled herself back to the present. The air was no longer perfumed by sweet smells of cooking. The walls didn't ring with the shouts of children, and the only legacy of Pever Tollins was his statue of the woman who had killed him.

Aina turned. Javan stepped from the shadows and looked at her as if seeing her for the first time.

"They all died," she said, a sad smile played on her lips. "Long before the Scourge was over, everyone in this *kaer* died."

"Except you."

"Yes," she replied. "Everyone except me."



"Why didn't you die?" he asked. What he really wanted to know was: *Why aren't you dead?*

Aina shrugged. "I have no idea," she said. "By all rights, I suppose I should have."

"How old are you now?"

"Approximately five-hundred-and-fifty years."

Javan tried to imagine it. To live for that long and not age or become infirm. He knew that elves lived for a long time, much longer than humans, but he had no idea they lived for this long. Envy shot through him. Perhaps the elves knew something about living and dying that they hid from the rest of the races. His eyes narrowed and gazed at her speculatively.

"You said there were three other elves. What happened to them?"

"They died along with the rest."

"How? How did they die? Did Horrors manage to breach your defenses? Was it disease?"

Aina shook her head. "No," she said. "They killed themselves."

Javan's mouth dropped open.

"You mean to tell me that an entire *kaer*, with the exception of you, killed themselves?"

"Yes."

"That's hard to believe."

Aina turned away from him. "I don't care if you believe me or not," she said. "That's what happened."

Javan reached out a hand to touch her, but then he thought about what she said had happened in the *kaer*, her impossible

age, and the secrets that hung about her like a shroud. He dropped his hand. They stood without speaking for a long time.



Aina was awake. She had been awake for hours, turning over in her mind the events that had led her back here. Maybe she'd been drawn here like a beacon in the night, reaching out, trying to finish what had begun so long ago. Maybe she wanted to come back.

Silently, she rose from her bedroll. Javan was sleeping, his mouth slack, his face impossibly young in the faint light.

She walked to the first corridor leading away from the main cavern. For four hundred years, she had walked these corridors until the floor was worn smooth. It had happened so slowly, almost imperceptibly, that it was only now, upon returning, that she could see the changes.

The corridor sloped down. Aina hadn't bothered to make any sort of light, instead using her memory as her guide. Twenty paces and she turned right. Another five, then into doorway. She gestured and white light burst into the suffocating darkness. It was her old room, where she had learned to hone her magical talents, had fought and loved, and then had lain in such an agony of guilt and self-loathing that even now the thought of it froze her.

"How I've missed you. Did you realize I was drawing you here?"

Aina trembled. It was him. He was here. Behind her. She fought for control over her fear, but it wriggled and slipped about in her stomach and made the hair on the back of her neck rise.

He was closer now. She could feel the hot breath, the sweet scent which was both alluring and repellent.

"Don't you remember what fun we had?" he asked.

"No," she whispered.

"How can you say that?" he asked, mocking her. "Such an explosion of pain and suffering. The best part was that you were responsible. Doesn't the irony of it thrill you? You were supposed to be their protector. To help hide them from the Horrors. Did you really think that I wouldn't have a way to find you? That your magic could keep me out? I admit I was a bit greedy at first, but oh, how delicious those later times were.

"Their fear. Your suffering. And it went on for so long. Even now I can taste your pain, Aina. It's still so fresh after all this time. What a delicacy you've turned out to be. And I see you've brought me more delights. That thief, Javan, he'll be quite a morsel. He's so nasty and yet so vulnerable. When you get through with him, may I have the leftovers? But of course I can. I know how generous you are."

His hands settled on her shoulders, then slipped up around her neck. Aina felt her pulse racing under those long, bony fingers with their razor-sharp nails, and she tried to keep her breathing even. It had been so long since he'd been this obvious.

Or she so foolish.

The hands slid down her arms and to her waist. They tightened and pulled her backward. She closed her eyes and forced herself not to scream. He liked hearing the fear as much as tasting it. The shape behind her changed; she could feel it moving and shifting against her back. Bile forced its way up her throat, and she tasted the bitterness of it in her mouth.

"That troubadour in Bartertown, did you know how much you hurt him? I confess, I hurt him much more before it was all over, but still, you were most effective. He's dead now.

"What? You're shaking? Didn't you expect it? You cared for him a little, I expect, or I wouldn't have such a marvelous sense of well-being. Yes, I only get that from you. But maybe

you didn't care at all, and that's why he died.

"That's why you're so special to me. And why I will never let you go. I know your plan, but you will fail because you crave this relationship as much as I do."

Aina moaned and collapsed to her knees. The hands fell from her waist. She shook with such a force that she thought she might shatter into pieces. Lying with her head pressed against the cold stone, she bit her lips until they bled, trying to stop the tears streaming silently from her eyes. Behind her, she heard his sighs of delight, and despaired.

Chapter Six

Javan was sleeping. From the shadows, Aina watched him and wondered how long it would be before he was dead. Or worse. She shut her eyes.
"Aina."

Her eyes flew open. Before her she saw a young girl, a child she'd known once. Pretty, with long auburn braids and brown eyes. The cavern was different now. It looked like it had when they had created it. Full of promise and hope and light.

Aina knew this was one of his tricks. He'd played it on her before, but she couldn't stop herself from being entranced by it.

"What are you doing?" the child asked. Her name was Beatrice, Aina remembered suddenly. And she liked honey cake more than anything else in the world.

"Just sitting," Aina replied.

"It's your turn to tell us stories," Beatrice said. "Did you forget?"

It was just as it had been, when it had started again all those years ago. Aina was remembering more now. The coarse

weave of Beatrice's dress. Her knees were scabbed over, a result of playing Sticks and Tigers with the other children.

Beatrice grabbed Aina's hand and pulled. Laughing, Aina got to her feet.

"Where do you want to hear them?"

"Up there." Beatrice pointed toward one of the balcony windows. Several small heads were at the window, then disappeared in a burst of giggles.

Beatrice rolled her eyes. Aina laughed and let herself be led to the waiting children.



"One more and that is all," Aina said. "What will it be?"

"Wyrn Wood," said one child. The others hastily agreed. "Wyrn Wood," they each said.

"Something else, perhaps," Aina suggested. "The story of how Jaspree saved the white hart?"

"No, tell us about Wyrn Wood."

It was just their curiosity, she told herself. They had all been born in the *kaer*. The only trees they knew were carefully tended to provide food. It was orderly and contained. Nothing like the wild nature of Wyrn Wood. To them, a forest was as mythical as the blue sky.

She straightened her robes and shifted on the low stool. *Tell them how it was before*, she told herself. *Don't think about the bad memories, just remember the good things.*

"Wyrn Wood," she began, "was the center of the world for the elves. No other place in Barsaive was as beautiful as Wyrn Wood. Trees soared into the heavens, some so high that it was impossible to see their tops. Flowers of every type imaginable grew there. Some dripped from vines, others grew on bushes, while some sent up dainty stalks which collapsed under the weight of their lush blooms.

"The air there was sweet and carried the smell of the places

the wind had been. Sometimes the winds would whisper stories into the ears of some of the elves and they would feel the need to go see those places the wind told them about."

"That's why you came here," said one of the boys. "The wind told you a tale."

"Yes," Aina replied. "The wind told me all about your parents building this *kaer*, and I had to see it for myself."

"The Queen, tell us about the Queen," prompted Beatrice. This was her favorite part.

"The Queen was very beautiful," Aina began slowly. "She lived in a great palace made from six of the largest trees in the forest. Such a masterful trick of magic was her palace that all who saw it were awed. There seemed to be no end to her power. She and her court ruled the forest and all the creatures that lived there for many years.

"Then the Therans came and told the Queen about the coming of the Horrors. They offered the gift of the *kaer* to the elves to keep them safe. Some of her court felt they should accept the Therans' plan, but the Queen declined. She would not bow to Theran authority."

"What happened to the elves?" asked one girl.

"We don't know," Aina answered. "Perhaps they are safe from the Horrors as we are, but they may have been overrun altogether by now. It is a mystery we shall never know, not until after the end of the Scourge."

"Is it awful when the Horrors get you?" asked Beatrice.

"Yes," replied Aina. "It's the worst thing in the world."

"Tell us about the Horrors," asked one of the children. The children leaned forward for her answer. No child in the *kaer* had ever seen a Horror. They were sheltered by their parents and the magical wardings on the *kaer* from any personal experience.

"No," said Aina. "I'll not talk about the Horrors."

With that, Aina snapped out of her memory. She fled the

room, angry that she'd allowed herself to be swept up in this torture. Those children were all dead now. This was the torture he had devised for her.

She dashed into the main cavern. The scene had changed again. It was one of the meeting days many months after she'd told the children about Wyrn Wood. Most of the adults were gathered in the center of the room. Only one statue had been completed at that time and it looked forlorn standing by itself.

Aina knew what was about to happen, but she couldn't stop it. It was as if she were scrying this memory, there were only images, no sound. Her shouts froze in her throat. She watched helplessly as the *kaer* leaders soundlessly discussed the mundane matters of the day. Then slowly, as if she were moving through water, she turned to the balcony where she'd told the children stories.

A shriek tore through the air and abruptly there was sound again. Shrill, terrified screaming cut through the adults' conversations. Everyone turned toward the balcony. Beatrice appeared, running as if pursued. She looked over her shoulder once, then leapt from the balcony.

For a moment she hung in the air, appearing weightless and insubstantial as a Windling. Then she fell. There was a hard thud as her body hit the stone floor. Aina reached her first. Beatrice's arms and legs were splayed out at unnatural angles and her torso was twisted to one side. A trickle of blood ran from her nose. Her eyes stared unseeing, blank and empty.

Then a scream came from the opposite end of the room. Aina turned and saw Beatrice's mother pushing through the crowd. Her eyes were wild, and her mouth contorted into a grimace. She pushed past Aina and dropped beside her daughter's body. Gathering Beatrice into her arms, she began to rock back and forth, saying over and over that everything would be all right.

Aina stared as the blood began to run from the back of

Beatrice's head, dripping through her mother's fingers and pooling onto the floor. She looked up to the balcony. In the shadows there she saw a movement. It was only for an instant, but she knew with all the certainty in her that it was him. That he had followed her here, had breached the protections of the *kaer*. And now he would make her pay for leaving him.



Beatrice's death shook the community. Existence in the *kaer* had been bucolic, happy despite their reason for being there. But now a pall had been cast over the community. Half-buried fears, prejudices, and resentments flared up.

With each passing day Aina found herself drawing away from everyone. She knew that her fondness for Beatrice was why he'd chosen to kill her. Aina sought to protect the other children through belated caution.

Gradually, Beatrice's death was put down to an accident. The people wanted to forget, to turn their eyes away from the possibility that something else was there in the *kaer* with them. As for Aina, she was willing to let the incident pass if it kept anyone else from getting hurt. But she knew it wouldn't last. Another person would die, and then another, until she found the courage to stop him herself. Courage she didn't possess.



In her wildest imaginings, Aina never expected him to be so methodical, so deliberate. The next death happened more than two years later. She had just begun to relax, to think that maybe it had all been a trick of her imagination.

This time it was one of the women. She was found hanging in one of the storerooms. When her body was examined, it was found that she had been pregnant. Eventually, gossip circulated that the father wasn't her husband and she had

hanged herself rather than face him. The husband and the supposed lover were both found dead many months later.

That was how it continued for the next two hundred and fifty years. A death here, another there, a gradual thinning of the *kaer's* population. The groups became more factious and less trusting, often breaking down by race. The atmosphere was so poisoned that the continuing deaths were often explained as murders by other races. Though the deaths always appeared to be self-inflicted, that didn't stop the rumors.

Aina was the only one who knew what was really happening, and that gave him even more satisfaction. He started coming to her at night, gloating over his success with his latest victim. And still she couldn't — wouldn't — stop him.



But I couldn't have done anything, she told herself. He was much too powerful.

Lie to Javan. Lie to everyone else, but don't lie to me.

That part of herself she had almost forgotten came to her then. It spoke with her father's voice. He had always been very serious about the truth. Even if it hurt. Especially if it hurt. And it hurt all right. The pain welled up, fresh again, as if she were feeling it for the first time.

She knew he would like it, but she didn't care at that moment. Because she was telling the truth. She could have stopped him. Or at least have tried to, but she hadn't. It didn't really matter why now.

But this time, this time she was going to stop him, before everything spiraled out of control again.

Her eyes snapped open. Javan was still asleep, and she was back in the cavern in the present. She rose and went to wake him.

Chapter Seven

He was dreaming about treasure. Mountains and mountains of treasure and all of it was his for the taking. Then a ghost from the past came and grabbed him from behind, pulling him kicking and crying away. Taking him away from what he loved.

"Wake up, Javan," Aina said. "Wake up now."

He pushed her hand away. The feelings were still there from the dream, but he didn't want them. Not in connection with her. Since they'd arrived at the deserted *kaer* and he'd discovered the statue, his feelings toward her had changed. He still wanted her, but now it was tinged with something else. Compassion, even sympathy, for how tortured she looked when she'd told him about what had happened in the *kaer*.

The thief in him loathed these feelings. Wanting her was fine. Caring about her was something else.

He pushed himself up and began rolling his bedding together. "I'm going to explore the rest of the *kaer* today," he said.

"There's nothing to take any more," she said.

“Oh?”

“Yes,” she replied. “When I left, I took everything of value.”

“Well, maybe you left a little something here in case of emergencies.”

“Do you really think I would willingly come *back* here?” she asked, her voice tense. “I thought you were venal, not stupid.”

He dropped his pack and rose to his feet. They were a few feet apart. He closed the distance and poked his finger into her face.

“You hired me because I’m a thief,” he said. “I don’t apologize for what I am. At least I didn’t leave a pile of corpses behind me.”

“I suppose Kraag doesn’t count.”

They stood facing each other, still as the statues ringing the room. Aina’s face was impassive, giving away nothing. Javan swore and turned away.

“Maybe it would be better for you to find another thief to help you get into Alachia’s castle,” he said.

He heard Aina take a step closer. “No,” she said. “You’re the best there is. And it would take too long to find someone else.”

He squatted and began to tie his possessions together. “That’s not my problem,” he said. “I have other things on my mind. Like Tiber Flamebeard and his friends. You remember them — they almost filleted us at that tavern.”

“But we escaped them,” she said. “And as I recall, you almost decapitated one of them. A nice piece of business, if you like that style. And I think you do.”

Javan smiled at that. He remembered the way the blood felt on his hands and the way the dwarf had squirmed in his grasp.

Aina sat down next to him.

“We will have to dispose of them before we reach Blood

Wood anyway,” she said. “We can’t have them blundering along behind us, giving everything away.”

He felt dazed, listening to her. Her voice was low and hypnotic, or maybe it was really the thought of slipping his knife in Tiber’s neck. He glanced at her. Her eyes were shining with some strange emotion, and the passion rose up in him. Pulling her close, he sank his hands into her braid, loosing her hair from the restraint.

His hands stroked her back and slid up to her neck. Her pulse beat strong and slow beneath his fingers as he kissed her.



They made good time that day, despite the late start. Aina set the pace; Javan concluded she wanted to put as much distance between herself and the *kaer* as possible. When they stopped that night, Javan noticed she was restless.

She was embroidering the same piece of fine linen. Fascinated, he watched the needle dart into and out of the cloth, the pattern taking shape beneath her fingers complex and mesmerizing.

“Tell me about yourself,” she said without taking her eyes from her work.

Javan was surprised. She had never asked him about himself. Never even seemed interested...which had suited him fine.

“There isn’t much to tell,” he said.

“Then make something up.”

He laughed. “I’m not a troubadour. I have no flair for the dramatic.”

Aina snorted. “Slitting a dwarf and an ork from ear to ear isn’t what I would call shy,” she said. “Tell me this: when did you first kill someone?”

Javan leaned back and clasped his hands behind his head. The stars were especially bright this night. Even the light Aina

provided didn't dim them.

When did I first kill? he wondered. It had been with him for so long it was like his arm or leg, a part of him, familiar and comfortable. Then the memory bubbled up inside him.

"I was about ten," he began. "It was my second attempt at thieving. My first time had gone very smoothly. I was lucky. The silver leapt into my hand like a frog into a pond. It was over in a few moments. But I remember how I felt after, filled with this lightness and a hunger. I wanted to do it again."

"The second time, I snuck into the tavern. It was early in the morning, an hour or so before sunrise. I knew the owner hid his silver in a bag under a loose rock in the kitchen floor."

"How did you know that?" Aina asked.

"You would be surprised what children know," he replied. "Adults seem to think children are like animals. That we see but don't understand and can't speak."

"Where were your parents?" she asked.

Javan shrugged. "They didn't mind what I did as long as I wasn't underfoot. I was a late child. My mother was surprised when she discovered she was to have me. She had thought herself too old to conceive."

"Have you any siblings?"

"Yes," he replied. "A brother and a sister. They were much older than me."

Aina rested her sewing on her lap. She was looking at him with her dark eyes. He wondered what thoughts were hovering there just out of his sight.

"Did you have any brothers or sisters?" he asked.

She looked down at her sewing and began to pick out a row of impeccable stitches. "No," she said. "It was just me. But you haven't finished telling me about the tavern keeper and his silver."

Javan rolled onto his stomach and began to draw a pattern in the dirt with his fingers. "I went into the tavern, then

to the kitchen. It was so quiet I could hear my blood pounding in my head and my heart sounded like a drum. I stood there in the kitchen for a while, waiting to see if anyone had heard me, but it was quiet. I could even hear the snoring of the cook. He slept in a little alcove off the kitchen.

"I went to the stone and tried to move it, but it was too tightly wedged in for my fingers. I looked around and found a knife. It popped the rock right out. In the dark hole was a lovely bag full of silver pieces. They called out to me; they wanted to be part of me."

Javan smiled then, slow and sensual as if he were running his hands through the silver at that moment.

"It was foolish of me I know, but I just couldn't resist opening the bag and touching the silver. I guess I must have made some sort of noise, because the next thing I knew, the cook was grabbing me by my collar. The silver flew everywhere as he shook me, demanding to know what I was doing."

"I knew that he was going to wake everyone with all his noise, but that wasn't what bothered me. He'd made the silver go away, and that I couldn't forgive. I had the knife and in that instant I knew what I had to do. I cut his hand to make him let me go. He dropped to his knees and began crying. The tavern owner and a few of his guests woke up about this time, and I heard them coming toward the kitchen. That's when I drew the knife across the cook's neck."

"It was just like slicing into a pig when we killed them during harvest. He made a sucking sound and grabbed his throat. But I knew he didn't have a voice now — I knew from the pigs how to cut deep — so he couldn't tell on me. I ran then and jumped out the window."

"There was a stream nearby where I washed off the blood. My hands were shaking and the cold stream made my teeth chatter. But I kept remembering how it felt to run the blade across his throat."

Javan smiled then, wistfully. “It’s never been the same since. I think that was the best. But sometimes it’s close. Of course, I still wanted the silver.

“I hid the knife and then slipped back into my house. Of course, nobody could talk about anything else for weeks afterward. They never did find out who killed the cook.”

Javan shifted and looked back at Aina. She was still watching him. If his story affected her, she gave no indication. It annoyed him. Anyone else would have been horrified. Or at the very least, nervous about spending time in his company. She looked as if she could walk over corpses and not turn a hair.

“Did you ever go back and get the silver?” she asked.

“Yes,” he replied. “Much later. The tavern owner eventually got tired of sleeping with his profits and started keeping them in the kitchen again. Of course, by then I was older and ready to make my way in the world.”

“Then no one ever knew,” she said.

“No one knows. Except you now.”

“Ah.”

She looked down at her embroidery and began to sew once more. Javan watched her until he grew tired and fell asleep.

Chapter Eight

Aina had grown accustomed to watching Javan sleep. Since she rarely slept for more than a few hours at a time, it became her habit to watch over him until he woke. Often, she wondered if her feelings for him weren’t tinged with more maternal emotions. As if he were a beloved, but very bad, seed.

Sleep was something she missed. At first she’d stopped because of the dreams; later it became habit. Now it served her in good stead. It wasn’t fear that kept her awake. At least not fear of Javan.

She wasn’t sure if his story about killing the cook was true or not, but it didn’t matter either way. He wouldn’t try to harm her until he had what he wanted.

“Well, he’s certainly full of surprises, isn’t he?”

Aina stiffened. The voice was coming from across the small clearing. She glanced at Javan, but he slept on unaware.

Then she saw *him*. He stood at the edge of the small circle of light she’d cast. His dark brown robes blended with the shadows, the hood drawn up, hiding his face. But she didn’t

need to see his face to know who it was.

“Go away,” she said. Her voice trembled and caught, sounding small and childish.

He stepped closer. His cloak swirled around his body; underneath the robe, his form writhed and changed. Aina wanted to run, but she knew it wouldn’t do any good. He could come to her as he willed, and there was nothing she could do to stop him.

“You really don’t want me to leave, do you?”

“Yes.”

A low chuckle came from him. He walked toward Javan and stood over him. Aina was glad he’d gone to Javan and not her.

“What an interesting revelation,” he said. “Quite bloodthirsty, but I’m not surprised that that appeals to you. Tell me, do you think one of my brethren helped him along, or do you suppose he’s bent this way naturally?”

Aina was trying to think of some reply when one of his thin white hands raised and gestured for her to keep silent.

“It doesn’t really matter,” he said. “He’s not afflicted by a conscience — I might be able to use that to my own ends. I shall give it some thought.”

He strolled from Javan to stand in front of Aina. Reaching down, he tilted her face up to his. She shut her eyes, trying not to look at him. The hand tightened then, the long, razor-sharp nails slicing into her chin.

Then his voice came again, close enough that his breath was hot against her skin.

“But you’re not like him,” he said. “Our murderous little thief can but dream of true perfidy. He’s evil enough, in a common sort of way, but I think you may teach him so much more.”

“Stop it,” she said, pulling from his grasp. She put her hand to her neck and felt blood there. “I’m not proud of what I’ve

done.”

“Yes, I know. That’s what makes it so delicious. Neither one of you can stop yourself, but only one of you knows the difference between right and wrong.”

The robe brushed her feet, and she shuddered.

“You are my finest creation,” he began.

“I’m not your creation,” she said.

“Forgive me,” he laughed. “Maybe I should say, my finest creature.”

“You’ll say whatever you want. When have I ever been able to stop you?”

“Ah, a question of semantics. Could you stop me? Or do you really not want to? Perhaps it’s what you fear — and we both know what that is, don’t we? Shall I draw back the sky and show it to you to refresh your memory?”

Aina threw up her hand. “No!”

“Cowardice,” he said. “So unlike you. Except for this one thing. You know I like it when you tremble. Your fear is such a rare treat for me these days. The others are but a prelude. They only sharpen my appetite for what only you can give me. Who would have thought I could be so faithful. So devoted.”

Aina didn’t answer. Long ago, she had learned that these conversations were merely his way of playing with her. If she continued, he would poke and prod until she was flooded with terror, hopeless and unreasoning. Then he would have what he wanted. Better for her to wait and try and control herself until he got bored and went away. At least for the time being.

She felt his robe brushing against her feet as he paced back and forth in front of her. Then his lips were at her ear, and he began to whisper to her. A litany of tortuous images designed to unnerve and rattle her.

“You don’t want to play,” he said at last. His voice was sulky. “There are a lot of things I could call you, but never a bad sport. It’s almost dawn. Your little thief will be waking soon. I think

I'll surprise him with a special dream. Think how he'll want to leap into your comforting arms when he awakes."

Then he licked her neck up to her ear. The path of his tongue burned her like acid, and she gasped in pain. He laughed.

"A pyrrhic victory, but I'll take it."

Then he was gone.

Chapter Nine

Treasure. Mounds and mounds of it lay before him. Avarice swept over him and he wanted it all. The feel of the cool gems, the gradual warming of gold against his skin, the distinctive clinking sound of silver coins rubbing against each other.

He stepped forward to take it, but his way was blocked. It was that damn elf; she was ruining everything.

"It's not real," she said. "It's a trick."

He didn't believe her. After all, she'd told him lies. He was sure of that. Besides, he could see the treasure and it was as real as he was.

"Get out of my way," he said, pulling his dagger.

She took his arm and shook him. "You're dreaming, wake up."

He stabbed her then, thrusting his blade into her heart up to the hilt. A grimace of pain crossed her face. She staggered back and reached for the dagger. With a slow steady pull, she removed it. Her robe was ripped, and a bloody stain spread from the wound.

She smiled at him then; her teeth, startling white against her dark skin, looked feral and deadly.

“Did you think this could stop me?” she asked, gesturing with the dagger. The wound had closed now, leaving a thick, raised scar. “I’ve lived through more than your human eyes could ever see.” She tossed the dagger aside with a flick of her wrist.

“Would you like me to show you true power?” she asked.

He was frozen to the spot. Her teeth were growing, becoming more elongated and pointed. They were sharp as wolves’ teeth. She was beginning to change too. Her body was expanding, blocking out the light. Arms sprouted from her torso like tentacles, then grabbed him in their merciless grasp.

She pulled him close.

“Give us a kiss,” she said.



Javan’s eyes snapped open. He lay very still for a moment, trying to shake the dream. No, the nightmare. It was cloudy, and he couldn’t tell what time it was. Aina was sitting next to him, and when he saw her, he recoiled. A flash of pain crossed her features, then her smooth mask dropped back in place.

The dream was still with him, vivid and real. He could still see the treasure, almost taste her blood where his dagger had stabbed. The slippery feel of her arms on him, cold as snakes. Javan shoved himself up, avoiding Aina’s gaze.

He didn’t say anything as he gathered together his belongings. The only sound was the wind as it blew through the leaves.



They traveled quickly that day. The forest thinned out to rolling hills covered in fields of grasses. Javan knew they were approaching the Serpent River where Aina had said they

would take a boat to the edge of Blood Wood.

The dwarfs were ahead of them now. Javan was amused that he was pursuing his pursuers. That night, they even skulked up to the dwarfs’ camp and listened to their conversation.

The fire the dwarfs had built burned hot with almost no smoke. A rabbit was being turned slowly on a spit. Javan’s stomach growled as a whiff of their dinner floated to him. Tiber was sharpening his sword with a piece of whetstone, working the blade slowly and methodically between his grizzled hands until he achieved the exact edge he wanted. Javan admired Tiber’s skill, then he shivered at the thought of that sword sliding into cringing flesh. Particularly his own.

This reminded him of his dream, and he glanced at Aina. She was watching the dwarfs with her impassive face. The shadows had gathered around her, obscuring her form. It reminded him of something, but he couldn’t remember what.

“Do you think we’ll catch them tomorrow?” This came from the brown dwarf. He looked sad and angry at the same time.

Tiber shrugged his shoulders. “I am not sure. Their trail has gone cold since we left the village. He was with that elf, though, which complicates things. I know nothing of her, but they were heading north toward Blood Wood, so perhaps that is their destination.”

“Why would they go there?” asked the blond dwarf. His blue eyes had faded to white in the fire light. “The elves in Blood Wood are corrupt. At least, that’s what the elves who didn’t stay in Blood Wood say. What would they want there?”

“Perhaps to join them.”

“Why would anyone want to do that? It is madness. Have you seen them?”

Tiber shook his head. The blond dwarf leaned forward and whispered his next comments. “I was in attendance on

King Valurus when Alachia's court came for one of their visits. The queen was surrounded by her courtiers. As Valurus approached, they opened their circle so he might meet her. I have never seen a more beautiful or profane sight. The sight of her was burned into my mind, though I've tried to forget it over time.

"Her skin was pale as milk, her hair looked like fresh minted copper, and her sapphire eyes held such promises, but from her flesh protruded thorns. They ripped through her soft skin without mercy. Blood welled up and slowly dripped to the floor off each tip.

"The worst of it was how I felt when I saw her. I wanted her and I wanted to feel those thorns ripping my flesh. She glanced my way and smiled at me as if she knew what I was thinking. I felt like she had opened my soul and searched through my most personal thoughts."

Javan rolled his eyes. A poetic dwarf, how ridiculous. He glanced over at Aina, to see her reaction. Her mouth was pulled into a thin line, and she looked old. She was staring blankly, and it appeared to Javan that she was seeing something beyond the dwarfs. He wondered what she knew about the elves and what had happened in Blood Wood.

He laid a hand on her arm, motioning for her to back away, but she pulled from his grip and continued to stare at the dwarfs. Then he tugged on her robe, and her head snapped around. The look she gave him was so full of loathing he recoiled. Immediately, she looked contrite and reached out to him, but he scooted backward. Silently, they made their way from the dwarfs' camp back to their own.



"When do you think we should do it?" he asked.

"Tomorrow night," she replied.

"So soon?"

"We reach the river day after tomorrow. Do you want to try and avoid them on-board? Or perhaps have them make a scene in the middle of the town? There will be Blood Warders there. I want to avoid drawing more attention to ourselves."

He looked at her pointed ears and elongated eyes. "Well, you'll certainly fool them. No one will ever suspect that you're an elf."

"With my hood up and you doing the talking, there's no reason they will suspect me being anything other than a woman."

Javan lay on his back and looked at the stars. The night was clear, and it seemed to him as if the dark was swallowing him whole. He didn't know where he left off and the sky started. The longer he looked the more intense the sensation became. Finally, he shut his eyes to stop the feeling, but it lingered and came to him later in his dreams.



He was floating in space, gliding along the stars. They shimmered and danced just out of his reach, their glow as bright as diamonds. He knew if he came just a little closer, he could take them for his own.

Then there was a rending sound. The sound of tearing cloth mixed with the wail of a thousand souls. Javan turned and saw that the very fabric of the sky was torn open. He could see into the astral plane, the colors so bright they blinded him for a moment.

Inside the colors was a blackness. It began to pulse, then extruded tentacle-like appendages that reached and probed. It began to grow, and as it grew the blackness swallowed up the colors until it spilled out of the astral plane into the sky.

Javan realized that it was trying to consume the world, and the thought of that appealed to him. He floated toward the darkness with his arms outstretched, wanting to embrace

it like a lover.

“Come to me,” it said. “Accept my gift.”

It swallowed him then, and in that instant, he felt himself merging with the darkness and he rejoiced.

Chapter Ten

The thief tossed and moaned in his sleep. Aina had stopped trying to rouse him. A dream had him deep in its grasp. She suspected that this was the Horror’s doing, and she gnawed at her thumb while waiting for him to wake.

He looked very young in his sleep, his mouth slack and soft. She wondered if he had looked this way as a boy. The loose woven blanket had slipped down and bared his chest. He was smooth and hairless as a child; the muscles across his abdomen expanded and contracted rhythmically as he breathed.

She pulled the blanket back up over his chest and tucked it around his neck. Her hand lingered for a moment and gently touched his cheek. It was warm, and she felt his jaw working beneath the skin. Feelings rushed up then, powerful and overwhelming; she pulled away from him and made herself feel nothing.

“That’s so much better.”

Aina didn’t even bother to look up. It was him. He knew — he always knew — when to come to her.