

The Guardians: Book One of the Restoration Series

By Christopher Williams

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## The Three Forms of the Mystical Arts

### Magic

Magic is a learned art. All that is required to learn magic is a good mind. The magic user focuses on their need, then casts the appropriate spell. Spells can be as simple as single words or chants, or as complex as multi-person rites and rituals. Magic is by far the most common of the three forms of the Mystical Arts.

### Sorcery

Sorcery, unlike Magic, is something a person is born with. It cannot be learned. Sorcerers are born with the unique ability to control their spirit and use it to manipulate things in the world around them. Touching other people's minds and moving objects with just a thought are some of the more common uses of Sorcery.

### Wizardry

Wizardry is the use of the elements to summon demons. Wizards use their will to control the demon and force it to do their bidding. Wizardry has been forbidden for two thousand years ever since the destruction of the Demon Lord War.

## Prologue

Startled, Kelcer sat bolt upright. He was on a bed, but he couldn't remember lying down. His head pounded and everything was blurry, but after a moment his vision began to clear. He was in a circular room, roughly twenty feet wide. Wooden rafters were maybe six feet above him and they showed the age of the building, as they were ancient and weathered. A way too small fire burned in a tiny fireplace at the end of the bed, but the fire couldn't chase away the cold. Spiral stairs led downward on one side of his bed, and a set of double doors opened onto a balcony on the other side.

The double doors were closed, but he still knew they led to a balcony. Vague memories of stumbling out onto the balcony flittered on the edge of consciousness. How long had he been here? He tried to remember, but his thoughts were disjointed. It was cold, but he could remember several times when this very room had felt like an oven. Summer? Had he been here that long?

The more he tried to focus his thoughts, the more they slipped away. Reaching up to scratch his chin, he screamed and thrust himself back away from the horrible vision. Only then did he realize it was his own hand. Three fingers on his right hand ended not in fingernails but in bloody stumps. There were disgusting sores on his hands and forearm, but the worst part was the withered look of his right arm. Glancing down, he let out a small whimper at the sight of his body. Wasted, little more than skin stretched over bones. He was a mess.

How could this be? He was a captain in the King's Guard. That thought surprised him. He knew it to be true, but how had he remembered it, and why couldn't he remember other things?

The memory of the King's Guard started to slip away, and the ragged man clutched at the thought like he was drowning. It was the only thing he remembered and he would not let it go. He closed his eyes and thought on the memory. Here and there, other memories floated up. His pride at being accepted into the Guard. Years spent dutifully serving the King. Suddenly, his eyes popped open and a cold foreboding ran up and down his body. Something along those thoughts was wrong. He wasn't sure what it was, but he knew it was horrible. He wanted nothing to do with those thoughts.

For the first time, he noticed a small desk that sat to the right of the double doors. The desk was small, but covered in papers, with a tiny wooden chair pushed under. Climbing to his feet, he stood beside the bed for a moment, as a wave of vertigo swept over him. He would have fallen but for grabbing the wooden bedpost. He swallowed hard and the dizziness passed, although his poor hands ached from clutching the bedpost.

Stumbling several times, he managed to make it to the desk without falling. He leaned over the desk and shuffled through the papers. That cold sense of foreboding came, stronger this time.

The papers on the desk were covered in lines of text, but in many different styles. The

writing changed from one word to the next, but still he knew that he was the author. Once again, he didn't know how he knew, he just did.

Here and there words jumped out at him and he flung the papers away, but it was too late. Memories flooded back. Memories of what he had done. He fell to his knees, weeping. "What did we do?" he cried, his voice little more than a croak. "What have we done?"

More memories flooded back, and now he knew what had caused his madness. He fought hard, pushing away the memories, no longer wanting them. No longer wanting to know, but it was too late.

Sobbing, he climbed back to his feet. The guilt was unbearable. *How can I atone?* was the thought that kept repeating. It was followed quickly by an answer, *You can't!*

Frantic now, he hobbled over to the stairs. He had to get out of the room. He stopped at the top of the stairs and sobbed anew. Ten steps down was a small landing that ended in a heavy wooden door. Even from here, he could see deep gouge marks on the door, and what looked like blood smeared in the gouges.

The panic seemed to rise to new heights as he realized he was a prisoner. Frantically, he looked around. There had to be another way. His eyes came to rest on the double doors, and without hesitating he rushed over as fast as his broken body would allow.

Yanking on the two doors, he was immensely relieved when they flew open. He staggered out onto the balcony, only then realizing that the snow was a foot deep. The wind blew hard and the snow was still falling. The moon was up and the night had the feeling of extreme lateness.

Looking around, his spirits sank as he realized there were no other ways off the balcony. He glanced over the edge of the railing and the vertigo flared up again. He quickly moved back from the edge. It had to be several hundred feet to the ground.

"There's no way out," he said quietly as tears streamed down his face.

"There's still one way."

He frantically looked around for the speaker, but no one was there.

"What way?" he pleaded

"You know." The answer was barely audible, and he wondered if it was real or another manifestation of his madness.

"What way?" he screamed into the wind, but this time there was no answer. What way could there be? He turned and looked back through the double doors. Breathing hard, he shook his head and backed away. He was not going back into that room. Absolutely not! In fact, he would rather die than go back. Just then, he backed into the railing and stopped. Turning, he looked out over the deep blackness and this time there wasn't any vertigo. No dizziness, just a peace. The blackness, as snowflakes floated on the wind, was inviting.

After a moment, he looked around and was surprised to see that he had climbed up on the railing. He stood there, with his back to the balcony, looking out over the black nothingness. It all looked so peaceful.

Perfectly at peace, he stepped forward off of the railing. Closing his eyes, he let the feeling of falling take him.

The wind from the open doors ruffled the papers that lined the small desk. Each paper had one word scrawled across the top: Kelcer.

## Chapter 1

It was a cool morning in the elven city of Solistine as Flaranthlas Eldanari approached the palace. Flare, as he was known, grew more anxious with every step. His excitement sent small tendrils of tension through his stomach.

His grandfather, King Feilolas, was expecting him for lunch to discuss Flare's future. When elves reached their one hundred twelfth birthday, they were expected to make a decision about what path they would follow in life. Flare was only approaching his thirtieth birthday, but he was half-human and therefore had aged faster than full-blooded elves. His appearance was similar to that of a sixteen-year-old human. Like most elves, he was tall, over six feet. But like humans, he had a more muscular build. He had inherited the blue eyes of the elves, but his shoulder-length hair was red while the elves always had blond hair.

His mother, Princess Aliston, had been raped by Flare's father. His father was believed to have been one of the two hundred and seven human dignitaries, who were in Solistine at the time. Unfortunately, she had been unable to identify her assailant, and as a result, all humans had been ordered to leave elven territory. Since that time, elven human relations had deteriorated dramatically.

Flare's choices in life were quite limited. Because he had no father he would not inherit anything. And because he was half human, he could not enter the Elven Guard. At least being the grandson of the king, he would not be asked to become a servant. He would most likely become a teacher or healer, although neither choice remotely interested him.

These thoughts weighed on him as he climbed the steps to the palace. The elven city was built with the palace on a hill in the center. The city had been meticulously laid out with trees lining the streets and growing among and over the houses.

"Well, well, look who it is," said a voice from just to the side of the palace steps. Standing amongst the trees and pillars were a group of elven youths. They were slightly taller than Flare, with long blond hair and blue eyes. Even though they were older, they appeared the same age.

"Uh-oh," Flare muttered. He had never gotten along with the other elven youth, as his humanity was just too obvious a target for them. Trying to ignore them, he continued climbing the palace steps.

An elf named Antholein, stepped up, blocking Flare's path. He was taller than Flare, but slimmer. "What are you doing at the palace?"

"I-I was just going to see my grandfather. He is expecting me," Flare stammered.

"Why would Grandfather want to see you?" asked another voice.

Flare turned to see his cousin, Bantharuis. Bantharuis's father, Yolstice, would succeed King Feilolas to the throne. Bantharuis would one day be king of the elves, and he had a deep hatred of Flare. Initially, their conflicts had only been verbal and easy for Flare to escape from. As time passed, Bantharuis had become more demonstrative and they had almost come to blows on numerous occasions.

“You should not be allowed to live among us,” Bantharuis said quietly, stepping closer. “You know that one day my father will be king, and when he is . . .” he let the words trail off, leaving the threat unspoken.

“You forget that I am half-elven,” Flare said, fighting hard not to stammer. “You and I share the same blood.”

“Your blood is corrupted by your filthy human heritage. Humans are no better than animals. Your conception was proof of that.” Bantharuis voice was cold and ruthless. He took another step toward Flare. “My father will not tolerate the humans like my grandfather has.”

“What is going on here?” said a deep voice from the top of the steps.

Flare had a burst of hope, which quickly disappeared as he recognized the person descending the steps. It was Prince Yolstice, his uncle. The prince looked like Bantharuis, except thicker through the middle. His white robes fit loosely over his shoulders, and he still had the youthful look of the elves.

“What trouble are you starting now, Flare?” Yolstice demanded.

“I didn't do anything. Grandfather is expecting me, but they stopped me and wouldn't let me by,” Flare said quickly, already knowing it was hopeless.

“He's lying, Father. We did nothing, but he tried to start a fight.” Bantharuis said with a wicked grin.

“That not tr-” Flare started to say.

“How dare you call my son a liar?” Yolstice demanded. “You're nothing but trouble. I don't know why Father allows you to live among us.” His voice took on a cold dangerous tone. “Be assured, when I am King, I will not make the same mistake.” Yolstice paused, watching Flare.

Flare knew what he was doing. He was trying to goad Flare into doing something stupid, but Flare had learned to play this game too. “Uncle, the king is waiting for me.”

Yolstice's eyebrow twitched in irritation; Flare knew he hated being called “uncle”. “Get into the palace and stay away from my son.”

Flare darted around them and ran up the steps, his heart beating rapidly. These incidents were becoming more common, and he was starting to worry what would happen when his uncle became king.

He was still shaking a little and breathing hard, as he entered the palace.

The palace was rectangular, longer than it was wide, and built around a huge outdoor courtyard. As long as the weather permitted, the king held court outside. The palace was lavishly decorated with elven murals and paintings. Ornamental pillars supported the roof that was high above the floor. Sections of the palace were kept open to allow in light and water. In these sections, plants were scattered along the hall and among the rooms, and ivy grew around some of the pillars.

There were a large number of elves in the palace. Some of them were servants who were performing their usual duties. Guards moved along the hallways and stood in doorways. Elven nobles were standing and talking in small groups. Off to Flare's left, a couple of elven magicians were sitting and talking quietly on a bench.

Flare paused to regain his composure. The anxiety of the confrontation slowly eased up, but it was replaced with another anxiety. What would his grandfather say about his decision?

He passed through the inner doorway and into the courtyard. The courtyard was an elaborate garden where the elves had spent years growing the plants and trees into just the right

patterns. In the middle of the garden, the elven throne rested upon a dais. The builders had carved the throne from the ancient oak tree that dominated the center of the garden. The king always enjoyed holding court in the courtyard.

Flare's grandfather, King Feilolas, was standing about halfway down the steps talking to a small group of three or four elven nobles. Flare did not recognize them, but they were apparently discussing something of importance, because two of the nobles appeared to be arguing with the king.

Flare moved closer, so he could hear what was being said. Just as he was getting close enough to make out the words, his grandfather caught sight of him and said, "Flare, I'm glad that you're here. Please go around to the other side of the garden and wait. I will be there in just a few minutes."

"Yes, Grandfather," Flare said, moving to the other side of the dais. Disappointed, he would have liked to find out what was troubling the nobles. It had seemed rather important.

He walked slowly around the garden, observing the plants. Unfortunately, he did not get to come the palace very often. Incidents, like the one that had happened earlier with his cousin, had become all too frequent. So he had just avoided the palace; it made life easier.

He soon came to a series of steps that led upward to the wall that was on the opposite side of the courtyard from the main entrance. Ascending the steps slowly, he went over what he planned to say to his grandfather. He had been working on his little "speech" for about two weeks now, but he was still nervous. In fact, the anxiety was close to making him sick.

When he reached the top of the steps, he noticed a table off to the side that had been set up for lunch. He had not noticed it before. Flare walked over and sat down. Trying to wait patiently was almost impossible but what other choice did he have? So, he sat there, enduring the wait and anxiety, until finally the king appeared.

He stood up, as was proper. King Feilolas was approaching his six-hundred birthday, but was in good physical shape. His hair was graying and short, and he had a closely trimmed beard that made him look stern. As he headed toward the table he appeared to be in a good mood.

"Flare, my boy. How are you doing today?" He smiled as he spoke.

"Fine, Grandfather. I hope everything is good with you. I noticed the nobles seemed upset."

"Everything is just fine, Flare," King Feilolas answered, still smiling. "I am pleased that you have made your life choice. I trust it will please your mother and me." He still wore a smile, but his eyes were curious now. Undoubtedly wondering what choice Flare had made.

"I . . . hope so, Grandfather." Flare said, hesitantly.

"Well, we can discuss it after lunch. I hope you're hungry. I had this venison prepared especially for today." The king sat down and Flare followed his lead.

Flare was getting more nervous as they ate, but he managed to keep the conversation moving. They talked about family members, city matters, and even discussed his last hunting trip. He had always loved to hunt and explore the forests, ever since he was a child.

After they finished eating and the table had been cleared, King Feilolas leaned back in his seat. "All right, Flare. Let's talk about your future. As you know, the first son normally is trained to lead the family; however, that will not apply to you. There is the Elven Guard, but my advisors are against you joining due to the strained relations we currently have with humans. So, as I see it, your choices are rather limited." The king paused and gave him an encouraging smile. "What are your thoughts?"

Flare's stomach was doing flip-flops. "Well, after much consideration, I have decided that I would like to become a warrior. I -"

"That could be rather difficult," Feilolas interrupted, frowning. "But I am the king, though," he paused, considering. "I could get you into the Elven Guard, but I do not know how well you would be accepted. That might not be the best idea."

"I had considered the Elven Guard, but as you say there could be problems with that plan. So, I have come up with another solution." Flare paused and took a deep breath, and then the words just seemed to burst forth. "I had hoped that you could use your influence to get me into the Guardians of Telur. They allow foreigners to join."

Telur was a powerful human kingdom that was to the south. Even during the period of strained human-elven relations, an elven ambassador had remained in the capital city of Telur. The capital city and the kingdom shared the same name.

"They are considered to be some of the greatest warriors and perhaps my being there could help improve our relations with the humans," Flare finished, a little breathless.

The smile slipped from King Feilolas's face and his expression hardened. "Flaranthlas, I don't believe that a member of elven royalty should be trained by humans." He shook his head, as if the word "humans" was a curse. "You have never dealt with humans - you don't understand the treachery they are capable of." He sat back in his chair. "No. This is not an acceptable solution."

"But, Grandfather, most of the elves would be happy to see me go. Prince Yolstice would probably help me pack. And you-"

"Be careful what you say about my son. He is your future king." The king seemed to growl the words instead of speak them. "I will not allow you to talk bad about him."

Flare took a deep breath and tried to steer the conversation back to where he wanted. "I'm sorry. I did not mean to insult Uncle Yolstice. I merely meant that everyone might be happier with me gone. Everyone would get what they want."

"The difference is that if you are assigned to one of our posts, then at least you will still be part of the elven kingdom."

"But I am half-human. I know what it means to be elven, but I don't know what it means to be human." Flare was practically arguing with his grandfather, but he didn't even realize it. "I need to understand my heritage, even my human heritage. Wouldn't yo-"

"YOUR HUMAN HERITAGE!" the king bellowed, half rising from his seat. His face wore a furious expression. "You mean the heritage that raped your mother. How dare you even suggest that anything the humans could teach you is more important than your elven heritage?" The king's face displayed anger unlike anything that Flare had ever seen.

"Do you want to know what I was arguing about with the elven nobles when you came in?" the king continued. "I had insisted that you be allowed to join the Elven Guard in some capacity. They were completely against the idea, but I insisted." The king stood and paced back and forth, his face still an angry mask. "Perhaps they were right to begin with," he said, nodding his head. He paused, rubbing his temples, trying to collect himself.

Flare sat quietly in his seat, the blood having drained out of his face at the king's explosion. He would have gladly sunk through the small holes in the chair if they had been larger.

The king finally collected himself and spoke again, this time a little more quietly. "All right, I will allow the magi to test you for magical talent. If you have any, I will insist that you become a magician. If you do not have any magical talent, then you will attend the teachers' academy at Demoreau."



“But, Grandfather, that’s ridic-”

“Do not talk back to me!” the king snapped, returning to his seat. “Go home before I really lose my temper.”

Flare rose and started to step away from the table.

“Come back tomorrow morning,” the king said quietly, as Flare reached the first step. “I want you to think about our discussion, and be prepared to give a different account of yourself tomorrow. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Grandfather,” Flare said, his eyes fixated on the floor.

Flare waited just a moment to see if the king would say anything else, but he just sat there with his hands rubbing his temples. When nothing else was forthcoming, Flare bolted down the steps and across the courtyard. He had never been completely comfortable around his grandfather, but he had never heard his grandfather raise his voice to a family member before.

His grandfather had always been fair with him, and Flare felt humiliated about the meeting. He hadn't expected his grandfather to embrace his decision, but he hadn't expected this.

After leaving the palace gates, he slowed down and headed home. Since his mother was a princess, her estate was only a short distance from the palace. But after his meeting with the king, Flare was in no hurry to get home. He raised his hands and looked at them; they were still shaking from his grandfather's outburst.

He walked slowly over the cobblestone road, considering his options. When he went back tomorrow, he might be able to talk his grandfather into assigning him to the Elven Guard at a distant outpost, but that would only confirm everybody’s belief that he was unworthy. He could dutifully accept the king’s decision and become a teacher, but what would happen when Yolstice ascended to the throne? He could also run away, but he doubted that he would make it ten miles before the Elven Guard overtook him. Perhaps, he thought suddenly, his mother could speak to his grandfather in his behalf. He clung to that hope as he approached his home.

## Chapter 2

Princess Aliston's estates were beautiful, truly fitting for a princess. The two-story house was made out of the smoothest white marble. A seven-foot white brick wall surrounded the residence, more for appearance than protection, since there wasn't any crime in Solistine. A pebble path went from the gate to the front door. Woods, flowers, and grasses surrounded the house and went to within ten feet of the wall.

Servants were going about their daily tasks, with a large number of them working on the grounds. As Flare walked up the path, some of the servants spoke to him, some nodded their heads, and some completely ignored him. He hardly even noticed their reactions. As he had grown up being ignored, he didn't even notice it any more.

He walked up the stairs and through the door, where he was met by Althos. Althos was the chief servant and had always been friendly to Flare.

"Hello, Master Flare. I hope everything went okay with your grandfather."

"Not quite, Althos. Do you know where my mother is?"

"Of course, sir. She is visiting the lady Octura." Octura was expecting her first child and Flare's mother was helping her. "She said she would be back shortly before dinner."

"Thank you, Althos. I'm going to my room. If Mother gets back early, please let me know."

"Yes, sir."

Flare climbed the stairs to the second floor and lay down on his bed. With all the decisions that he had to make, the last thing he wanted to do was fall asleep. But after his draining morning, he fell asleep as his head hit the pillow.

Althos woke Flare at dusk, just in time for dinner. Flare washed his hands and face, and went downstairs.

The dining room was immense. As a member of royalty, Princess Aliston often entertained guests. The table was made of a hard wood and was stained a deep-red brown. Along the walls were extra chairs, used mainly for parties. A number of pictures and paintings adorned the walls, and there were a number of cabinets placed around the room that contained dishes, silverware, and glasses. On one wall there were two ancient elven swords crossed for decoration.

Several servants were bringing in platters of food. Princess Aliston was already sitting at the table. She was one hundred fifty-two years old, but looked like she was twenty. She was slim, as were most elves, and she had waist-length silver-blond hair. She was wearing a long, white dress and a gold necklace. She smiled at Flare as he entered.

"You must have been tired from your big morning with Father. You have been asleep for hours." She looked questioningly at him, "Are you feeling okay?"

"I feel fine, Mother," Flare said, slipping into his chair. "How is Octura?"

"Oh, fine, she should have that baby any day now. But I am more interested in hearing how your day went."

Flare paused while a young elven girl refilled his mother's wine. "Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that too." He paused and took a deep breath. "Grandfather is not pleased with me. I asked him to use his influence to get me into the Guardians of Telur."

Princess Aliston's mouth fell open, and she was momentarily speechless. That was unusual; she didn't surprise easily. "You did what?" After a moment, she regained her composure and said, "Whatever were you thinking?"

Flare's eyes dropped to the empty dishes on the table. "I'm not accepted here. I had hoped that I could see Telur and maybe learn more about my human side. I know nothing about humans. I've never even seen a human." His words seemed to be all jumbled together.

In a disjointed way, he knew he was rambling on, but he couldn't seem to stop. "Humans have been banned from the city since before I was born." He neglected to mention that he was the reason that humans were banned from the city. "I have heard that the Guardians of Telur will accept all peoples into their army, but Grandfather wouldn't even listen to me. I was hoping that you could talk to him and get him to change his mind." As quickly as the words had poured forth, they just as abruptly cut off, leaving Flare nervously watching his mother.

Princess Aliston was silent for a moment, her brow furrowed in concentration. "Flare, I understand your desire to know more about your human half, but I can't help you with this. Once Father makes a decision, it is extremely difficult to get him to change his mind." She swallowed hard. "I'm sorry, but you must deal with this on your own."

"Well, what do you think I should do? Grandfather wants me to become a teacher or healer." He shrugged. "Those are both respectable jobs, but I want to do something great with my life. I want to be known, I want to be a part of history. Do you think I should fight this or give in quietly?"

She shook her head. "You must decide this for yourself. This is your decision. This is your life," she said emphatically. "You must make your own decisions and all I can do is tell you to follow your heart." She paused for a moment, then put her hand on Flare's. "I have always followed my heart. It has sometimes gotten me into trouble, but you don't want to live your life saying 'what if.' You must do what you think is right."

Flare sat through the rest of dinner in silence. He felt torn between two worlds, not sure of which path to follow. He hardly could eat at all. After about twenty minutes of re-arranging the food on his plate, he broke the silence. "Mother, I need to think. May I be excused?"

"Of course."

"Thank you." Flare got up from the table and headed out the back door. He walked among the trees on the back half of the estate. The sound of the wind blowing through the trees was calming. He stopped and sat on a bench.

If he obeyed his grandfather, he would not get to do what he had chosen. Elven youths were allowed to choose what they wanted to do. If their decisions displeased their parents, then their inheritance could be transferred to another sibling. But they were not restrained from following their chosen path. Flare was not due to inherit anything; therefore, there was no reason for him to be denied his wish. But that was exactly what had happened. His grandfather had deliberately refused his choice. Not only that, but Flare suspected he would be forcibly stopped. If he decided to run, he doubted seriously that he would get very far. The Elven Guard knew the forest paths much better than he did, and they had outposts all throughout the forest. They would be able to catch him without any problems. If he was going to run, then he needed a way to get a head start. With this simple thought, a plan began to take shape.

Flare paced the woods all night long. He planned each step of his escape, then he took the time to rethink each step, re-examining it to make sure he had not missed anything.

He returned to the house early the next morning, just in time to bathe and eat breakfast. He quickly got ready and left for the palace. Even though he had planned, and re-planned, this part of his escape, the anxiety ate at him. He had never lied to his grandfather before, and he was afraid that he wouldn't be very convincing. Would his lie be that obvious? Could he manage the

deception?

After a brisk walk to the palace, he stopped on the steps to compose himself. Since he had arrived a few minutes early, he sat on the steps and went over his plan one more time. Lost in his thoughts, he barely noticed the early morning chill. After reassuring himself that there were no obvious problems with his lie, he got up and entered the palace.

At this time of the day, there were very few people about. A young elf was busy sweeping the floor, and nobody else was in sight, except the guards who were always there.

Flare walked toward the courtyard and concentrated on keeping his story straight. Entering, he noticed two things immediately. The first thing was that the courtyard was all but deserted. The second thing was that Prince Yolstice was standing to the right of the King. He had not planned on the presence of his uncle. He had hoped to be able to manipulate his grandfather, but Yolstice would only complicate matters. He took a deep breath and walked to the steps of the dais.

"Flare, you're a few minutes early. That's good. Promptness is a good virtue," the king said quietly. His expression was stern, foreboding. He kept his eyes down.

"Have you reconsidered your conversation from yesterday?" Prince Yolstice asked, his arms across his chest.

"Yes, I have," Flare said, refusing to even look at his uncle.

"You have?" exclaimed Yolstice, and the king raised his eyes to meet Flare's.

Flare had expected to surprise the king, but he had evidently caught both of them off guard. "Yes, Grandfather, I will do as you wish and become either a magician or a teacher. And I would like to apologize to you for the incident that occurred yesterday at lunch." He then deliberately dropped his eyes.

The king beamed. "Good. I don't like arguing with family. I'm glad you have agreed with my wishes."

Yolstice had recovered from his initial surprise. "I'm glad you've changed your mind. I guess we can arrange for you to leave this afternoon. I'll make the arr--"

"Uh, Grandfather," Flare interrupted, "I had hoped that since I'm entering an academy soon, that I could go on a hunting trip. It will be a long time before I can go on another one." The king's face was indifferent, but Yolstice's eyes had narrowed to mere slits. "When my trip is over, I will enter the academy." Flare held his breath. Interrupting the prince was risky; it could very easily re-anger the king. Fortunately, it appeared he hadn't noticed.

"Well, that appears to be reasonable. Where did you intend to go?" the king asked.

Flare had also anticipated this question and was prepared for it. This was crucial to his plan, and his stomach did flips as he continued the lie. "I was hoping to go north and hunt around the Urlist mountain range." Telur was to the south, so by saying that he wanted to go north he hoped to turn aside any suspicion. Once again, the surprise was evident on Yolstice's face, but that was not good in Flare's estimation. If Yolstice was expecting him to want to go south, then perhaps he might have already guessed Flare's plan to run for Telur. Flare reminded himself to be very careful and keep the story straight.

The king considered the request for a moment, then said, "Well, I will allow you to go on the hunting trip, but you probably shouldn't go to the mountains. There have been reports of white dragons in that range. Also, I believe that goblins have come down from the north and entered the edge of the eternal forest. Maybe the south would be safer."

"Well . . ." Flare paused. Everything had occurred as he had hoped, except the smug look

on Yolstice's face. *Damn*, Flare thought, *he's guessed the whole thing*. He considered changing the plan, but that was risky. So, he continued on, "I could hunt and fish along the Black River." The Black River was far to the south, along the edge of the Eternal Forest.

The king said, "That would be much better, I would."

Yolstice interjected, "Father, perhaps a squad of the Elven Guard could accompany him, since he will be so close to the human territories."

"That's probably unnecessary. I have hunted along that river before by myself," Flare said, getting nervous at his uncle's attempt to thwart his plan.

The king turned toward Yolstice. "I tend to agree with Flare. I think a squad of the Elven Guard is way too much."

"But, Father, we have been receiving reports of the humans crossing the Black River and hunting in the forest's edge." He turned toward Flare with a sneer. "I would hate for anything to happen to my *nephew*."

His uncle's "newfound affection" for Flare was winning over his grandfather's opinion. Flare had to think fast. If he was stuck with a whole squad of the Elven Guard, then he wouldn't have a chance to get away. "Grandfather, perhaps one guard would be sufficient for the trip."

Yolstice scoffed, "No, I think that--"

"Yolstice, I think one guard will be sufficient," the king said. "Surely one guard can protect an elf within our own borders." The king turned back to Flare. "It's settled. You can have twenty days for your hunting trip, and I will assign a guard to protect you. When are you leaving?"

"I guess I could leave tomorrow morning," Flare said, his hopes rising.

"Fine. Fine. Why don't you meet your escort at the main gate tomorrow at sunrise." The king seemed rather pleased. "Flare, I am really glad that you had a change of heart. I do not like being angry at family."

Flare smiled at how easily his plan had worked. But now the hard part began; he had to carry out the rest of his escape. He bowed low and said, "Thank you, Grandfather. You don't know how much this means to me." As he turned to leave, it seemed like he could feel the cold emanating from his uncle's stare.

Flare went home and began to pack. He packed several different hunting outfits. The clothes had been nice once, but were rather worn now. The last thing he wanted was to make himself a target while traveling through human territories. The hunting outfits were green and brown and would help the wearer blend into the forest surroundings.

He also got his sword, which he had been given several years ago on his twenty-seventh birthday. The sword was solid but had some dents and scratches. He had received basic instruction on sword fighting, as did all young elven men. When he left tomorrow he would also carry three knives. He would put one on his belt, one in his boot, and one would be strapped to his leg. They were throwing knives, but he couldn't hit a tree if he was standing four feet from it.

He packed ten silver pieces into a small leather bag, which would be worn on his belt. He hid the rest of his money in three small leather bags, which would be hidden on his person. He knew, from tales and stories, that he didn't want people to know how much money he was carrying. Hidden in the three bags were forty-four gold crowns, thirty-two silver scepters, and thirty-six bronze pennies. The coins were all elven, but it was all he had.

Flare went downstairs to have Althos prepare provisions for his trip. He finally found him outside, supervising the servants. "Althos, I need you to prepare provisions for a twenty-day

hunting trip. I intend to leave at sunup tomorrow.”

“Certainly, sir,” Althos said, as he turned from watching the servants working on the lawn. “Oh, by the way, your mother is with the lady Octura. Octura has gone into labor and she should have her baby sometime today.”

“Thank you, Althos.”

Flare spent the rest of the day double checking his supplies and rethinking his plan. The toughest thing was not knowing when he would see his mother or his few friends again. The initial excitement was now turning into anxiety and depression about leaving the only home he had ever known. A deep sadness threatened to overwhelm him at the thought of not seeing his mother for a long time. But the decision was made, and he intended to see the plan through.

Flare arrived to dinner a few minutes late, but was surprised that his mother was not there. She was never late and disapproved when he was slow in arriving. He stopped an elven girl who was setting the table. “Where is my mother?”

“I don’t know, sir. I haven’t seen her.”

“Well, do you know where Althos is?”

“Yes, sir. He is in the kitchen overseeing dinner preparations.”

Flare entered the kitchen and found Althos helping arrange desserts. “Althos, what is keeping Mother? Is everything okay with Octura?”

“No. I understand that she is having a difficult delivery,” Althos answered. “I think your mother will most likely stay with her until everything is over. I’m sorry, but I don’t know when she will be back.”

Flare's heart sank. If his mother wasn’t home by sunup, then he would have to leave without saying goodbye. It would break his heart if he left without getting a chance to see her one last time.

He barely ate any dinner, before retiring to his bedroom. He spent a sleepless night tossing and turning, before he got up and went for a walk. He walked the grounds for an hour; after all, he didn’t know when, if ever, he would be able to return to Solistine.

An hour before sunrise, Flare was dressed in a brown and green hunting outfit. He wore oiled boots that would resist water, and an elven cloak. The elven cloak, made of the finest elven fiber, was enchanted. The cloak was waterproof, and even though it was a thin material, it would keep the wearer as warm as any fur coat could. His sword was strapped to his belt, but it kept getting in his way as he walked. He was not used to wearing it.

Flare found Althos in the kitchen. “Did my mother ever come in last night?”

“Yes, sir. In fact she came down a few minutes ago. She is waiting for you next to the gate.”

“Thank you, Althos. Goodbye.” Relief washed over him. At least he would get to say goodbye to his mother.

Flare left the house carrying his belongings and provisions. His mother was standing next to the main gate, holding the reins to a beautiful, white mare. The horse had been loaned to him from the royal stables, but the stable boy had brought it by earlier than Flare had expected.

“Good morning, Flare,” Aliston said quietly.

“Good morning, Mother,” Flare said, his eyes blurring with tears. “Well, I’m leaving and I’m not sure when exactly I’ll be able to return.”

"I thought as much. Be careful, Flare. Always watch your back, even among those you think are your friends." She paused for a moment and seemed to be searching for words. "Flare, there are so many things I wanted to tell you. Sometimes we allow things to get so tangled and then we can't escape." She paused again, trying hard not to cry. "Things are not always as they seem. Flaranthlas, I love y . . ." She couldn't complete her sentence before she burst into tears.

"I know," Flare said awkwardly, hugging his mother. Her tears lessened after a moment. "I'll be careful, and I promise I'll come back. I just don't know when."

Hugging him, she spoke quietly into his shoulder, "I have to tell you something. I have lied to you about some things." She paused, sighing deeply, "I never meant to keep things from you, but I felt it was necessary to keep both of us safe. And to be honest, I didn't think it would matter."

Flare was confused. "What things?" he started to ask, but his mother cut him off.

"Shh! Just listen. I did what I did because there are people who would harm you if they knew." Still hugging him, her voice dropped so low he had a hard time hearing it. "I lied to you about when you were born."

Flare's forehead wrinkled in confusion. Of all the things he had thought his mother might say, this was not one of them.

"My handmaiden and I were the only two who knew the truth."

His thoughts raced, and he felt dizzy. He remembered his mother's handmaiden, Elanora, but she had died in an accident when he was still a child. "I don't understand."

Aliston continued as if she hadn't heard him, "I left the city and bore you at one of the king's private hunting lodges. I was there in seclusion for four months, with elven guards staying a fair distance away in the forest. The nobles here at the court were glad to see me leave, as they didn't like the reminder of my situation."

Flare was too overwhelmed to get angry about the nobles. He knew full well what her situation had been - pregnant with him.

Aliston whispered, "You were born in the middle of spring, but Elanora and I kept it secret until the first week of summer."

"But why?"

His mother still held him close, as if she were afraid of being overheard. "It's nothing really, just an old superstitious story about a half-elven heir who's supposed to do some really horrible things. The stories mention that the half-elf would be born under the sign of the Prince. It wasn't much, but it would have been enough for some of the elven nobles to plot against you, so I lied."

"Plot against me! I don't understand. You mean they would have tried to kill me?" Flare asked, not sure if he wanted to hear the answer.

"I don't know, but I was not willing to risk it, so I lied about when you were born. You were not born in the second week of the Tree. You were born in the third week of the Prince."

Each of the four seasons had a sign associated with it. Summer was associated with Divinity, and spring was associated with a King or Kingship. Fall was the Knight, and winter was associated with arcane people and things. Each sign was further divided into three sub-signs that were related to the major sign. Each of these three sub-signs were associated with a month, which took one third of the season. Summer was Divinity. It was divided into the Tree for the elven goddess Silverti, the Farmer for the human god Adel, and the Shadow which was for Thal, the God of the Goblins and Trolls. Until now, Flare had always believed that he had been born under

the sign of the Tree in early summer. Spring, or the King, was divided into the Queen, the Prince, and the Scepter.

"The Prince?" Flare asked disbelievingly. It seemed such an insignificant thing to keep from him. Question after question raced through his mind, but they seemed to trip over each other before he could voice them. He did manage to get one out, "Why tell me now?"

"I had to tell you, she said quietly, and then more forcefully she added, "it seemed such a small thing to keep from you. Tell no one. Humans are even more superstitious than the elves. Do not let them know that you were born under the sign of the Prince."

Her voice bore such a fierceness that Flare quickly mumbled his promise to tell no one.

After a few minutes, Princess Aliston disengaged herself. She then wiped her eyes and said, "You should be going, Flaranthlas. You don't want to be late."

Flare climbed onto the saddle and looked down at his mother. She seemed to be on the verge of saying something else, but he wasn't sure that he wanted to hear anymore. "Goodbye, Mother." He then turned and rode out of the gate without looking back once. He was in somewhat of a daze as he rode. *How can you keep a secret like that for so long?*

When Flare arrived at the main city gate, it didn't surprise him to find that his escort was Lenturin. Lenturin was one of Prince Yolstice's private guards and was slightly shorter than most elves. His hair reached just slightly below his shoulders, and he was wearing green hunting clothes. His sword was strapped to his back. Since his uncle seemed to have deduced Flare's plan, he expected his escort to try to stop him.

"Lenturin, are you ready for some hunting?" Flare asked, guiding his horse up next to his escort's. He paused long enough for one more brief glimpse of the city of Solistine.

"Of course, Flaranthlas," Lenturin said politely, smiling the whole time.

Flare was committed now. He could no longer turn back; all he could do was carry out his plan. With a deep sigh, Flare and Lenturin headed out of the main city gate of Solistine.



### Chapter 3

For as long as could be remembered, the Black River had stood as the boundary between humans and elves. It took Flare and Lenturin six days to reach its banks. During the trip, the only words spoken were spoken out of necessity. They rode side by side, set up camp, and cooked while exchanging the fewest words possible. Lenturin stayed to himself and Flare was happy to let him.

He still had not been able to think of a way to get rid of the guard, even though he had spent every night trying to come up with a plan. He could trick Lenturin, but without a doubt his elven guard would be able to track him down and catch him. He had to come up with a way to trick Lenturin and delay the guard for several days.

They reached the banks of the river at dusk and made camp about one hundred yards from the river between several enormous trees. There were numerous coves and small inlets in the vicinity, and Tranquility Lake was a day's travel to the east. On the eastern side of the camp, there was an oak tree that blocked out slightly more than half of the sky.

As Flare lay under his blanket, he plotted about how to get rid of Lenturin. He had been to the Black River four times before and knew the area fairly well. But, while he considered himself a good woodsman, Lenturin was an expert. It would take almost two weeks to get to Telur and Lenturin would easily catch him. Perhaps he could trick him into waiting by himself for several days, but he seriously doubted his guard would fall for anything that obvious. If Yolstice had guessed his plan, then Lenturin would be expecting a trick and would be ready for it. Fighting was out; after all, Lenturin was a highly trained member of the Elven Guard. Flare was still searching for an answer when he drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, Flare woke to the smell of elven hollenstren bread being warmed over the fire. Hollenstren bread was a type of sweet bread that was good for the body and supplied a boost of energy. Lenturin was also cooking a rabbit that he had caught, and the smell made Flare's mouth water.

Getting out from under the blanket, Flare stretched his sore muscles. He had slept on a root and his whole back was stiff.

"That's smells good," Flare said, stifling a yawn.

Lenturin grinned. "It tastes even better than it smells. Go ahead, get some."

The friendliness of the guard's tone was surprising, but Flare recovered quickly. "I want to wash my face first. I'll be back in a few minutes." He shivered in the coolness of the morning as he walked down to the bank of the river.

The Black River was named for its murky appearance. The bottom could not be seen except right around the edges. Even though the river appeared gloomy, life was abundant in the river and in the woods surrounding it. Fish, beaver, and snakes were common throughout, and more exotic animals could also be found. From where Flare stood, the river was a good two hundred yards wide, and in many parts, it was even wider. In fact, there were very few places that the river could be crossed without the aid of a ferry. That was why Flare had decided to come to this particular section of the river. Within two days' travel, there were three places where a person could cross. Two crossings were to the west, and the third was to the east.

Flare knelt down on the edge of the river and washed his face and arms. The water was shockingly cold and invigorating. He dried off as he walked back to camp.

Once he got there, he bent over and pulled some of the rabbit and bread off the spit. He ate in silence, enjoying every bite. He was almost done eating when Lenturin broke the silence.

"So, what are you going to do today? Are you going to fish or maybe track some deer?" Lenturin smiled, his eyes narrowing at Flare.

"Well, I thought that I would travel east to Solitan's Cove and fish. That cove has some of the best catfish of the whole river," Flare said, getting nervous again. If Lenturin kept watching him like a hawk, escaping was going to be very difficult, if not impossible.

"That sounds good. I don't think that I have ever been there. Besides," he said with a grin, "I love catfish."

"Nothing personal, Lenturin, but I don't want you looking over my shoulder the whole time. The reason for this trip is to get away and have some solitude." He hoped he hadn't rushed the words; he wanted them to sound natural.

"I understand, but I am responsible for your safety. That cove is at least a good half-day ride to the east. What kind of protector would I be if I am here while you're there?"

"I don't need your protection, and besides, you are here to escort me, not guard me."

Lenturin studied Flare for a moment, "All right. I will stay here, but I am against it. And if anything happens to you, I am not responsible. Do you agree?"

Flare nodded quickly, relief rushing through him. "Yes, I agree. I really don't understand why you were sent with me. I have hunted these woods for years without any escort." He stumbled on the words, confused by how quickly Lenturin had agreed to stay behind. Could it be a trick? It seemed too easy.

"I know, Flare, but I am just doing what I was ordered."

"Well then, I'll leave for Solitan's Cove and return tomorrow by dusk."

"Fine. As long as you assume responsibility," Lenturin said, watching Flare closely.

Flare did not respond and finished eating. He was very careful to avoid eye contact, not wanting his face to betray his excitement. Here was the chance he was looking for. If Lenturin followed his word, then Flare would have at least a three-day head start. Lenturin wouldn't even know that Flare wasn't coming back for two days. Once Lenturin realized that Flare wasn't coming back, he would waste at least one more day trying to find him around Solitan's Cove.

Flare finished eating and started packing his gear. He kept telling himself to be calm and to take his time. The last thing he wanted to do was act suspicious.

As Flare rode out of camp, Lenturin leaned against a tree watching him, but neither said a word. When Flare had gotten out of sight of the camp, he let out a deep sigh and broke into a grin. He was delighted and amazed that he had gotten away so easily. Perhaps he had been wrong about his uncle guessing his plan. After all, Lenturin had not suspected a thing.

He followed the riverbank until he reached Solitan's Cove just a little after noon. Solitan's Cove was a small sheltered nook in the side of the river. Trees grew all around the cove, and their roots hung out into the water. These roots were the very reason that the fishing was so good, because the roots protected the fish from predators. At this point, the Black River was about four hundred yards wide. The cove, however, was no more than thirty-five yards across at its widest point.

Flare decided to rest his horse and try to catch some lunch. He sat on a tree root and fished the shallow waters. The fish were plentiful, so he was not surprised when he caught two fairly large catfish in less than twenty minutes. Rather pleased with himself, he started a small

fire to cook lunch.

He ate quietly, thinking about where he had to go from here. It was about another hour and a half to the ford. The ford was at an extremely narrow part of the river, and a sandbar stretched out almost halfway to the other side. Once he found the ford, he would cross the river and ride southward until dark. He really didn't want to travel at night, at least not until he found a trail or road. The last thing he needed was for his horse to break a leg.

He finished eating and packed his gear back into his saddlebags, then continued eastward. He kept his horse at a steady gallop. Time was important, but it wouldn't do to wear the poor beast out.

He reached the ford a little over an hour later and his pleasant mood disappeared abruptly. Last summer, this spot had been easy to wade across, but it had changed in a year's time. The sandbar was gone, and the water was flowing much faster than he remembered. He could swim rather well, but he had no idea what was in these waters. And besides, the opposing shore was too steep for the horse to climb up. Crossing here would be impossible.

If he went back to the other fords, he would have to cross Lenturin's path and might be seen. Not to mention the fact that he would lose two days off his lead. He had come too far to turn back now, so there was little choice but to continue on. Perhaps there would be a place where he could cross farther eastward.

Staying on the riverbank, Flare kept watching for any place that would allow him to cross. With dusk quickly approaching, he soon realized that he would not find a spot today. He kept riding in twilight, until he came to the Shore of Tranquility Lake. The Silver River emptied into the lake from the east, and the Black River drained the lake to the west. He made camp a hundred yards from the shore.

Flare found two trees that were leaning together, so he set up camp under those trees. Before falling asleep he set some fishing lines in the river. With any luck he would be able to catch breakfast. A few minutes later, he was sound asleep beside his small fire.

He woke the next morning at dawn and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He loved the appearance of the forest at daybreak. There was always a chill in the air, and he loved listening to the animal sounds. After answering nature's call in the bushes, he walked down to the river to check the fishing lines. Of the four lines he had set, three had caught catfish. The fourth fishing line was missing; apparently, the fish had managed to pull the fishing line off the shore. He kept the largest fish and threw the other two back. The fish made an excellent breakfast, and he carefully packed the leftovers for later.

Breaking camp, he continued to ride eastward. Hopefully, it wouldn't take more than a few hours to skirt the lake. With any luck he would find a place to cross the river before sundown. He kept within sight of the lake's shore but carefully avoided getting too close. He had never been to Tranquility Lake, but he had heard the wild stories that surrounded it.

The trip around the lake's shore was not difficult, and he reached the eastern side of the lake a little after lunchtime. He tied his horse to a tree and ate the remainder of his breakfast while looking out over the lake. When he finished eating, he continued to rest and observe the lake and shore. With his superior elven sight, he could make out the Black River fairly well. Something caught his attention, and he scanned the shoreline more closely. He studied the area until he caught sight of a horse moving along the far shore. Flare and his horse were hidden behind some trees and foliage and could observe the horse rider without being seen. After another

few moments, he spotted the horse again, still moving among the trees. This time, however, he also recognized the rider. It was Lenturin.

"Damn him," Flare cursed, dropping the fish. He jumped up and quickly untied his horse. *Okay, all I have to do is find a place to cross. Perhaps Lenturin won't follow me into the human territories.* His heart was beating fast as he turned eastward and raced along the shoreline, quickly approaching the Silver River.

A quarter of an hour later, he stopped to observe Lenturin's progress. Lenturin must have realized that Flare had spotted him, because he wasn't riding among the trees anymore but instead was racing along the sandy shore. His horse had been bred for speed, because he was quickly catching up. Flare estimated that he had no more than half an hour before Lenturin would catch him.

Ten minutes later, Flare reached the Silver River but he didn't even slow down. He fought off the despair that was trying to overwhelm him. "I'm not about to lose before I even get started." All of a sudden, he realized that at this point the Silver River was only about two hundred yards wide. They were only about fifty yards away from Tranquility Lake, but the water appeared to be rather calm. Flare scanned the opposing bank to see if the horse would have any problem climbing the shore. Much to his delight, the opposite bank was nicely sloped, so his horse should be able to climb the bank. Flare looked back to see how close Lenturin was, and unfortunately, Lenturin was almost within bow range.

Return whipped or give it his best? Gritting his teeth, he turned his horse southward and rode her straight into the water.

The water was numbingly cold and it took his breath away. He held on to the saddle as the horse fought the current. Flare rolled on his side and located Lenturin standing on the shore watching. He had dismounted and was standing there with his hands on his hips. Flare rolled back over and concentrated on breathing. He even allowed himself to smile, as he thought of Lenturin explaining to Prince Yolstice. He kept thinking, *Uncle, I beat you*, over and over.

The current was carrying them back toward Tranquility Lake, but they would still reach the opposing shore without any problem.

There was about fifty yards to go, when Flare heard an ear-piercing screech from the direction of the lake. He whipped his head around and his blood froze in terror. Sticking out of the water was the head and neck of a creature, the like of which he had never imagined. The head was a mottled combination of gray, green, and brown. The forehead had several spikes extending from it, with scales covering the entire neck. The creature's mouth was open, baring large, needle-sharp teeth. Except for the spikes and teeth, the creature's head reminded him of a snake's head. From top to bottom the head was at least three feet long, and the top of the head was at least fifteen feet above the level of the water. He shuddered, imagining the size of the creature. It screeched again, and this time, Flare's horse answered with an equaling ear-piercing screech. The monster had swum into the mouth of the river and was nearing them. It was now no more than twenty yards away.

The poor mare was exhausting herself in an attempt to reach the other side, and her fear urged her on faster. Flare, who had wrapped his left hand in the reins, hit her rump with his right hand over and over, hoping to help speed her up. She was going as fast as she could, because his paddling her had no affect.

They were now forty yards away, and the creature was still gaining. He was unsure of how close to the shore they would need to be before the creature would be unable to pursue.

Flare was still frantically trying to motivate his horse when the creature struck.

The creature lunged at Flare's legs. It was so close, he could smell the rotting breath of the monster. Its teeth clamped down on his trousers, scraping his ankle. He grimaced in pain as he realized the monster's teeth had ripped a gash in his lower leg. He left a trail of blood in the water behind them. The monster reared its head and emitted another ear-piercing screech.

They were now twenty-five yards from the shore, and his horse was still moving as fast as she possibly could, but the monster was still with them. The creature had slowed down, and he hoped it was because of the nearness of the shore.

Flare's leg was throbbing as he looked back at the creature. Even though the creature had slowed, it could still attack before they reached the shore. With his right hand, he drew his sword. He didn't know what use the sword would be against a creature of this size, but he hoped it would distract the creature long enough for them to escape.

The creature moved in closer. All of a sudden, the head shot down on top of them. He did not even have time to think - he just instinctively reacted. He thrust upward with what little force he could gather. The sword shot upwards and hit the monster on the side of the neck. The thrust did absolutely no damage, but the blow distracted it. The creature's lunge had been directed at the front of the horse, but the sword thrust deflected the creature's head to the right side, and it missed the horse and Flare.

The creature's head hit the water just to the right of him and it immediately whipped its head to the left toward Flare. This time, however, Flare had a chance to see what was happening and he slashed his sword at the left eye of the monster. The sword cut an arc through the air and hit the left side of the monster's head. His slash had been too soon and missed. The sword hit several inches short of the eye, scraping across the scales. However, as the creature turned, it caught its eye on the sword. A white, milky fluid seemed to erupt from the ruined eye, covering Flare's sword and arm. The creature emitted a scream, and it began to writhe in the water. Its head and body rolled over like a snake.

The mare took advantage of the creature's wound to pull ahead and reach the shore. She climbed up the shore, dragging Flare by the arm. His arm was so well wrapped in the reins, that at first he couldn't get loose. She continued dragging him until they were nearly twenty or thirty yards away from the water, where she finally stopped. Flare let go of the sword and pulled himself to his knees. He kneeled there trying to catch his breath. He unwound the reins from his left arm and slowly massaged his hand, trying to get the blood to circulate. Finally, he stood up and kissed his mare on the forehead, immediately becoming concerned with the poor horse. She was standing there with her head down, gasping for breath. He had never heard of a horse dying from fear, but he began to think his horse might be the first.

"It's okay, baby," he said, stroking her neck. He was also breathing hard, but from the excitement, not the exertion. He slowly talked to her until she started breathing normally. Then, and only then, did he wrap the reins around a tree and tend to his leg. It was bleeding but not gushing. The gash had missed the arteries, and the blood was only trickling down his leg. After bandaging the wound, he walked back down to the shore.

Looking out over the water, he could see the tip of the creature's head as it swam back into the lake. He had believed that most of the rumors about the eternal forest were told to scare children, but he promised he would pay more heed to the stories in the future.

Flare looked back toward the right, toward where Lenturin had been standing. He was still standing on the shore with his hands on his hips, looking across the river. When he saw Flare

looking at him, he cupped his hands to his lips and shouted, “You’re . . . uckiest son of . . . itch. I ha . . ver . . een.”

In return, Flare hollered back across the water, “Come on across, the water is wonderful!” After a short pause, he continued. “I beat you! You failed. Tell Yolstice goodbye for me.” He was grinning ear to ear and felt like he was unbeatable at that moment. Lenturin was too far away for Flare to make out facial features, but Flare hoped he was furious.

“You don’t actually believe that you beat us, do you?” Lenturin replied, louder than before.

“By the time you warn the Elven Guard, I will have at least a four-day head start. I doubt seriously they can catch me.”

“Don’t worry, Flare. I can guarantee you a six-day head start.”

The response confused him. He had expected Lenturin to curse or threaten, but not agree with him. Flare was still frowning as he asked, “What are you talking about? Six days? Are you trying to help me get away?” Suddenly, a frightening thought entered his mind. Perhaps his uncle wanted him gone. There was a note of panic in Flare’s voice as he said, “Lenturin, are you trying to help me get away?”

“Very good, Flare. Prince Yolstice had guessed your plan ever since the meeting with King Feilolas. I was supposed to make sure you escaped.”

“Why? Why send you with me? Why did you follow me to Tranquility Lake? If you wanted me to escape, then you shouldn’t have pressured me.”

“I was sent to make sure you left, one way or the other.”

Flare didn’t like the sound of that last comment. His elation at escaping the forest was quickly turning to dismay at being manipulated so easily. “Are you saying that you would have killed me?”

“I am not saying anything like that. But a human bastard hanging around the elven court is an insult to all elves. Now, enough talk. You had better get moving. It is already afternoon, and you have to find a place to make camp.” Lenturin turned and started to walk away, then stopped and turned back. “If I were you, I wouldn’t try to come back.” With that, Lenturin mounted his horse and rode away.

Flare was crushed. He had believed he was in charge of the whole situation. In reality, he had been manipulated from the very beginning. It was a strange feeling to know that someone had that much control over him.

He slowly walked up the riverbank feeling dejected. For the first time since the start of his journey, he began to question his life choice. It was really a miserable feeling, but he certainly believed that Lenturin would be waiting for him if he tried to cross back over into the Eternal Forest, not that he really wanted to.

He was glad to see that his mare was perking up. She was standing straighter and breathing more normally. He untied the reins, but he did not climb onto the saddle. She was still exhausted from the swim and he was content to lead her.

There was a Telurian city called Deladon almost due south of Tranquility Lake, so Flare shouldn’t have any problem finding it. From there, he just had to follow the northern road straight to Telur. The terrain, on this side of the Silver River, was hillier and had fewer trees.

After several hours of walking, he stopped to make camp. The clouds that had been gathering all day opened up and poured rain on him. He was soaked, miserable, and sore as he tried to sleep under an oak.

The next morning, Flare began the second half of his journey toward Telur. The rain stopped in the early hours of the morning, but not early enough for him to get any real sleep. He broke camp and rode south. He was relieved to see his mare had perked up after the near fatal events of yesterday.

Even though the terrain was hilly, there were less trees and vegetation to slow them down and they made excellent time. No humans lived this far north, so he rode without worrying about encountering anyone.

The rolling hills were grasslands broken up by small patches of trees. Off in the distance, to the east and west, he could see forests, but he was headed to the south into the grasslands.

The second night, he made camp in a copse of trees. He was exhausted and excited at the same time. This country was foreign to him, and he was riding to Telur to join the Guardians. Alternating between fear of failure and sweet dreams of glory, he nodded off to sleep.

The second day of travel mirrored the first, at least until early in the evening. The sun was starting to go down, and Flare was looking for a good place to camp when he rode over a small hill and noticed the lights of Deladon.

In the dusk, the lights reminded him of a swarm of fireflies. Judging by the number of lights, the city was larger than he had expected. From his studies, Flare knew that Deladon was a small city on the edge of the Telurian border with the elves. For a “small” city, it looked awfully big.

He sat on his horse staring out over the city, considering what he should do. Undoubtedly, the gates of the city would be closed at night. And besides, did he really want to ride through that city crammed with humans? Perhaps, he thought grimly, it would be better to ride around the city in the night and make camp on the far side; there would definitely be less chance of trouble that way.

His mind made up, he started riding down the road toward the city. He left the road well short of the high walls and turned his horse to the west. He didn't completely avoid attention, as he was surprised to see small huts and shacks thrown up around the base of the walls. Apparently, the city was packed to overflowing, and the poor were being forced to live outside the walls. His stomach turned at the sight of the squalor that these people were enduring. Half-naked children covered in grime ran around the campfires, playing with large dogs. The fires were being used to cook the evening dinner, and for once he wished his sight was not so good. After looking to see what was on the spit of one such fire, he carefully kept his eyes away from the other cook fires.

It took several hours to skirt the city, and he was grateful when he stumbled across the Northern road. Upon reaching the road, he turned his horse southward and nudged her into a slow gallop. He wanted to put several miles between himself and the city before he stopped for the night.

On either side of the road, the grasslands were broken up with small clumps of trees, although most of the trees were short and stumpy. Despite the darkness, Flare spotted a small clump of trees off to the right, several hundred yards away from the road. He dismounted and led the mare over the grasslands to the trees. After tending to his horse, he quickly fell asleep.

He slept until the warmth of the mid-morning sun woke him, and then he quickly saddled his mare while eating some more of the elven bread. Not wanting to waste any time, he mounted and quickly headed south along the road.

The journey continued in much the same fashion, but now more villages and towns

started to appear along the road. If the village was small enough, Flare just pulled his hood up and rode right on through, pretending not to notice the stares of the villagers. However, when he approached a larger town or city, he followed the plan that he had used previously, wait until dark and ride around the city. Perhaps he was being overly cautious, but then again, maybe he wasn't.

The road slowly turned to the southwest, and then back to due south as he got closer to Telur. The farther south he got, the more people he noticed along the road. Also, farms replaced the grasslands running along the road. He spotted many a farmer working the fields, but they rarely noticed him.

Flare finally abandoned the idea of skirting around the towns and cities in the night. There were so many travelers on the road this close to Telur that the townspeople didn't even seem to notice them. He rode through the towns and cities with the rest of the masses. Tired guards posted at the gates looked them over, but they apparently did not find anything amiss. As bored as the guards looked, he wondered if they would have missed a goblin riding through the gates.

He was beginning to think that he would never reach Telur, and several times he caught his attention drifting. There were just too many sights with all the people that were around him now.

A fight broke out between two merchant guards from different caravans, and he watched intently as the guards rushed to break it up. He quickly followed the other travelers as they moved to quickly get away from the argument. The last thing he wanted was to accidentally get involved. He continued to ride slowly, looking back over his shoulder at the fight, until he started to lose interest. He turned back around and for the first time noticed how thick the crowds of travelers had become. For a moment, he was confused as to why there were so many, but then his gaze swept forward to the plains ahead. The road had just crested a small hill and the view from here was excellent. Flare sat frozen in his saddle, looking in amazement at the massive city that stretched out in the distance ahead of him. He had reached Telur.



## Chapter 4

The city of Telur stretched across the horizon. Although he was still some distance away, he could tell that the city was many times bigger than Solistine. The buildings were stone and most of the roofs were wooden, but he also noticed that some were made of an orange tile. The city had been built in an obvious random manner, with little thought for planning. Buildings had been built right beside other buildings with a completely different type of architecture. Built around the city was an immense wall. He could see guards walking on the wall at different intervals. The wall was twenty feet high and made out of huge, square blocks of stone. He could see another wall further into the city. Leading down the hill and to the gate was a road that was used heavily.

It was mid-morning when he approached the city gates. Like most of the other human cities, the poorer residents lived outside the walls. Makeshift communities had sprung up, with tents and small huts spread along the base of the wall. The smell of smoke hung in the air from the many small cook fires. A few people sat along the road and begged for money from those entering the city, but he didn't see anyone giving to the poor. His heart sank as he watched the misery around him. The people's squalor was starting to make him question his plan. Perhaps his human side wasn't worth learning about.

The city gates were enormous and made out of steel and wood. Guards were stationed on both sides of the gate and were scanning people as they entered. The guards had to be more for appearances than anything else. After all, what would they be able to spot in the huge stream of people entering the city? The sheer size of everything was overwhelming.

Flare moved out of the throng of people and stopped next to the guards. "Excuse me. Can you tell me how to reach the residence of the Elven Ambassador, Henotairin?" he asked of a guard standing to the left of the massive gate. There were several guards there, but the one that he spoke to was in the front and looked to be in charge.

The guard was wearing chain mail armor under a loose-fitting black tunic emblazoned with the yellow sun of Telur. His hair was brown and came down just below his ears. He was dark and muscular and wore a sword on his left side. The guard looked Flare over before answering. "I can, but what is your business with the elven ambassador?"

Flare was momentarily taken aback by the guard's question. He wanted to be careful about what he told the guard, but he would need someone's help to find the ambassador. "I – I have personal business with Henotairin."

"With the strained relations that currently exist between us and the elves, I cannot direct every person who has a complaint to the elven representative. If you have a complaint, you can take it to Officer Seran. He's at . . ."

Flare realized that he was being mistaken for a human and pulled the hood back on his cloak. The soldier at once recognized him for half-elven.

The soldier's eyes narrowed. "Oh, uh, my apologies. I didn't realize you were elven. Are you on official business?"

Not wanting to divulge his identity, Flare lied, hoping he sounded convincing. "I'm a courier. I have a message for Henotairin, which pertains to official elven business," he said with a smile, and trying not to stumble over the words.

Flare's answer was good enough, because the guard quickly lost interest. "Wait here,"

the guard said, turning and entering the small guardhouse.

The guard returned leading another soldier. The second soldier was much younger than the first, but he was attired in the same type of armor. He was shorter and leaner as well.

"Jarum will escort you," the first guard said to Flare. He then turned to the younger guard, "Jarum, after you escort him to the elven ambassador, return here immediately."

"Yes, sergeant," was the only response from the younger, fidgeting guard.

The first guard walked back toward his post, leaving Flare alone with Jarum. The young soldier visibly relaxed. "I'm going to take the long way, but we'll avoid the marketplace. There are too many people there right now."

"Fine," Flare said, climbing down from his horse. He pulled his hood back over his head and followed Jarum. He had assumed that since they were taking the "long way," there wouldn't be that many people on the streets, but just the opposite was true. The streets were packed with people going about their business. He was amazed at how humans went about daily life. Elves were calm in public, but the humans showed very little restraint. He heard one human male cursing another and saw children chasing one another through the streets. Merchants were hawking their wares, and his senses could barely take in all the sights and sounds.

Jarum led Flare through the city, and before long they passed through the inner wall that he had seen earlier. They crossed an ornamental bridge that spanned a small river. The river seemed to separate the wealthy section of town from the poorer side of the city. There weren't any shops on this side of the bridge, as they were in a residential area. The houses were enormous. Most of them had large walls, so he couldn't see very much of the courtyards. Many of the houses were two stories with large balconies that overlooked the courtyards. Most of them flew the flag of Telur, which was a golden yellow sun on a black background.

Jarum stopped at a house that had to be the elven ambassador's residence. The rest of the houses had wide open courtyards, but this house had a courtyard full of trees and shrubs.

He turned to Flare. "This is it. If there is nothing else, I'll leave you." His comment was more of a question than a statement.

"No, thank you. I'll be fine," Flare said, staring at the mansion. He barely noticed as Jarum turned and trotted away.

Breathing deeply and beginning to get nervous again, Flare approached the gates. As he did so, guards ran out to bar his path.

"Halt. This is elven property," the guard on Flare's left said. He appeared to be in charge. He was slim and had blond hair that hung down past his shoulders.

Once again, he was being mistaken for human. Sighing, Flare reached up and pulled his hood back to expose his face and head. "I am elven, and I request an audience with Henotairin."

"What is your business with the ambassador?" the guard on the left asked.

Flare's eyes narrowed. He had not expected a problem getting in to see Henotairin. In Solistine, he had always tended to be somewhat timid, but after the last two weeks of traveling he was in no mood for questions. He had hoped to keep his identity a secret until he saw the ambassador, but it appeared that he would have no choice. "My name is Flaranthlas Eldanari. I am ninth in line for the elven throne, and I am in no mood to wait. I have had a very long journey and I am extremely tired."

Flare's words had a profound effect on the young guard. His eyes initially registered surprise, followed immediately by recognition. He apparently had seen Flare before and a little fear crept into eyes. Flare had been around the elven court enough to know how to give orders.

He just wasn't used to having them followed.

"I am sorry, sir. I did not recognize you. I was not aware of your visit."

"There was a reason for that. Try to keep my arrival quiet," Flare said, trying to act aloof. "Now, is Henotairin here or not?"

"Yes, sir. I'll escort you to his office."

Flare retrieved his saddlebags from the mare. "Have somebody see to my horse."

The guard barked an order, and then turned back to Flare, "If you will follow me, sir."

He led Flare up the steps and into the palace. The elven palace was beautifully decorated, but it was definitely human designed and built. Directly inside the doorway was a T-shaped hall. There were passages to the left, the right, and also straight forward. The ceilings were a good ten feet high with painted murals on them. Plants decorated the hallways and the various rooms, but the pictures were not as splendid as those in the elven palace of Solistine.

They turned right and walked down the hallway, then they climbed a spiraling staircase to the second floor.

At top of the stairs, Flare found himself in a waiting room. This room resembled the rooms downstairs, except there were soft couches instead of hard benches. A young elven male was seated behind a desk. He was slightly shorter than most elves, and he had pale skin and very little muscle tone. He stood up as they approached his desk.

"Sergeant, what is going on here?" the young elf asked.

The elven guard stood at attention, "Sir, uh . . ."

Flare stood there for a moment before he realized that the guard was stalling for him. He then spoke up, "What is your name?"

The young elf seemed a bit taken back by the abruptness of Flare's question. "My name is Narion. Who are you, and what is your business here?"

Once again, Flare did not appreciate being questioned. "Narion, my name is Flaranthlas Eldanari. I am the king's grandson, and I need to speak to Henotairin immediately."

Narion seemed to be appropriately shocked. Some of the color drained from his face, and he glanced back and forth to the sergeant. "I, uh, I –"

Flare interrupted him, "Please notify Henotairin of my arrival."

"Uh, yes sir. Excuse me. I will let him know you're here." Narion turned and disappeared through the doorway.

A couple of moments later he reappeared with an elder elf. Flare recognized Henotairin, whom he had met at the palace. Henotairin would soon be celebrating his seven hundred and fiftieth name day, but he looked remarkably healthy. He had white closely cut hair and a beard. His skin was pale but wrinkled, and he was wearing a white tunic with a slender rope-type belt.

His eyes went straight to Flare and shock was evident on his face. "Flaranthlas, you look horrible. What are you doing here?" With a start, he seemed to suddenly realize how he had spoken. "I apologize for my words, but why are you here?"

Flare moved toward him. "Let's step into your office. I would like to speak to you in private."

Henotairin seemed a little taken back, but he simply nodded and led the way.

Flare was exhausted and mentally drained, but he continued the plan that he had started. "It has been a very long journey, so I'll be brief. I need for you to schedule a meeting with King Darion, as soon as possible."

"King Darion!" Henotairin repeated, confused. "I'm sorry, my prince, but I must know

what this pertains to. And I must also ask why you traveled here with no escort. That seems awfully unusual,” Henotairin said, sitting down on a small couch.

Flare sighed. “I started out with an escort, but Lenturin was forced to return after an encounter with a creature at Tranquility Lake. He was my only escort because we hoped to avoid unnecessary scrutiny.” Flare paused, the anxiety settling in again. “I have traveled here to ask King Darion’s permission to join the Guardians.”

Henotairin was speechless for a few moments. He finally managed to ask, “The king approved this?”

“Of course. Grandfather was not pleased, but I convinced him. You see, I have very few options open to me in elven life, so this was an excellent life-choice for me. Besides, it is hoped that I can be a bridge between the two races. After all, I am the primary reason for the terrible relations between our two peoples.” He was getting excited, stumbling over his words. He forced himself to slow down, “So, how soon can you arrange for the meeting?”

Henotairin sat quietly for a moment, “Well, King Darion usually plans his meetings in advance and only emergency meetings are made as they are needed.” He paused, his brow wrinkling in thought. “Seeing how you are an important member of royalty, I might could arrange for a meeting this evening. The king does not do very much late in the day.” He nodded at Flare’s clothes, “But before you can meet the king, you are going to have to bathe and change.”

Flare smiled. “Excellent. A bath and a nap on a soft bed sounds really good.”

Henotairin stood and ushered Flare toward the door. “Fine. I’ll have Narion take you to a guest room, while I send a message to the palace.”

When they walked through the door, Narion was once again sitting behind the desk. He immediately stood when Henotairin approached.

“Narion, take Flarantlas to a guest room and arrange a hot bath for him.”

“Yes, sir,” was the only reply.

Flare followed Narion through the hallways, ignoring the surroundings as they walked. The plan seemed to be working, and he was dreaming about his future with the Guardians, when Narion stopped walking in front a large wooden door. He had led Flare to a luxurious bedroom. A tan, plush carpet covered the floor. There was a grand window overlooking the courtyard, as well as a gigantic four-poster bed. There was a door on the opposite side of the room, which Flare assumed was the bathroom. Beside the door, there was a desk and a chair.

“Sir, I had anticipated your desire for a bath, so the water is already hot. Do you need some more appropriate clothes?”

Flare sat on the edge of the bed. “Yes. All I brought with me were traveling clothes.”

“Well, I probably will have trouble finding anything in your size, but I’ll try.” He paused, then said, “Do you require anything else?”

Flare answered with a wave of his hand, “Just some peace and quiet.” Narion half-bowed leaving the room.

He walked into the huge bathroom and immediately began undressing. The bathroom had a tile floor and a huge circular, sunken tub. Sliding into the tub, he groaned in pleasure. He took his time in the warm water of the bath. After finishing his bath, he closed the drapes, climbed into the bed, and fell fast asleep.

When Narion woke him, he could tell that it had gotten darker outside.

“Sir, you have a meeting with King Darion soon,” Narion said, laying out clothes on the chair. “I couldn’t find any leggings, but I did manage to find a nice pair of trousers. I also found

this nice shirt, which should fit you.”

Flare sat up, yawning. “What time is it?” he asked, rubbing his eyes.

“It’s almost sundown, sir. Master Henotairin is waiting for you in the dining room. He assumed that you would want dinner before meeting King Darion.”

Almost as if on cue, Flare’s stomach growled.

Narion led Flare to the dining room, where a modest dinner was set out. Henotairin was already there. They discussed elven matters while Flare ate, since the Ambassador had not been to Solistine in several years. Flare answered the questions between bites and actually found himself liking Henotairin. He began to feel a little guilty, knowing that he was lying and using the man.

After dinner, Flare returned to the bedroom and gathered his clothes and equipment. He could have sent Narion, but for some reason he didn’t much care for the elf, and so he decided to go himself. It only took several minutes to get everything and return to the foyer, where he waited for Henotairin.

“I apologize for making you wait, but I had to perform duties,” Henotairin said, entering the foyer a little breathless. He clapped his hands together and smiled. “Well, are you ready to meet the king?”

Flare rose to his feet and weakly smiled. “Yes, I’m starting to get a little nervous. What kind of man is he? Do you think that he will be receptive to the idea of me joining the Guardians?” He was being honest about getting nervous. His stomach was doing flip-flops, and his words were coming out in a rush.

“I do not know, Flare,” Henotairin said. He motioned for two elves to take the saddle bags and equipment. He waited for just a moment, as if trying to remember what he had been saying. “Oh yes, the king. King Darion has always been friendly toward the elves, but his advisors do not trust us. Did you know that when King Darion was a prince, he was an ambassador to the elven court? I first met him in King Feilolas’s castle, in Solistine.”

King Darion had been at the castle? Flare’s heart skipped a beat. If King Darion had been to Solistine, perhaps he would be more receptive to Flare’s predicament.

They left the palace and began walking toward the center of the city. It was already dark, so it was difficult to make out much detail. After they walked a few minutes, Flare could see a wall rising up out of the gloom. At first he thought the wall was small, but it just kept getting bigger with each step he took. There were no more palaces along the road, but instead there was a wide open area. The wall appeared to be made out of great stone blocks and easily reached thirty feet high. A huge gate stretched across the entrance to the castle, which he assumed was kept open during the day. There was a smaller entrance to the right of the main gate, which was where Henotairin led him.

Henotairin was smiling at Flare’s incredulous look. “That wall is magnificent, isn’t it? I understand that it took a small army of dwarves, as well as some powerful magicians, to build it.”

Flare was quiet as Henotairin led him through the wall and into the courtyard. He was beginning to worry about what would happen if King Darion turned down his request, but it was sort of late to be thinking about that now.

Inside the wall, the palace grounds were beautifully laid out. There were beautiful trees planted along the walkways and well-trimmed lawns. Several fountains were placed around the courtyard. The courtyard itself was monstrous, being at least five or six hundred yards across. Off to Flare’s left was a free-standing circular tower that rose one hundred feet or so high.

The palace was in the middle of the enclosed area and was simply breathtaking. It was made out of block, which was similar to the wall, except the castle block was whiter. The palace was ancient, with parts of the castle looking like they had just been constructed yesterday and other parts looking like they had been there for a thousand years. There were numerous towers and battlements around the exterior, some of them had banners flapping in the wind. In the dark it was hard to make the pattern out, but he felt confident that the golden sun flew on those banners. Flare could see the lights coming through numerous windows, as well as guards moving along the battlements.

He followed Henotairin into the palace. They apparently were expecting them, because they went unchallenged. The interior was different from what he had expected. It was much more closed-in than the elven palace. Some of the walls were plain stone, and others were painted off-white and had various human paintings hanging on them. Suits of armor, as well as various weapons, were hung on the walls. The palace was well lit with lanterns and torches, which kept the shadows at bay. There were exquisitely crafted spiral staircases and beautifully carved statues. Flowers and plants were used to accentuate the stone work, and Flare relaxed as he looked at all the different types of plants.

Henotairin had been observing him with amusement. "So, Flare, what do you think? A lot of this stonework was done by the dwarven masters. Impressive, huh?" He waved his hand toward the walls of the palace. "This palace has been here for several thousand years. Oh, not in the same state of course. I mean parts of the castle have been torn down and rebuilt over the years, but the Telurian castle has existed in this very spot since before the Demon Lord Wars."

"Yes, it's definitely not what I had expected. I expected things to be more dark and dirty. I guess that's just the impression that the elves have of humans," Flare responded.

"Humans are not all bad, just like not all elves are good. Some of the nicest and most honest people I have met are humans."

Flare was surprised. He had always believed that humans were deceitful and untrustworthy. But here Henotairin was telling him just the opposite. Henotairin had the most contact with humans of any elf that Flare knew, so his opinion was confusing, but his opinion also made him feel better. Maybe the human half of him was not so bad after all.

He was deep in thought as they walked through the palace. Henotairin was walking too fast for Flare to take in everything, but what he did see amazed him. There were large ballrooms and dining rooms. They passed what appeared to be a colossal throne room and he just managed a glimpse. All throughout the palace, guards were posted at the entrance to doorways. They closely watched the elves as they passed by.

The two elves were passing an entrance to what looked like a rather large ballroom when a man emerged from the doorway walking briskly. So intent was the man on the papers in his hands that he almost walked into Henotairin before he noticed them.

"Oh, my apologies, Ambassador," the man said, pulling up short. He was a tall man, over six feet tall and in good shape. He had long, black hair that hung past his shoulders and a well-trimmed beard. His clothes looked silky and luxurious. He had a rather sharp chin and thick, bushy eyebrows, but it was his eyes that caught Flare's attention. They looked dead.

"I didn't realize that you were scheduled to be here tonight," the man said. He glanced over at Flare, seeming disinterested. He was just starting to look away again when his eyes widened and he quickly swept his gaze back to Flare. "And whom do we have the pleasure of meeting tonight."

Henotairin squeezed past the man. "My apologies, Angaria. I would love to stay and talk, but I do not want to keep the king waiting."

Flare followed Henotairin past Angaria and even though he didn't look back, he could still feel the eyes of the man following them.

He waited until they had turned a corner before speaking. "Henotairin, who was that, and why were you so rude to him?"

Henotairin slowed down and looked back as if he expected the man to be following them. "Sorry about that. You remember how I said some humans were evil? Well, Duke Angaria Wellis is a good example of that. I have never met such a cold and conniving person." He shook his head. "Duke Angaria's great-grandfather committed high treason. He tried to usurp the throne for himself. The king at the time had him executed, and his head was hung from the wall of the city." Henotairin stopped walking and turned, pointing his finger at Flare's chest. "The only reason that Angaria is alive today is because his grandfather managed to escape."

"Well, how is it that Angaria is a lord of Telur?" Flare asked.

Henotairin started walking again, and he answered quietly, "Angaria's father returned to Telur and begged King Darion's father for clemency. King Deratheel agreed and even reinstated him as a lord, although not with the power and importance that the Wellis family had once enjoyed." He leaned in closer to Flare, "The other lords of Telur do not like the Wellis family, and it is rumored that Angaria's father bought his way back into the nobility. The nobles liked them even less when King Darion appointed Angaria onto his Council of Lords."

They continued on down the hallway, which curved to the left past a couple of doorways. Flare was about to ask about the Council of Lords when the hallway ended into a huge wooden door with two guards on either side. The guards were both young, but despite their youth, they had a commanding presence. They were wearing black plate armor with the golden sun of Telur on their chests. Helmets hid most of their faces from view, but blond hair poked out from under the right guard's helmet. The guards were holding pikes at attention.

Henotairin stopped and turned toward Flare. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," Flare managed to say. His heart was pounding, and he thought he might get sick. He grinned at the thought of introducing himself to the king by fainting in his presence.

Henotairin smiled and turned back to the guards. "Hello, Nathaniel. We are here to see the king. I was told he would meet us here."

Nathaniel, the young guard on the left, answered, "Yes sir. I was told to expect you. Unfortunately, the king has been detained. I was instructed to tell you that he will be along presently. You are welcome to go in and wait, if you like."

"Thank you."

The other young guard reached out and opened the door for them.

The room turned out to be a study. It had a warm feeling about it that just seemed to hang in the air. It had exquisite red mahogany paneling and trim, with bookshelves that also appeared to be made of mahogany. The bookshelves were packed full of books, some new and some so old that they looked like they would fall apart if they were touched. There was a large oak desk against the opposite wall. A thick dark-brown carpet covered the floor, and a small oval window was directly behind the desk. On the wall to the left was an unlit fireplace. There were four chairs arranged in a half circle facing the desk. Apparently, King Darion used the study as a meeting place often.

Henotairin walked forward and sat in the chair farthest to the left. Flare followed his lead

and sat next to him. They sat there for a few minutes in silence.

Flare suddenly remembered the question that he had been about to ask in the hallway. "Henotairin, what is the Council of Lords that you mentioned?"

Henotairin leaned back in his chair as he spoke. "The Council of Lords is a group of seven lords who advise the king on kingdom matters. Each of the seven lords, or their representatives, vote on an issue and the results are relayed to the king. The king then considers the opinion of the council before he makes his final decision."

Flare found the discussion interesting. The elven king had no such formal council to advise him. "Are all the lords appointed by the king like Angaria was?" he asked.

"No," Henotairin answered. "Some of the lords inherit a spot on the council as their birthright." Seeing the look of confusion on Flare's face, he quickly explained. "In Telur, there are four great houses that are right below the king in power. House Efflen is led by Lord Roderick. He is called the Champion of the Sunset."

Henotairin smiled slightly at the lost look on Flare's face. "He is called the Champion of the Sunset because he is lord of the territories to the west of Telur. And though there is a standing army that guards the borders, House Efflen is charged with protecting the people and areas under his charge. Lesser lords in the western area pledge their loyalty to him and he pledges his loyalty to King Darion. Ever since House Efflen has been given the west, the leader of the house has been called the Champion of the Sunset."

"So Lord Roderick is permanently on the Council of Lords?" Flare asked.

"Yes, as his son will be, although Lord Roderick rarely attends meetings in person. He appointed a representative who attends the meetings for him, as do most of the lords."

Flare nodded his head. "Well, while we wait, tell me more about the lords on the council."

"All right. The second of the four great houses is House Darkvale. House Darkvale is led by Lord Justin, and he is called the Guardian of the North. Both House Darkvale and House Efflen have grown in power recently, due mainly to the lack of a threat from the west and north."

"Aren't the elves viewed as a threat?" Flare quickly interjected.

"Yes, we are," Henotairin answered. "But the elves do not raid across the border killing farmers and soldiers. Raiders have plagued the southern and eastern borders, which has sapped the strength of two of the great houses. House Morningstar holds the eastern lands and is led by the Lady Julia, the Protector of the East. Lady Julia is the steward until her son, Geoffrey, is old enough."

Henotairin leaned forward in his seat, resting his elbows on his legs. "House Steel holds the southern lands and their lord is Cedric. He is called the Lord of Fire and Vengeance. House Steel has always been warriors, perhaps because they have always had to fight the armies and raiders of the southern kingdoms."

"Are they good people?" Flare asked.

"They are good and bad, each in his own way. None of them are cruel, but they are hard, determined people. If you get in their way, they have no reluctance in squashing you," Henotairin answered. "They have mastered the art of politics, and they do it well."

Flare was enjoying the conversation, perhaps because it was helping to keep his mind off of the meeting with the king, but he also found it interesting. "Counting Angaria, that brings the total to five. Who are the other two lords on the council?"

Henotairin smiled, enjoying having such an interested pupil. "General Allister Dunn was



the sixth son born to Lord Dunn, a minor house that is pledged to House Morningstar. Being the sixth son, he joined the army of Telur and quickly rose in power. He has been the Captain General for a good ten years now, and the Captain General always has a place on the council. And since he is frequently in Telur, he often attends meetings.”

“The last member of the council is Arch-bishop Rondrell Poole. The arch-bishop is the church's representative on the council.” Henotairin paused, then said, “I suppose you are unaware of the Telurian people's following of Adel?”

“I know that most of the humans worship Adel, just like most of the elves worship Silverti,” Flare answered.

“Yes, but the Church of Adel is very powerful and will not tolerate any threat to its power. Other religions are not openly condoned. Oh, they are allowed to exist, but only as long as their followers are few.”

Suddenly, the door opened.

A human man stood in the doorway. The man possessed such a presence that Flare immediately knew it was the king. He was tall, over six feet with shoulder-length black hair and a neatly trimmed peppered beard. He was wearing a brown tunic that was belted at the waist and loose-fitting brown leggings.

Henotairin stood as King Darion entered, and Flare quickly followed his lead. The king stood in the doorway for just a second, scrutinizing Flare, before he entered the room. He wore a friendly smile.

“Hello, Henotairin, I didn’t know you were bringing anyone to this meeting. Whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?” The king's voice was deep but friendly, reminding Flare of his grandfather's.

Henotairin quickly answered, “King Darion, it is my pleasure to introduce you to Flaranthlas. He is a member of elven royalty and ninth in line for the elven throne.”

Flare bowed to the king. The elves kept with tradition and manners, and he had been taught well. “It’s my pleasure, Your Highness, but please call me Flare.”

Henotairin’s words hit the king like a slap. His eyes grew wide and his mouth was open for a few seconds in astonishment. He looked as if he was struck speechless, and Flare got the feeling that this man wasn’t speechless very often.

He quickly recovered from his surprise and addressed Flare. “I apologize, but I never expected to have a member of elven royalty in my palace.” He then spoke to Henotairin, “I wish I had been informed sooner of this visit. I would like to have prepared a more official reception.” The king's voice hinted at a mild rebuke.

“I apologize, Your Highness, but that is my fault,” Flare quickly interjected. He felt bad enough about using Henotairin and he didn't want any more trouble for him than was necessary. “The ambassador didn't know I was coming.”

The king paused for a second, considering. “Really?” His eyes bore into Flare.

Flare was worried. He had come here under false pretenses, but he didn't want to introduce himself to the king by lying to him.

King Darion said, “I see. Well, what can I do for you?”

Flare looked at Henotairin, who was looking back at him. The little shrug that Henotairin gave told Flare that it was his turn to present his case. “Well, sir, I am here to ask your permission to join the Guardians.”

For the second time, King Darion was speechless. He looked first at Flare then at

Henotairin, who simply shrugged and smiled weakly. Finally, King Darion managed to say, "I'm shocked that King Feilolas even considered it." He walked around the desk and sat down. "Flare, why do you want to join the Guardians? Surely you know that it would be a tough life."

Flare felt queasy and a little weak in the knees, but he steeled himself. "Sir, I wish to be a warrior in a noble cause. The civilized world is protected by the Guardians, and I want to be one of them." It was not quite true that the Guardians served the world – they had at one time – but now the Guardians were completely in the service of Telur.

King Darion nodded and considered Flare's words. "A noble intention."

Flare's hopes surged at the king's words and once again he felt weak in the knees. He hoped he wasn't swaying.

King Darion took a deep breath. "Unfortunately, I cannot grant you access to the Guardians."

The king's words hit him like a kick to the stomach, and he felt queasy again. He could feel the panic began to build.

"Access to the Guardians is not granted, it is earned," the king continued. "People compete against each other for the right to enter, and my recommendation means nothing if the person cannot pass the physical part of the tests. There is a very good reason for this and it is because the Guardians have to be the best warriors and magicians possible."

Flare had never heard any of this in the stories and he felt his hopes sinking. What was he to do? He could not go back to Solistine in disgrace. No, he would rather die than to face the smug looks of the elven court. If he couldn't join the Guardians then he couldn't stay in Telur either. In all the many different ways he had imagined this, being rejected hadn't occurred to him.

King Darion must have noticed the dejected look on Flare's face. "Now, I cannot grant you entrance to the Guardians, but I can allow you to compete in the entrance tests. And as a matter of fact, quite a few foreign royalty serve in the Guardians."

At his words, hope blossomed anew in Flare.

The king smiled, reading Flare's every emotion. "The problem I see for you, Flare, is that your elven blood, while increasing your speed, will probably make you weaker than some of those competing. If you like, I could have someone assist you in preparing for the tests."

Flare was beginning to feel better, but he was still nervous about having to compete. "Thank you, sir. I appreciate you helping prepare me."

"I hope that we can help you. But tell me, Flare, how did you convince King Feilolas to allow you to come here? Did the princess help, or did you do it on your own?"

Once again, the king's eyes bored into him, almost daring him to lie. Flare was at a loss on how to answer. He did not want to lie, but he also did not want to admit to disobeying his grandfather. "I, uh, convinced him myself," was all he could manage. He immediately saw suspicion in the eyes of King Darion, and he decided that it was time to tell him the truth.

"Henotairin, may I have a moment alone with the king, please?"

Henotairin seemed a little surprised, and looked from the king to Flare, then back to the king again. At the king's nod, he rose to his feet and excused himself from the room.

Flare turned back to the king, who was regarding him with a calculating stare. "Flare, I'm beginning to suspect that you are not telling me everything. What are you holding back?"

Flare took a deep breath, fighting back the rising panic. "Well sir, elven youth are allowed to choose their own way in life," he started slowly, but the words came out faster and faster. "However, I was told that I would not be allowed to pursue my chosen path, and so I sort

of ran from my grandfather's wishes. Sir, I am not full-blooded elven and therefore I have no place in elven society. I am begging you to please allow me to stay here."

The King was still smiling, "You're going to cause me a lot of trouble. Undoubtedly, the elves will demand that I return you, and my own nobles will not like the idea of a royal elf in the Guardians." The king sighed again. "Tell me, did your mother agree to your leaving and joining the Guardians?"

A brief surge of hope coursed through Flare. "She was scared at the very idea, sir, but she did give me her blessing."

The king laid his head back against the top of the chair, thinking hard.

Flare sat quietly, praying under his breath to the elven goddess Silverti. He had come so far, he would hate to be turned back over to the elves now. The fear and anxiety were making him sick. That would be a way to meet a king, getting sick in his study. He swallowed hard and waited as patiently as he could.

Finally, the king looked back up. "Flare, I knew your mother, and she was a caring and honest woman. For her sake, if not for yours, I will make a pact with you. I will allow you to take the entrance test, and if you are accepted into the Guardians, I will allow you to stay."

Relief washed over him like a wave; at least he had a chance to join the Guardians. A smile started to form on his lips.

King Darion noticed the smile and quickly continued. "But if you are not accepted, then you will agree to return to the elves willingly. Do you agree to my terms?"

Flare grinned widely as he accepted the king's terms. "Sir, will I still get someone to help me?"

"Yes, but you will have to work very hard if you really want to get in. And once you get in, it will only get harder. Are you sure you can handle this? If you are accepted, then you will be trained to fight, kill, and possibly die for Telur. In battle, people are maimed and die horribly. Are you willing to kill or die for the people of Telur? Remember, most of the humans here in Telur will not accept you any more than the elves did. In fact, the resentment toward the elves is so strong, you could be at risk from the very people you are training to protect."

The king's last comment caught Flare off guard, and dispelled his earlier elation. He expected some possible resentment from the human nobility and commanders, but he had expected to eventually be accepted by his fellow soldiers. After all, elves joined the Guardians from time to time. "Are you saying that I might be in danger during the training?"

The king leaned back in the chair and propped his head on his right hand. "Elves have served before and are currently serving in the Guardians, but none of them are elven nobility. I do not believe anything would happen to you, and if I thought there was any real danger, I wouldn't even consider your request to join. I believe it will be fine, but you will need to remain on guard."

Another thought occurred to Flare. "Sir, how will this affect human and elven relations?"

The king smiled humorlessly. "Flare, there has not been a human allowed in the Eternal Forest in thirty years. I believe the only reason the elves keep an ambassador in Telur is so they can spy on us." The king paused. "Since the fall of the elves, they have not had the power to wage war against the combined might of the humans. If the elves were to march on Telur, it would be their undoing. You see, Flare, right now the humans are divided and we frequently fight among ourselves. But if an elven host descends on Telur, it would unite the human cities in a fashion that has not been seen since the Demon Lord Wars, some two millennia ago."

The thought of elves fighting against Telur had not seriously occurred to Flare. The elves had not marched outside their forests in millennia. Although the elven troops had been marshaled and ready to go to war thirty years ago, the human ambassadors had been dispelled and the troops disbanded. He was intimately aware of this, since his birth had been the driving factor behind the near war. He knew the elves were weak and that they couldn't wage war outside of their kingdoms, but he also knew they were plenty capable of defending those very same forests. That thought troubled him, having fled the elven forests, resentment was the last thing he wanted to feel toward his new home. Troubled, he held his tongue and said nothing.

The king paused briefly, watching Flare. "Now, what are we going to do with you?" Without waiting for an answer, the king continued, "How soon do you want to start preparing for the tests?"

Flare did not even hesitate in giving his answer. "As soon as possible, sir. How soon can I start?" A feeling of elation replaced the earlier melancholy.

"I know just the person. His name is Sergeant Wellmann and he is one of our finest soldiers. I will contact him tomorrow." The king paused a moment, smiling. "Now, unless you have some more surprises for me, I really must go now. It has been an interesting evening, Flare. I hope you succeed in your endeavors."

The king rose to his feet and walked around the desk. "I will send in the ambassador. I think you need to talk to him. When he leaves, I will instruct Nathaniel to find you lodging for the night." He smiled at Flare, "Tomorrow, you will have an escort until Sergeant Wellmann is ready." He stood looking into Flare's eyes, as if searching for something. Finally, he spoke again, "Well, if there is nothing else, I must leave."

"Your Highness, I will do my best in your service," Flare said, a small knot forming in his throat.

The king grinned. "I hope you make it." He turned and walked through the door.

Henotairin came back into the room. He looked expectantly at Flare, waiting for him to speak. Flare was slow to respond and Henotairin burst out, "Well, what did he say?"

Flare tried to smile, but at best he managed a sickly grin. "He will allow me to compete for a spot in the Guardians." Flare took a deep breath.

"What is the matter?" Henotairin asked.

"I have not been exactly honest with you, Henotairin. My grandfather did not give his blessing on my journey. In fact, he forbade it." He was looking at the ground, feeling like he had betrayed an old friend.

When he looked back up, he was surprised to see Henotairin calmly regarding him. "I'm sorry. I lied to you and betrayed your trust," Flare added.

Henotairin put his hands on Flare's shoulders, "I knew you were not telling me everything, but I did not suspect this. When you arrived, alone, obviously trying to avoid scrutiny, I knew you were hiding something. I thought that perhaps you had left without the king's blessing, but it never occurred to me that you would leave after the king forbade it. Why did the king forbid it? Did you make it your life choice?"

"I was not allowed to. I was told that I would not be allowed to leave if that was my decision, so I pretended to go on a hunting trip and then I fled. But if I do not win my way into the Guardians, then I will be forced to return," Flare said quickly, the words tripping over each other.

"If those are your options, I would urge you to make it into the Guardians. I don't believe

you would want to return, at least for some time.”

Flare nodded, the lump in his throat had returned. “I will do my best and the king said he will have a sergeant help me prepare for the trials.”

Henotairin seemed surprised. “He must have been impressed by you, Flare. He is showing you a lot of favor by assigning you a tutor. Do not betray his trust.”

“I won’t.” Flare hesitated a moment, before asking a question that was troubling him, “Henotairin, will you suffer because of this?”

Henotairin half laughed, “I do not think so. After all, I was just helping the king’s grandson.” His mirth slowly drifted away. “I can handle matters, Flare, but you must watch yourself. Never lower your guard and always pick your friends carefully.”

“I will be careful, and Henotairin, thank you for your help.”

“Flaranthlas, I have done very little for you. I wish I could have helped you more.” He sighed and said, “I must be going now, but always remember to be careful.” And as if a thought just occurred to him, he added, “Flare, be careful to whom you divulge your identity. Elves are not popular among humans, and you could be in physical danger.” He paused briefly, then said, “Well, goodbye and may fortune smile on you.”

Flare watched Henotairin leave, feeling a profound loneliness.

A few moments later, Nathaniel entered. “Sir, I am to escort you to a room for the night.”

Flare was led deeper into the palace, through several long hallways, and up two flights of stairs. The block hallways were relatively unadorned, which led him to think that this was the more rarely used part of the palace. The lighting had gotten dimmer, but he hardly noticed. He was much too nervous to more than glance at his surroundings. He kept contemplating having to return to the elves. As he thought of facing the elven royalty, he felt a renewed sense of determination to win his way into the Guardians.

He was so deep into his worrying, that he almost bumped into Nathaniel when the young guard stopped.

“Sir, this will be your room for tonight. Dale will guard the door and be your escort if you wish to leave the room.” Flare had not even noticed that the second guard had followed them. “Have a good night, sir,” Nathaniel said and then walked back the way they had come.

Dale took up his position next to the door and Flare went in. The room was austere in its decoration. The walls and flooring were made of a grey block, with about half of the floor covered by a reddish-brown, oval rug. The bed was along the wall to his left. There was a small window in the far wall, which was covered by dark brown curtains. There was also a small dresser and chair in the corner to his right. Also to his right was a closed door, which upon further inspection led to a small bathroom.

Whether, because of Flare having already slept in the afternoon or due to the fact that he was so nervous, he took several hours to fall asleep.

## Chapter 5

The next morning, the young guard led Flare to the kitchens for breakfast and then took him to meet the king. He had not been able to see very much of the castle the previous night, and he was not impressed. The elven castle was open and airy, full of life, both animals and plants. The human castle was closed in with smaller windows. The walls had been built out of enormous blocks of stone with torches mounted about every ten feet. There were large paintings and murals depicting great kings and courageous heroes. He tried to observe as much as he could, but it quickly became overwhelming.

They soon entered a grand hallway which had two main exits. For the first time today, Flare was impressed. Small windows had been placed above the doorway, and the windows flooded the hall with sunlight. The windows had been designed to reflect the light toward the upper half of the hall, and the effect was stunning. The walls were painted showing the deeds and battles of generations of the Telurian army. The ceiling seemingly had been painted in the far off distant past and showed not just the great deeds of the Telurians, but also of the elves, dwarves, and other races. Flare recognized several great elven kings and warriors, including his own great, great, great, grandfather, King Osturlius.

King Osturlius had possibly been the most powerful elven king of all time. He had died in disgrace some two thousand years ago. Osturlius had helped win the Demon Lord Wars, but had later done some evil deed, which had caused the gods to curse the elves. The legend did not tell what Osturlius had done, but the gods had spoken to a priest in the temple and cursed all elves because of the king's actions. The king, who had been away from the city, was never heard from again. The curse had been evident almost immediately. Before King Osturlius's fall, the average elven life span had been between seventeen and eighteen hundred years. Now, an elf was considered old if he reached the age of eight hundred years, and each generation's life span continued to shrink.

The hallway was lined with small benches and chairs, apparently for those who, like Flare, were waiting to see the king.

As they approached the massive wooden doors at the end of the hallway, Flare was surprised when Dale turned to his left and approached a small hallway set back in the corner. Two guards were stationed on either side of it, and a fifth guard stood in front of the hallway. The guard in front was outfitted more fitting a noble than a common guard. He wore red and brown silks, which poked through the joints of his chain armor. The armor was made of thousands of rings of some metal that Flare was not familiar with, and he wore a sword attached to his belt, that although it looked rather plain, appeared well used. He wore no helmet, but had long, brown hair flowing past his shoulders. He challenged them as they approached.

"Who would enter the king's presence?" His voice was deep.

Dale halted and answered, "Captain, I am a member of the griffin squadron of the castle guard. I was told to bring Flaranthlas to the king's council."

"King Darion had informed me of your visit. However, he is not ready to see you, Prince Flaranthlas. I apologize, but you will have to wait." He motioned them toward a door that led to a small waiting room. "If there is anything you need, please let me know."

"Is he always that abrupt?" Flare asked Dale, as they entered the waiting room.

"Most officers are abrupt. But actually, he was fairly respectful toward you. Probably

because you're royalty. If it had been just me, he would have just barked orders." He paused and looked around the room. "I must leave you now. I have stood guard all night, and I really must get some sleep. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"No, but thank you for everything," Flare managed.

Dale smiled. "Think nothing of it. I was just doing my duty. Luck to you." He turned and left the room, closing the doors behind him.

Time slowly passed. Flare, although a little anxious, was more accepting of what was to come. He spent the morning waiting for the king's summons. Finally, the door opened and a young squire came in.

"Prince Flaranthlas, King Darion will see you."

Panic and anxiety fought to settle on him, but he pushed them away. He followed the squire from the room. He paused momentarily and took a deep breath before entering the king's council room.

The room was octagon shaped and exquisitely decorated. The walls were made of a stunning red wood, which seemed to darken the room. Magnificent blood-red draperies hung at several various points on the walls. There were no torches on the walls, but the room was still brilliantly lit. Flare could not see from where the light was coming. Around an octagon-shaped table sat a large number of finely dressed men, each wearing a different crest. Each crest was the sign of a different house. Most of the men were older, with graying hair.

As Flare entered the room, the scowls on the king's councilors deepened.

The young squire stopped in front of the table and addressed the assembly. "Prince Flaranthlas, ninth in line for the elven throne."

Flare scanned the various faces, looking for a friendly face. But what he saw did little to ease his anxiety. The friendliest faces were simply indifferent, but most of the faces wore angry scowls. He moved forward and stood where the squire had been standing.

The king was sitting in his chair with his arms folded in his lap. "Welcome, Flaranthlas, I hope you slept well." His mood was entirely different than the previous evening. He seemed tired today, whereas the night before he had been more animated.

"I slept fine, thank you," Flare said quietly. He was rather intimidated by the stern counselors. The anxiety was threatening to overwhelm him.

"Flaranthlas, I have discussed your request to enter the Guardians with my counselors. They wish me to deny your request and return you to the elves. However, I have decided that you will be allowed to enter the competition. If you pass the competition, you will be allowed to enter the Guardians. However, if you lose, you will be sent back to the elves. Do you understand this?"

"Yes, sir. May I ask when the entrance competition is to begin?"

The king looked to one of the men sitting to his right. "When is the competition?"

The young man responded, "It is on the first day of summer, some thirty days from now."

The king turned back to Flare. "Will you be ready?"

"Yes sir, but you had suggested a sergeant to help me prepare."

The king turned to a young squire, who was standing behind and to the right. "Summon Sergeant Wellmann."

The squire left and returned through a door that was in the wall behind the king's chair. When he returned, he was followed by a soldier. The soldier was an older man, who had short, graying hair. Chain mail showed through several openings in his brownish-red tunic, and his skin

was brown and wrinkled from being in the sun too long. He entered the room and stood rigid, awaiting the king's attention.

The king did not keep him waiting long. "Sergeant Wellmann, I have an assignment for you. Prince Flaranthlas has been given my blessing to compete in the Guardian entry competition. I want you to work with him and help him prepare. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir," the sergeant snapped quickly. "I will do my best."

"Yes, sergeant, I'm sure you will." The king turned back to Flare, "I want you to listen to everything he says. Preparation is your only hope of getting into the Guardians."

Before Flare could respond, one of the counselors spoke up. "Sir, I must object to his presence." Flare realized it was Duke Angaria, the one who Henotairin had warned him about. "Sir, it is bad enough that elves are allowed into the Guardians, but a member of elvish royalty? You are allowing a poison into our midst. I urge you not to do this."

Several of the other men at the table opened their mouths to speak, but the king spoke first. "Angaria, your opinion of my decision is well known. Your advice is welcome, but I have made my decision." His tone was final.

The king turned his attention back to Flare. "It is my opinion that this will be a turning point between humans and elves." He paused, sighing. "I'm trusting you."

"Thank you, sir," Flare said, walking around the table to where Sergeant Wellmann stood.

The two exited the room together, and Flare slumped noticeably, relieved to be out of the council's presence.

"Sergeant, thank you for your help. When can we begin?"

"We begin immediately. We leave this afternoon," was the gruff response from the soldier.

"Leave? Where are we going? And what about horses and supplies?" Flare asked, startled. He had expected to remain close to the palace.

"No horses. We walk and we take only what the two of us can carry." He stopped, turning toward Flare, and said, "Listen to me. I don't want this job. I'm used to teaching soldiers who have already passed the competition, not coddling elven princes. I'll do what I can, but I only do it because my king has ordered me to." He moved closer. "While I am in charge, you will do what I say without questioning me. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir," Flare replied, somewhat sullenly.

"Good. Do you have anything that you need to get?"

"Yes sir. I left my sword with the soldiers."

"Get it and let's get going."

As Flare retrieved his sword and pack, once again he thought, *What have I gotten myself into?*



## Chapter 6

Flare was tired, wet, and miserable. He and Sergeant Wellmann had left Telur and traveled east for a day, each of them carrying a large pack on their backs as they trudged along through the slow falling rain. Wellmann set a pace that Flare thought would be easy to maintain, but as they walked, the pack on his back got heavier and heavier. The further they traveled, the more his calves hurt, but he endured silently. He was determined to show Wellmann that he would not complain or demand any kind of special treatment. Wellmann probably expected him to ask that they slow down, but he just gritted his teeth and hurried to keep up with the sergeant.

They'd left Telur right after Flare's meeting with the king. He had been surprised that the two packs were already waiting for them when they left the meeting room. The cool morning air chilled him, but he knew the springtime sun would have him sweating soon enough. The guards at the gates hadn't looked twice at the two men and they passed quickly through to the shanty town that lay outside the walls.

Their passage set off a number of dogs to barking, and he thought that anyone who was still sleeping wouldn't be for long. Men and women with wary eyes turned from their fires to watch the two men pass. Several men moved closer to the road to better see them, but one look from Wellmann and the men turned and went on with their business. These men had experience judging who they should leave alone and apparently Wellmann was such a man.

They followed the eastern road through the farmlands that lay all around Telur. The road was well maintained and they made good time, despite the aching in Flare's calves.

They walked for hours until finally, Wellmann called a halt for lunch.

*Good thing*, Flare thought as he dropped his pack to the ground and wiped sweat from his face. His legs were throbbing and a little shaky. He stared upward at the sky, judging how much daylight was still left by the position of the sun. It was an hour or so past high noon and night was still hours away.

They moved off the road into the surrounding grass to eat their quick lunch from the stores that Wellmann had ordered from the kitchen. All in all, the cheese and bread seemed like the best thing Flare had ever eaten. He hadn't realized how hungry he had gotten; instead, he had been focusing on putting one foot in front of the other.

He looked up and caught Wellmann looking at him.

"We'll slow our pace down a little this afternoon," Wellmann said, his eyes studying Flare.

Flare was surprised. It was probably the last thing he had expected the Sergeant to say. Was he showing respect for Flare's lack of complaining, or was he just taking pity on him? He nodded. "Okay. How much further do we have to go?" he asked, hoping it wasn't far.

A smile seemed to flicker across Wellmann's face, but it was gone quickly. "We'll stop about an hour before dark, which will give us time to make camp before the sun goes down."

They finished lunch in silence, washing down the cheese and bread with cool water from their flasks. All too soon, Wellmann stood up and motioned for Flare to put his pack on.

Flare was surprised when they turned northward off the road. He had expected to continue to follow the eastern road, and he could still see farms off in the distance to the south and east. To the north though, the terrain was hillier and it appeared to be the beginning of a small forest.

With a sinking feeling, he realized their pace would slow because of the hilly terrain. It didn't take long for him to miss the flat eastern road.

They made a camp in a clearing located several miles into the forest. Wellmann seemed to know the area well and was pleased with their progress. They set up camp quickly and then prepared dinner. Wellmann was quiet, only speaking to give orders.

After eating, Flare sat next to the fire and tried to stay awake. The combination of the hard march and now having a full stomach was making it difficult for him to keep his eyes open.

"Why don't you get some sleep?" Wellmann said, causing Flare's eyes to pop open.

He had almost fallen asleep sitting on a stump. He rubbed his head and nodded. "Sounds good. I'll see you in the morning."

Wellmann watched Flare. "I'll wake you early tomorrow and it will be a hard day. You will be exhausted tomorrow evening."

*I'm exhausted now!* Flare thought, but said nothing.

Wellmann continued to watch, and Flare flushed wondering if Wellmann knew what he was thinking. "Flare, we only have a few weeks. The training will be difficult, but if you do as I say then you will be as prepared as I can make you."

"I will," Flare said, "thank you."

"Don't thank me, thank the king. I wouldn't be doing this if not for him."

Flare nodded but said nothing.

Three grueling weeks passed slowly. Wellmann had been right – the training had not been easy, and Flare was completely exhausted each day, but he was noticing an improvement. Each morning they sparred and trained with the sword. Initially, Flare had thought himself proficient with the sword, but it only took one sparring session to prove him wrong. The sergeant had him bruised and bleeding from numerous minor cuts. After sparring, they worked to improve his physical condition. He would have to run for long distances, swim in the nearby river, as well as various other exercises. Later in the day, Wellmann would discuss topics that related to the Guardians, such as geography, military strategies, and miscellaneous other subjects that he thought were important.

Over time, Flare felt like he was beginning to earn the sergeant's respect. He was sure that the sergeant expected him to be a spoiled prince needing coddling. But Flare did everything asked of him without complaining. Wellmann asked the impossible from him, probably expecting him to argue. Wellmann seemed pleasantly surprised when Flare attempted to do everything he was told, even things that were impossible. Wellmann was still demanding, but he was friendlier at dinnertime and around the fire at night, although he was still quiet and Flare began to think that was just part of his nature.

After another hard day of training, Flare had used his bow and arrows to bring down a couple of rabbits. They were waiting on the rabbits to finish cooking.

"Sergeant. Why were the Guardians formed?" He had heard this story before from an elf, so he was curious to know if the human version differed.

"There is a long story that answers that question. The Guardians were formed about two thousand years ago, shortly after the Demon Lord Wars." Flare had found it was fairly easy to get Wellmann to discuss history.

"By that time, the Dragon Order had been shrunk to only a few members. I believe that your ancestor, King Osturlius, was one of them. Anyway, there was a rift among the remaining

members, and several of them were exiled. They left the Dragon Order and traveled south, joining the forces of the evil King Bal-zaniake.”

“King Bal-zaniake? I’ve heard the name, but where is he from?” Flare asked, interrupting. Wellmann normally did not like being interrupted, but asking questions was acceptable. He had heard the name Bal-zaniake, but only in hushed tones, as if it was a curse or something.

“King Bal-zaniake was the ruler of the kingdom of Golteranth.” Wellmann said, motioning to Flare, “You may have heard it called Gol or Golt – all three names are the same kingdom. The kingdom was situated in a heavily forested area south of the Silver Mountains. It was a well-developed civilization, but they were a cruel people. The civilization was destroyed at the end of the Demon Lord Wars, and the people hunted mercilessly.”

Wellmann continued, “Anyway, the armies of Bal-zaniake swept northward with surprising speed, conquering and destroying city after city. The exiled Dragon Order members used their wizardry to summon powerful demons, which were almost unstoppable by conventional means. The Dragon Order organized and united the various races to fight Bal-zaniake’s forces. They also summoned and controlled demons and a great battle was fought on the plains of Delteck, just south of Victory Lake.”

“Osturlius led the combined human armies of Telur, Dalar, Ontarin, and Molindor, and a host of other smaller kingdoms.” Wellmann seemed lost in the story. “The elvish and dwarven armies also fought beside them. The battle was horrendous. So bad was the battle, it is said that the plains were ankle deep in blood and gore. When the battle was over, the forces of good were triumphant, and the forces of Bal-zaniake were either dead or scattered. All the members of the Dragon Order, both current and exiled, perished in the battle, with the exception of your forebear. After their death, King Osturlius was the only remaining member of the Dragon Order.”

“After the war, King Osturlius helped rebuild the human cities. It was his idea to establish the Guardians. The Guardians were to guard against kings like Bal-zaniake. The Guardians were not supposed to be controlled by one kingdom. They were supposed to be controlled by the kingdoms and cities acting in cooperation, but since that time, Telur has gained control and they have become the elite part of Telur’s army.”

Wellmann’s version of the story agreed with what Flare had heard, but the elves’ version did not have all of the details. “How did Telur come to control the Guardians?” he asked.

“Well, after the Demon Lord Wars, most of the kingdoms and cities were rebuilding both their cities and their armies. Telur was one of the least damaged by the war, and therefore it quickly became one of the more powerful kingdoms. When King Osturlius died, the elves and dwarves withdrew to their kingdoms and fortresses and left the humans to handle their own affairs. The Telurian royalty quickly seized control of the Guardians, as well as land and provinces that had been formerly controlled by the other human cities.”

Wellmann took the first rabbit off the fire and gingerly handed it to Flare. Flare took it and bounced it from hand to hand so as not to burn himself. Wellmann took the second rabbit for himself.

Wellmann took a bite, as smoke floated up from the steaming hot rabbit, then between bites he said, “Now, Flare, I have a question for you. How did King Osturlius die?”

Flare paused briefly. He was not sure how much he should tell. The story was not a secret, but it was considered embarrassing. “I do not know. According to legend, King Osturlius died while traveling in foreign lands.” He shrugged, a little uncomfortable with the story. “An

elven priest was in the temple late one night, praying and meditating. He was interrupted by a statue that came alive and spoke to him. The gods were mad at the elves and cursed them. The statue said that the elven king had done something that was so despicable that all elves would be punished.” Flare paused, having forgotten his dinner of rapidly cooling rabbit. “Since then, elven life spans have shrunk dramatically, and fewer and fewer elves are born each generation. The power of the elves has declined ever since.”

Wellmann was quiet for several moments. “I’ve never heard that story. I’ve heard rumors, but never from anyone as close as you. That was a bad period for all races.”

They sat there for several moments, each absorbed in his own thoughts. Flare thought of the elven city of Solistine and wondered if he would ever be allowed there again. And, as always, every time he thought of his mother, he experienced a dull ache in his stomach.

After several moments, Wellmann stirred. “Prince Flaranthlas, tell me why you have decided to risk your life to protect humans? You’re a prince and you lived in luxury. Why would you leave that?”

For the first time since arriving in Telur, Flare laughed. The laugh was a good one, coming from the belly. Finally, the laughter subsided. Wellmann sat watching Flare with an amused grin on his face.

“My apologies, Sergeant, but my time in Solistine was anything but luxurious. I was an outcast, and I was reminded of that daily. My mother loved me and she showed it. I believe that my grandfather loved me – he always treated me with respect and kindness. My uncle and cousin both threatened me and I believed them. And I had heard the stories about how elves serve and are accepted in the Guardians. So I hoped to find a place where I would be welcomed.” The smile on Flare’s face slipped a little.

Wellmann nodded. “Elves are accepted in the Guardians, but you’re not the normal elf. I expect you will not find it easy to be accepted anywhere.” Flare’s face fell, but Wellmann continued, “Listen to me, Flare. The people who are willing to accept you will judge you according to your deeds. However, the people who are not willing to accept you will never accept you no matter what you do. You just need to be a good judge of character and learn who to trust and who not to trust.”

They both fell silent. Flare once again wondered if he had made the right decision. He was still wondering when he fell asleep.

The next morning, Wellmann roused Flare at dawn for the morning training session. Flare’s skill with the sword had improved dramatically under the expert tutelage of Wellmann, but he still had never beaten the older man in a dueling session.

The training session was almost over with neither man having established dominance, when Wellmann slipped slightly in the loose gravel. Wellmann was off balance and in an awkward position, so he did what came naturally. He slashed at Flare’s legs, attempting to distract Flare while he regained his balance. Flare was slightly too quick for him, and he acted instinctively. He rammed his sword down on Wellmann’s blade. Wellmann’s blade snapped just below the hilt. He dropped the sword and landed on his side.

“Yield, Sergeant. I won! I’ve finally beaten you!” Flare roared triumphantly.

He was rewarded with a handful of dirt thrown in his face and having his legs jerked out from under him. He landed on his back and had the wind knocked out of him. After wiping the dirt from his eyes, he looked up to find the tip of his own sword resting against his neck.

“Now, you can yield, because I’ve beaten you,” Wellmann said, grinning.

“But . . . you cheated,” was all Flare could manage to say.

“Cheated? What do you think this is, boy? If this had been a real fight, you would be dead, I would be alive, and that is all that matters. There is only one rule when it comes to fighting, and that is win. You had better lose any foolish ideas you have about fighting being noble. It doesn’t matter who your opponent is, your objective is to kill them. Remember that and it will lead you true.” Wellmann removed the sword from Flare’s throat and helped him off the ground. “Do you understand that I’m trying to help you survive?”

“Yes sir,” Flare said weakly.

“Good. Let me get a new sword, and we’ll try it again.”

It was a somewhat dejected Flare that resumed his fighting stance.

## Chapter 7

They returned to the outskirts of Telur the day before the competition. The competition was scheduled to take place on the field outside the eastern wall. Temporary barracks had been set up for the students and instructors. Flare was given an entire tent to himself, and he was nervous and agitated, awaiting the competition to begin.

Sergeant Wellmann had improved his proficiency with the sword and increased Flare's knowledge of human history. Flare also believed himself to be in the best physical condition of his life. He was more prepared now than he had ever been. But would it be enough? His stomach ached with anticipation.

Flare's mixed-race heritage gave him both advantages and disadvantages. Elven senses were sharper than humans. Strength-wise, there were few advantages to being elvish. Typically, elves were taller than humans, but also weaker. But elves were usually quicker and faster.

His quickness should help him in the competition, but he was still not as strong as most of the humans he would be competing against. The confidence he felt when he had fled Solistine was quickly turning to dread at the thought of having to return in disgrace.

He spent the evening before the competition trying to rest. The first several days would be the physical part of the competition, in which strength, quickness, and stamina would be tested. The middle stage would consist of testing the students' familiarization with the more common weapons, such as the sword and bow. The last stage tested the students' knowledge of history and military tactics. The last stage was also meant to test the character of the student. Only students who passed all three stages of the competition would be admitted into the Guardians.

Flare was exceedingly anxious the night before the competition. It was way past midnight when he finally managed to drop off to sleep.

Flare was already awake and waiting when his escort arrived the next morning. He had been standing outside the tent since before the sun had come up, anxiously waiting to get started. The cool morning air gave him chills as he stared out over the field.

"Flare, how did you sleep?" a voice asked pleasantly.

Flare turned and was pleasantly surprised to see Sergeant Wellmann. "Not so well. All I could think about was the competition. I didn't fall asleep until after midnight."

Wellmann nodded and smiled. "I remember when I tried to join the Guardians. Don't think I slept any the entire night before."

"I didn't know that you tried to join the Guardians, Sergeant. If you don't mind, why didn't you make it? I mean, you're an excellent swordsman, and you appear to be physically fit. You seem like the perfect soldier."

Wellmann motioned for them to walk toward the competition field. "I failed because I was not fast enough. I was removed during the first stage." His words were matter of fact, but they had a touch of emotion to them.

Flare was astounded. "But that's absurd. I mean you fight well, you're intelligent . . ."

"Only a fighter who can pass all three stages is considered worthy. I simply couldn't make it." He paused, shrugging his shoulders, the echoes of those distant days playing across his

face. "But after I failed to make it into the Guardians, I joined the regular army, and I rose through the ranks. I had a distinguished military career until a few years ago when I received a minor leg injury in a battle with a goblin raiding party. It was nothing serious, but it kept me from remaining with my unit." He patted his right leg as he spoke, "After that happened, I was allowed to instruct the recruits. And I have remained here as an instructor ever since." He grimaced a little. "I don't enjoy teaching as much as I enjoyed the army."

Flare heard Wellmann's words, but a sinking feeling was starting to settle on him. *If he couldn't make it, then what chance do I have?*

They walked in silence the rest of the way to the assembling field. Wellmann slowed, but kept walking. "Flare, most of the recruits never make it. But if you don't make it, then you simply have to accept it and go on."

*Easy for you to say, Flare thought. You missed your chance thirty years ago, but if I miss my chance, it will be today.*

They emerged from between the temporary dwellings onto the main assembly field. Flare was simply amazed at the number of people gathered on the field. They were scattered around in groups of various sizes, ranging from individuals and small groups, to groups that numbered thirty to forty.

The young warriors who hoped to enter the Guardians were easily picked out of the crowds. They were young, physically fit, and wearing clothes that were made for physical activity.

"Come, Flare. You must register. They're almost ready to begin." Wellmann led him to a wide ring of tables.

After Flare was finished registering, Wellmann motioned toward a large group of men standing in the middle of the field. "Those men are from House Steel. The young man at the middle of the bunch is the fourth son of Lord Steel. His name is Keltin. I expect him to do well."

Flare looked at the young man. He was handsome with shoulder-length blond hair and a muscular physique. Even from this distance, Flare could see that his clothes were expensive. He carried himself with an air of superiority and indifference, and Flare hoped he wouldn't have to train with him. He had grown up in the elven court with too many men just like this young Lord Steel. He sighed, wishing the competition would start.

After a time, the lists were closed and no more applicants would be allowed to enter. Young soldiers in white outfits and red armbands appeared from nowhere. They started shouting orders, and Wellmann leaned over and said something that Flare could not quite make out. Flare turned to ask him what he had said, but jumped and turned back toward the field when a voice shouted close behind him. A young man with a red armband was staring at him from a short distance away.

"Did you hear me?" the young man shouted. "Get over here now and get in line!"

Flare jumped to follow orders. *Not the start that I was hoping for.*

The young warriors and magi were assembled into ranks. Each soldier and their escort was required to stand at attention while they were reviewed by nobles and army officials.

They waited most of the morning, while the hopeful warriors were inspected. The sun was high in the sky, and the morning coolness was long gone when a general finally stopped in front of Flare. Flare tried to ignore the bead of sweat that ran down his cheek.

"So, you are the elven prince who wishes to join the Guardians?" the general asked. His

tone was more curious than anything. The general had dark, tanned skin and short, white hair. He had thick, bushy eyebrows and a small scar on the right side of his neck. His dress uniform seemed out of place on him. He looked like a man who should be wearing armor and fighting goblins, not inspecting young troops. "Tell me, young prince, are you willing to give your life defending Telur?"

"Sir, if that is what is required of me, then I will give my life defending the city and people of Telur. I hope it doesn't come to that, but if I die, I intend to die fighting and to kill as many of the enemy as I can." He answered the question easily – Wellmann had prepared him for these types of questions – but he thought the answer seemed rehearsed.

The general nodded. "Well said, young prince, but I hope you never have to experience that fate. Although, perhaps we are looking too far into the future; you still must win your way into the Guardians." The general paused, "Good luck to you." With that, the general and his entourage left Flare and continued their inspection of the troops.

Wellmann leaned toward Flare and said, "That was General Vergillion. I think your answer impressed him."

They spent the rest of the day being inspected, and then being split into three groups. Each group would undergo the physical part of the competition tomorrow, but each group in a different area. He was disappointed that he had to wait another day for the competition to begin.

Flare patiently waited until it was his turn to be selected and then they were released. Taking Sergeant Wellmann's advice, he retired to his tent so he would be well rested.

The next morning Flare woke well before the sun came up, as did most of the novice students. He ate breakfast, even though he wasn't hungry, in a large tent that was open on the sides. There were a large number of students that were also waiting, but they stayed to themselves.

When breakfast was done he went to the competition field and found where his group was already beginning to assemble.

Sergeant Wellmann soon joined him but remained quiet and reserved.

Soon, the students were all assembled and the competition began.

The three groups were sub-divided into smaller groups. Flare found himself in the company of twenty young men and ten young women. A group of four officers were in charge. They directed the competition and judged the results.

The competition was to remove those soldiers who were average or below average. What this meant was that if all the students were judged above average in an event then they all passed, but if they were all judged average or below average, they all failed.

The first several tests were tests of speed. They competed in short and long races. Flare's performance was excellent in each event, easily outdistancing the slower humans. Hope sprang in him as he easily passed these initial tests, but he tried to be cautious and not get over confident.

He was surprised by how many students were already being released. After the races, six or seven had already failed out. He had expected a large percentage to fail, but not this soon. His stomach ached with worry.

The competitors then had their quickness, agility, and flexibility tested. They competed in exercises that were designed to test these abilities, and once again Flare easily exceeded the abilities of the other students.

After several hours of speed and quickness tests, they reached the section of the tests that



Flare had been dreading – strength and stamina testing. Upper body strength and lower body strength were both tested by various exercises.

The first two tests were simple. The students were forced to do numerous repetitions of push-ups and pull-ups. These tests were easy to judge. If the students did all the repetitions, they passed. However, if they could not do the exercises, then they failed. Only two students were unable to pass. Flare, thanks to Sergeant Wellmann, passed these tests fairly easy.

The next test was considerably harder. It involved an oak plank that was about three-and-a-half-feet long. From each end hung a two-foot chain that attached a metal cube to each of the plank's ends. The plank was placed on the shoulders of the students and ran behind their heads. Each student was required to lift the plank using their back and legs, until they were standing fully erect. Each student had to repeat this procedure twenty-five times.

Flare nervously awaited his turn. With each student's turn, his anxiety continued to grow. Several students were unable to complete this exercise and failed out of the competition. This drill concerned him more than any previous ones had.

Finally, Flare's turn arrived. He knelt down and settled the plank on his shoulders. One judge stood in front of him and was responsible for counting each repetition. A judge also stood on each side of him to observe his attempt.

"Are you ready, son?" the judge in front asked.

"Yes sir."

"It's simple. You have to stand up with the plank twenty-five times. Once you pick up the plank, you cannot set it down. If, in the judge's opinion, you set the plank down and take the weight off your shoulders, then you fail. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Flare said, a huge knot forming in his stomach.

He stood there for several seconds, taking deep breaths and measuring the weight of the plank on his shoulders. Finally, he stood up with the weights swinging from the plank.

"One," the judge in front barked.

*This isn't that heavy, Flare thought. This isn't going to be that hard.*

"Two."

Flare continued lifting the plank, brushing the weight against the ground each time he lowered it.

"Eleven."

Flare began to lose his breath, as the weights felt heavier and heavier with each lifting. His back was starting to hurt, and his legs were feeling weak. He continued to force his legs and back to lift.

"Sixteen."

Flare was short of breath and his legs burned. Each lift was a struggle, but he stayed focused and continued.

"Twenty-one."

Flare lifted the weights again and held it there, trying to catch his breath.

"Continue! Now!" the judge to his right yelled.

Flare immediately lowered the weights, and straining all the way, lifted it back up.

"Twenty-two."

He was red in the face, out of breath, and his back was throbbing. But in spite of this, he forced the weights up again.

"Twenty-three."

Flare's legs were so weak he felt top heavy. He tried to force the weights up again, but his legs almost refused. He stumbled forward, quickly regaining his balance, and kept the weights off the ground. Straining and exhaling all the way, he forced the weights up once again. "Twenty-four."

He was about halfway up on the last repetition when he reached a point where he thought he could go no further. He stood there for several moments, straining to raise the plank one more time.

"Come on boy. Up or down," the judge to his right said.

Flare felt the weight begin to force him down.

He thought of his training with Sergeant Wellmann, but the weights continued to slip down.

He thought of the confidence that the king had displayed in him, but it didn't help.

Finally, he thought of his uncle, Prince Yolstice. The derision and laughter that he would have to face if he failed. Slowly, the weights began to rise. He put every last bit of strength he had into lifting the plank.

"Twenty-five."

Flare fell to his knees, out of breath and exhausted. But he had done it. He smiled knowing that Prince Yolstice had been the deciding advantage.

Flare half-stumbled away from the judges and collapsed in the shade of a huge oak tree.

The test was the last one of the morning, and he had a couple of hours until the tests resumed. Flare ate sparingly, knowing that he needed to eat, but really not wanting anything. He knew there were still some tough tests ahead.

He was surprised there was only a single test in the afternoon. It was a twelve-mile obstacle course. It involved climbing, swimming, and running through wilderness and hills. The swimming and running did not bother him, but the climbing squandered his remaining stamina. He just managed to complete the course in time and collapsed to the ground, worn out.

Sergeant Wellmann was waiting for him at the finish line. "Great job, Flare. You did it!" Wellmann said, leaning over him, and grinning.

"Yeah . . . great," Flare managed, breathing hard. "Where . . . where can I get some water?"

After resting, Flare made his way back toward the temporary shelters.

Wellmann was quiet for most of the trip, but spoke as they were nearing the rooms. "You did really good today. Over one-third of the students failed. You should be proud. But tomorrow will not be easy. They will test your skills to see if you have the potential to be an excellent soldier." He paused. "I think you're more ready for tomorrow than you were for today." Wellmann patted him on the shoulder, "Well, I'm going to let you get your rest. I will see you in the morning."

Even though it was still early in the evening, Flare fell fast asleep. So great was his exhaustion that he slept through till the next morning.

He awoke early, fully rested, although a little sore from the previous day's trials. He dressed quickly and went to get breakfast. He was surprised to see how many fewer students were at breakfast today than yesterday. He ate a small breakfast of fruits, cheese, and bread, and he realized that his appetite was much bigger than yesterday.

After he finished eating, he walked out into the early spring morning. The anxiety was

not gone, but it had lessened tremendously.

There was some time before the tests were supposed to start, so he took his time getting to the assembling field. Some of the students were already gathering in small groups.

Flare spent the time stretching and warming up.

As the starting time approached, more and more of the students arrived. Once again, the students were assembled into formation and then split into three groups.

A general addressed the assembled students, "Today's tests are to see what types of soldiering skills you already possess. These skills are not quite as necessary as those that were tested yesterday, because these skills can be taught to you. However, do not think that these tests are not important, because each of you will be judged on how you handle yourself overall." The general dismissed the students to their tests.

The first test for Flare's group was horsemanship. The students' ability to control a horse through an obstacle course was the main skill being tested. The course had traps, jumping hurdles, and low-hanging obstacles. He performed well in his two times through the course, finishing about middle of the pack in the judges' opinion. Flare was displeased in his finish but satisfied that he passed.

The next area of testing was weaponry. While several common weapons were tested, the two most critical weapons were the sword and bow. In today's testing the judges easily outnumbered the students. In the weaponry tests, the amateur students fought expert instructors. This tended to keep injuries to a minimum, although from time to time injuries did occur.

Flare was easily the best in archery, but several humans were close. He hit the target every time, regardless of whether he was standing still or moving, or whether or not the target was moving.

In the sword test, he was extremely disappointed in his performance, but he still received a good score. The instructor quickly disarmed him while managing to avoid the moves that Flare tried to use against him. Flare, like most of the students, performed poorly with the other weapons that were tested, such as the mace and ax.

After the completion of the weaponry testing, the students were dismissed for lunch. Flare was thoroughly disgusted with his performance so far today and ate his meager lunch in silence, trying not to think about it. After eating he headed to the competition field and waited for the rest of the students to reappear.

To Flare's surprise, the reading, writing, and recognition skills were tested next. He performed flawlessly and made it to the next stage.

The next skill tested was unarmed combat. Here the students were pitted against each other in one-on-one tests of physical skill. The first match for Flare pitted him against a short and skinny human male. Flare had wrestled with elven youths, and Sergeant Wellmann had taught him as much as he could in the four weeks they had trained together. His opponent apparently had never wrestled with anyone, because Flare quickly got a grip on the young man's arm and used the leverage to force him to the ground. Once he had him on the ground, he shoved his knee into the man's back until the judges declared Flare the winner.

Flare's enthusiasm diminished when he saw his next opponent. He was simply huge. He was close to seven feet tall and weighed in excess of two hundred seventy pounds. He was not the typical Telurian citizen. In fact, he probably was a foreigner. He had long, brown hair past his shoulders, was extremely tan, and wore clothes made of a coarse fabric.

They faced each other in the small circle where they would fight. The giant gave Flare a

menacing stare and waited for the judges.

“Start,” called the judge.

Flare had expected the giant to be slow because of his size but was surprised by his speed. As soon as the fight started, the giant was in Flare’s face trying to end this fight quick.

Flare broke to his right trying to keep the huge man from getting a grip on him, but he was tripped as he attempted to slide past the giant. He went down on one knee and was tackled by his opponent. They rolled over with Flare winding up on top. The giant was holding him by the right arm while Flare was leaning over him. Resting on his left knee, Flare quickly found out that his adversary had no intention of letting him get up. He lashed a left-handed punch and landed the blow on the giant’s face.

The giant simply smiled at him. “If that’s the hardest you can hit, you might as well quit now.”

Flare’s response was to bring his right knee up as hard as he could into the giant’s groin. He was pleased when a sharp look of pain appeared on the face of the giant.

“Is that better?” Flare shot back.

Using the momentary weakness of his opponent, Flare propelled himself backward and away from the giant.

The giant rolled over and attempted to stand up. As he knelt there, attempting to stand, he lost track of Flare’s whereabouts and was rewarded with a kick to the face. His nose exploded in a crimson gusher, but the man forced himself off the ground to his feet.

Flare knew this was his chance and tried to press his advantage. The giant who was now standing, roared a battle cry and charged. Once again he attempted to escape to the right, but this time the giant was expecting it, grabbed him, wrapped his long arms around him in a massive bear hug. Flare tried to slam his head into the face of the giant but was unable to reach him. Starting to panic and unable to breathe, he began to see yellow blotches. He kicked futilely, and then remembered no more.

Flare woke up with the judge leaning over him.

“Lie still and catch your breath,” the judge said.

“I lost. Does that mean I failed out of the Guardians?” were the first words out of Flare’s mouth as panic surged through him.

The judge grinned. “You lost, but against that monster, I didn’t give you a chance anyway. You should be proud of how well you did.” The judge’s grin got bigger. “Actually, since he underestimated you, your opponent’s score is lower than yours. Rest here as long as you like. I’m needed elsewhere.”

The judge left, leaving Flare to smile at losing and getting a good score. He leaned back in the shade. There was a cool breeze and he reclined there with his hands placed behind his back. He closed his eyes and rested.

“You fight well,” said a voice from behind him.

Flare twisted on his back to see who had spoken and was surprised to see the giant foreigner.

“Thanks,” Flare replied. “You fight pretty good yourself.”

The big man smiled. “I like you, little man. What’s your name?”

“My name is Flaranthlas, but I prefer to be called Flare,” Flare said, standing.

They grasped hands as the giant said, “My name is Enton. The next time I fight, I want

you fighting beside me, not against me.”

Flare took this as a compliment and was rightfully flattered. After Enton left, a hopeful feeling spread through him. *He accepted me as a fellow soldier*, Flare thought with amazement. *Perhaps I can do this after all.*

He had lost track of time and was surprised that it was already getting dark. After speaking to a judge, he found out that he had survived another day. He was so tired and sore that he hardly even realized he had passed all the physical tests and skill competitions.

Tomorrow was the last day of the competition. Tomorrow, Flare would go before a tribunal of nobles and officers and would have to answer their questions. This was the last part of the test, and it was the last obstacle to him becoming a Guardian.

Flare returned to his tent, undressed, and laid down on the bed, intending to take a quick nap before dinner. He was soon sound asleep.

When Flare woke up the next morning, he could barely get out of bed. His whole body ached and was extremely stiff.

He spent a few minutes stretching, hoping it would ease the soreness of his muscles, but he couldn't tell if it did any good.

He got dressed slowly and straightened up his tent.

Leaving his room, he meandered slowly in the early morning coolness. His stomach started growling, since he had not eaten any dinner the night before.

After a quick breakfast of fruits, cheese, and bread, Flare strolled to the assembling field. He waited patiently as the remaining students began to gather. He was surprised by how few students were still left.

“Good morning, Flare,” came a familiar voice from behind him.

Flare turned as Sergeant Wellmann approached. “Good morning,” he said with a huge grin. “Only one more day to go.”

“Don't forget about today's test. You must pass this review or you fail. You have done wonderfully, but do not get overconfident.”

“But, Sergeant, this review is a measure of the student's character; I shouldn't have a problem with it.”

“I hope you're right, but they will try to trick you and catch you in your words. Just remember to take your time and be honest. In the short time that I have known you, I have come to respect you as a person. You should do fine.”

“How many people are on the tribunal?” Flare asked.

“By tradition, there are seven members and they each get to vote on whether or not the student becomes a Guardian. Four of the seven members have to vote you in.”

Shortly thereafter, the students were assembled and the last test was explained. There were over a hundred different tribunal review boards, so they expected to review all the students by sundown.

Flare's group was taken to a small temporary building that had been hastily put together underneath an oak tree. Once there, they were assigned a number that represented the order in which they would be interviewed. Flare was disappointed; his number was next to last. Make it or not, he simply wished to get it over with.

His anxiety began to grow as the first students entered the building. The first student to be interviewed was a young woman. She remained in the building for almost half an hour. She

emerged in tears.

The review process moved slowly. By lunch, only a third of the students had been in to see the tribunal.

The day seemed to last forever as Flare awaited his turn. This morning he had thought that this test was a simple one, but the longer it took to get it over with, the more his impatience mounted.

It was approaching sundown, when finally, it was his turn to be seen before the tribunal. He entered the makeshift building and found himself in a small waiting room. He waited for several minutes before being ushered into the tribunal room. It was much darker than the waiting room and he waited several moments for his eyes to adjust to the darker interior.

As his eyes adjusted he noticed seven men sitting around a table. Three of the men appeared to be wearing military uniforms and the other four were nobles.

"Welcome, petitioner. State your name."

Flare could not tell who had spoken but he answered quickly, "My name is Flaranthlas."

"Ah, yes. The elven prince who would become a Guardian." This time he did see who had spoken. The speaker was a dark-haired man who was sitting second from the left. It was Duke Angaria. Flare's anxiety increased dramatically. Angaria had interrupted the king in order to object to Flare's presence. Now, instead of needing four of seven votes to get into the Guardians, he needed four of the other six members to vote in his favor.

Angaria continued, "Why should we allow you into the Guardians? Why should we train our enemies to fight? If we train our enemies, will they not use our own tactics to defeat us?"

Flare felt his face flush. "I am not your enemy, and neither are the elves. You seem to forget that my father is, or was, a member of the human delegation to the elven court. Chances are that I am the son of a human noble. Is the fact that I was raised in a foreign land enough of a reason to disown me?"

"You are a poison, and to allow you to contaminate the Guardians would be an absolute disaster. I will –"

Angaria was interrupted by the man who was sitting directly in the middle of the review board. "Duke Angaria, please follow the format of the tribunal. Personal attacks and political opinions are not to affect our purpose. We must treat each applicant fairly."

Angaria replied calmly, "Of course, General. I will be fair, of course, in my decision."

Flare doubted this but he also saw in it a way to turn the tribunal in his favor. If he could bait Angaria into another outburst perhaps he could turn the other members against Angaria. He clung to a glimmer of hope.

The general, who had previously spoken, continued, "Flaranthlas, each member of this tribunal will ask you a single question. After all seven questions have been answered, we will vote on whether or not to allow you into the Guardians. We will ask questions in order from your right to your left. Do you have any questions before we begin?"

"No, General," Flare replied calmly.

The officer to the far right asked the first question. He was a middle-aged man whose black hair had not yet started showing any gray. His nose was crooked, and his sharp, penetrating eyes that seemed to bore right through Flare. Although he was an officer, he had the appearance of nobility as well. He asked what seemed like a fairly routine question. "Flaranthlas, would you die in defense of Telur?"

Flare paused to consider how best to word his response to the question. "Sir, I have no

desire to die and I have no desire to take the life of another. But in joining the Guardians, I will probably have to kill. If I am called upon to give my life in defense of Telur, I will make that sacrifice. And in doing so, I hope that my death will be worthy of both my elven ancestors and of the Guardian tradition.” Flare smiled. “Although, I must say that I hope it doesn’t come to that.”

The officer looked down at the table, and smiled, and made some notes on a piece of paper.

*That might be one of the four votes I need,* Flare thought, hope starting to rise up against the fear in his stomach.

The next person to ask a question was a young blond nobleman. The man had sharp features and pale skin. His clothes were fancy, and his hands looked like they had never seen the first little bit of work. “Tell me, young prince, would you be willing to fight the elves for Telur? Would you be willing to kill the very elves you grew up with?”

This question bothered Flare, as he had tried not to contemplate it. “Sir, I do not know how to answer that question. I hope I am never confronted with that problem, but if I was placed in a position where I could not perform my duties, I would resign my place in the Guardians. I would not let my inability to perform my duty affect the Guardians.”

Flare thought it was a good answer, and he observed approval in several of the men at the table. However, the noble who had asked the question was not satisfied.

“So, Flaranthlas, your answer is no. You would not defend Telur against the elves?”

Flare realized that this vote was lost before he had entered the room so he answered as calmly as he could, “I do not know what I would do in that situation. And I hope that I never have to face it.”

The next question came from a young man who was sitting third from Flare’s right. He appeared to be a cleric or priest of a religious order and wore a plain, brown robe. He had long black hair and a close-cut beard. “Petitioner, describe to me how you would handle the following situation. Let us for a moment imagine that you are a soldier in the Telurian army. Let’s say that your commanding officer orders you to slaughter all the men and animals of a small village and he decides to use the women for the men’s pleasure. What would you do?”

“Sir, I believe that all life is sacred, and I would never partake in slaughtering defenseless farmers. I understand that in a war the resources of the enemy must be destroyed. I could partake in the destruction of the enemies’ food supply and basically starve the enemy into surrendering. I could kill the enemy, but I do not believe in the slaughter of innocents, and I never would allow women to be abused in the way you were suggesting.”

Flare noted approval from several of the questioners.

The next question came from the general who was sitting directly in the middle of the table. He was an older man with short gray hair. “Flaranthlas, you have been raised a member of the elven royalty. Do you believe you can be an effective soldier while surrounded by commoners? And furthermore, can you do all the menial tasks that are required of soldiers?”

Flare answered the general's questions slowly, “Sir, I can only do the best that I can do. I understand I will have to do things that nobody wants to do, and I will do them the best I can. I do not know how else I can answer that question.”

The general responded, “Sometimes, only time can answer a question, and sometimes the answer that you give is not as important as how you give it.”

The general’s response confused him. He couldn’t determine if the general was a favorable vote or an unfavorable vote.

There were three questions left for Flare to answer. Out of the first four, he believed he had two favorable votes, one unfavorable, and one unknown. Of the three questions left, Duke Angaria was an unfavorable vote. That meant of the other two members, he couldn't afford more than one negative vote. He shifted on his feet as he waited for the next question.

The next question came from a nobleman who was sitting to the left of the general. He was an old man with thin, white hair and blotchy skin that hung loosely on his face.

"It seems to me, that your loyalties shift rather easily. First you say that you will not fight elves and then you say you will. It appears to me that you answer the question whatever way you think the tribunal wants you to."

"Sir, I have answered each question honestly," Flare responded. "If the elves attack, then I will defend myself, my comrades, and the city of Telur. But I will not participate in an attack on the eternal city. And if I was willing to help in an attack against my former home, why would you want me in your army?"

The nobleman responded, "I do not believe any individual should be allowed into the Guardians if that individual has a loyalty concern. You are not fit to be in the Guardians."

Flare's heart sank at these words. If the general voted negatively, then he had already lost.

Duke Angaria was next. "I have no question for this applicant. He is a poison, and the mere thought of letting him into the Guardians makes me ill." As he spoke, Angaria folded his arms across his chest and sat back into the chair.

Flare was actually pleased. At least Angaria couldn't try to catch him in his words.

The last question came from the military officer all the way to Flare's left. He was a young man with an intense gaze; he appeared new to being an officer. "Tell me, Flarantlas, do you think that you will receive a fair judgment from this tribunal?"

"Sir, I don't understand the point of the question."

"It's very simple. Do you think this tribunal will treat you fairly in its decision?"

"I believe that most members of this tribunal will judge me based on the answers I have given, but I also think some members came into this meeting with their votes already decided. But may I ask what was the reason for this question?"

"I wanted to see if your answers to the other questions were truthful, and a lot of applicants would have been too intimidated to have answered the way you just did. By answering honestly, I now have faith in your previous answers."

*He may be young, but he's sharp,* Flare thought.

The general said, "Prince Flarantlas, please wait outside while we discuss your petition."

Flare stepped outside and paced nervously. The time went by slowly, even though he knew it had only been several minutes. Finally, he was summoned back into the tribunal room.

The first thing he noticed when he reentered was the absence of Duke Angaria and the other two noblemen who had been against him. They had apparently left via an unseen door, leaving only the three military men and the cleric. He was exceedingly relieved by their absence. He hoped this signified a positive vote for him.

The general spoke, "Congratulations, Flarantlas, you have passed the tribunal's review. You are now a member of the Guardians." He paused. "Are you prepared to accept this commission and act only in the best interests of Telur?"

Flare choked out an ecstatic affirmative answer, the room swirling in front of him.

The general then continued, "Please send in the last petitioner."



Flare left in a daze. Remembering little as he left, he hardly even answered as the last applicant offered congratulations. He walked slowly toward his tent, chills running up and down his spine.

## Chapter 8

Guardian training was simply grueling. The first year consisted of improving the physical condition of the Guardian cadets, as well as instructing them in the art of war. The training was conducted several miles to the west of the capital city of Telur. The terrain was much rougher, and therefore more conducive to improving their physical conditioning.

The fighters had a much tougher training regime than the magi. The fighters started before the sun came up, enduring several hours of intense physical exercise. After a short break, the students were broken into small groups for instruction. They were instructed in fundamental military tactics using historical battles as examples. Flare found these sessions captivating, as the intricacies of military battles were demonstrated to the students. More than once he wondered whether or not he could ever grasp all the complexities that were thrust on the commanding officer. These instructional sessions lasted until an hour before lunch.

The hour immediately before lunch was used to practice the individual skills that each fighter must have to be a successful soldier. Sword fighting, archery, unarmed fighting, and horse handling were practiced, rather extensively, on different days. The use of other weapons were also taught, but not with the intensity of the sword. Flare was excellent at archery and soon rode a horse like a seasoned soldier. He joined the Guardians as a mediocre swordsman, but with his agility and speed, he was always improving. He quickly picked up the moves and tricks that the instructors demonstrated. Most of the other students had received more weapons training growing up, so they were better initially. But since Flare had more to learn, he improved faster.

Every day after lunch, the students were given instruction on various current topics. Geography, history, and political alliances were explained and discussed in great detail. And while most races spoke common, several also had their own language. The students were taught basic phrases and words from the languages of different races.

After another short break, weaponry was once again practiced for several hours. The day was finished by another period of intense physical training. The instructors would drill the students until the point of exhaustion and release them only after darkness or collapse.

A large number of students dropped out quickly after the training began, being simply unable to handle the physical and mental stress that came with the training.

Flare simply had no other options, and so he simply endured the physical exhaustion. Over time, he became aware of the changes the training was making on his body. His muscle tone and flexibility developed quickly, and his stamina and durability gradually improved.

He was gradually accepted as a comrade by most of the other cadets, but he would not have considered many of them his friends. Because of the intensity of the Guardian training, very little time was left for anything else. The recruits spent a year following this schedule.

At the beginning of the second year, the students were broken into teams of thirteen students called squads. While the first year had taught the students how to fight, the second year taught them how to fight in an organized group.

There was a small graduation ceremony to mark the successful completion of the first year, and then they were each assigned to a squad at dusk and told to report there immediately. Flare was caught by surprise, not knowing they would be relocated so soon, but he gladly went to his new squad's barrack. Each squad would spend the next year living together to learn

companionship and trust.

The barrack was a one-story building made of logs, and placed at the edge of the forest. It was made to be functional, nothing else. He was amazed that thirteen students were expected to live in such a small structure. There was a single door with a window on each side.

It took Flare several minutes to find his assigned barrack. When he found the lodge, the rest of the squad members were already assembled.

The interior was brightly lit by an oil lamp sitting in the middle of the room. There was an officer sitting on a stool beside the lamp. The students were sitting in a half circle, with their backs to Flare, and with the officer sitting in the middle of the students.

The officer spoke as Flare entered, "Sit in the chair at the end." He pointed to a chair at the end of the semi-circle of students.

Flare sat down quickly in the chair, looking around as he did so. The barrack was a single large room. Bunk beds were lined along the walls, and a fireplace was in the middle of the back wall. He sat next to a human woman who appeared to be a soldier. He did not recognize her, but it wasn't all that unusual. There were still a large number of cadets in training.

The officer waited for Flare to sit down, then said, "Now that the squad is completely assembled, let me introduce myself. I am Sergeant Danlion, and I will be in charge of your instruction." He spoke quietly, but his voice had the ring of authority. "You come from many different backgrounds, and some of you are even foreigners, but you must become like brothers." He paused, gauging the affect his words had on the young students. He made eye contact with each student, measuring each one. Flare felt uncomfortable under the piercing gaze of the sergeant, and slowly let his gaze drop.

"Now you know who I am, but you do not know your fellow soldiers. So, I want each of you to introduce yourself and tell a little about yourselves. I think we will start at this end," he said, pointing to his left.

The young man was a muscular warrior. He had short, brown hair and was clean shaven. "My name is Derek Aldanon," he said slowly, seeming unsure of himself. "I have always lived in Telur, since my father is a merchant who deals in spices." He stopped speaking, and looked expectantly at the sergeant.

"Good. Thank you, Derek. Young lady, you're next," Danlion said.

The woman had black hair that reached down past her shoulders, dark eyes, and high, angular cheekbones. She was wearing brown trousers and a green tunic. "My name is Heather Elt, and I trained in the druid monastery of Garath Al-Denari. I am a good warrior and an excellent woodsman."

The sergeant merely nodded at the next soldier.

The next soldier had skin that was as black as night. Flare had seen several Guardian soldiers with similarly colored skin, but he had not had a chance to get to know any of them. He was extremely muscular, and his hair hung down in long braids. "My name is Del-Atock A'bamani. I am the nineteenth son of King Del-Otin, who rules the kingdom of Entucca. Entucca and Telur have been allies for centuries, and as part of our treaty, each king must have one son train as a Guardian. I consider it an honor to have been chosen to represent Entucca, and I will dedicate my life for you." The warrior's words were not extremely clear, but good enough.

Flare believed in the sincerity of Del-Atock's words and was glad that he had been placed in the same squad.

"Tell me," Danlion said, speaking to Del-Atock, "do you mind being called Del, or do

you prefer Del-Atock?”

“Please call me Atock. My people are not formal with their friends or family.”

“Fine. You’re next,” Danlion said to the next student.

Flare had not observed each student when he came in, and he was shocked when he realized that there was another elf in the room. He knew that elves sometimes joined the Guardians, but he didn’t expect to have another elf in his squad.

“My name is Enstorion, and I am a mage,” was the short statement given by the male elf. He was tall with shoulder-length blond hair. He had a sharp hawkish nose, was rather thin, and had extremely pale skin. He spoke quietly, as if he was whispering.

Enstorion was apparently not interested in volunteering any information, so Danlion prompted him. “Enstorion, tell us why you have joined the Guardians, and why you left the elven homeland.”

The elf stared at Danlion for several moments before he answered, “I left because the elves are too restrictive in their teachings. They are afraid to learn and explore the magical arts. By joining the Guardians, I can increase my chances of being apprenticed to a high level magician.”

Flare found the answer troubling. Enstorion had shown no concern or interest in the Guardians, and was only interested in furthering his own ambitions.

The next student was Enton, the warrior who Flare had fought when he was taking the Guardian entrance tests. Flare was surprised that he had not recognized him sooner. He was simply huge. He was nearly seven feet tall, and easily two hundred and eighty pounds. He had brown hair that was braided and reached half way down his back. He had a wide nose, which looked like it had been broken several times. Flare remembered sheepishly that he might have broken it himself when they wrestled in the entrance trials.

“I am called Enton Dale, and I am from the Yurkut tribe. We live to the northwest where the mountains meet the forests. We are loyal subjects of Telur and have been for centuries. I was chosen for the Guardians, because I am the best warrior of my people.” It was a claim that was easy enough to believe.

The next two warriors turned out to be brothers and excellent bow-men. They were both clean shaven, but the younger had shoulder-length brown hair and was called Callin Obiah. The older brother, whose name was Trestus Obiah, had short hair that was cut just below his ears. Both men were tall and slim, with a dark complexion. Trestus seemed quiet and reserved, but Callin was cocky and even joked with the group. They both seemed trustworthy.

A human female mage was next. She had long, black hair, which stood out against her pale complexion. She was of average height, but appeared to have a muscular body. “My name is Mikela Shaltin, and I too am a mage. I have lived my entire life in Telur . . . um, when I was a child, a mage from the Doe-Rushkin academy discovered that I had magical talent. I have trained there since I was eight. It was my mentor who recommended that I join the Guardians. He said I was talented and that my physical prowess would make me stand out.”

*Do all mages think only of themselves?* Flare wondered. Enstorion said he joined the Guardians so he could find a good mentor, and now Mikela said she wanted to stand out among the Guardians. He hoped he was mistaken about the two, but he shrugged and let it go. Only time would tell.

The next member of the unit to speak was a human female. She had dirty-blond hair, and a fair complexion. Her nose was slightly too large for her face, and she had rather rough skin.

Flare thought her pleasant looking, but not beautiful. "My name is Murleen Plurin, and I too grew up in Telur. My father is a weapon smith."

A human male warrior named Aaron Imes followed Murleen. He was about six feet tall, and had a muscular build. He was clean shaven, with brown short hair. "I joined the Guardians, as my father did before me. My father died tracking a goblin raiding party in the mountains to the west. I hope to honor his memory with my service."

The next soldier was a handsome warrior. He was tall, about six foot four, and had white-blond shoulder length hair. "My name is Phillip Connell, and my father is the Duke of Atwell. I am an excellent fighter and a natural leader." He seemed arrogant, and reminded Flare of his own cousin.

The young lady sitting immediately to Flare's right was next. She had blond hair that was pulled up on the top of her head. She had a pale complexion, blue eyes, and a small nose. Her mouth seemed small for her face, but many men would find her attractive. She was wearing a grey tunic and faded blue leggings. "My name is Kara Elba, and I'm a priestess of Adel. My role in this squad is to act as a spiritual guide to all of you, and as a priestess, I have been trained in the healing arts." She paused briefly, thinking about what else to say. "I'm not a great fighter, but I can handle myself."

Flare was comforted to know that a priestess would be assigned to their squad. Should one of them be seriously wounded, Kara should be able to help them and ease their suffering.

The sergeant nodded at Flare, and he felt his stomach tighten as the other students turned his way.

"My name is Flaranthlas. I am the grandson of the elven King, Feilolas. I'm a fighter, and I joined the Guardians because I was hoping to find acceptance in the Guardians." There was compassion, respect, and even doubt on the faces of the others. There was contempt on the face of Phillip, and Flare made a mental note to keep his eye on him.

Sergeant Danlion leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms across his chest. "Good. I think each of you has a better understanding of your fellow soldiers. I will begin your instruction as a team tomorrow. There are many things for you to learn still. Over the next couple of months, there will be competitions among some of you for positions of leadership in this squad. Ultimately, I will make the decision, but I will be testing you to determine who is the best man or woman to lead."

"Custom dictates that the leader be a warrior, but that is the only restriction on my choice. Man or woman, foreigner or native, it doesn't matter. I can choose whomever I believe to be the best choice. Do you have any questions?" He waited patiently for several moments, before continuing, "For the next six months you will eat, sleep, and live with each other. After six months, your training will be scaled back, and you will assume some guard duties in and around the castle. Your squad training will continue, but it will just be reduced. At the end of this year, your squad will be assigned regular duties with the army of Telur. This training is of utmost importance to you. I suggest you heed my words and those of the other instructors. We know what we're talking about. Are there any questions?"

There was dead silence, so Danlion continued, "Well then, I suggest that you get some sleep. We are getting up before dawn for a ten-mile run."

The sergeant retired to a small room at the far end of the lodge, and each of the students picked a bed. There wasn't much talking.

As Flare dropped off to sleep, he wondered what tomorrow would bring.

For the next several months, they drilled as a squad and were instructed in military tactics. Sergeant Danlion took them on difficult marches, forcing the squad members to rely on each other. They also competed against the other squads, so the students would have battle experience. Initially, mock battles were fought between squads to reinforce their lessons on military tactics. As time progressed, multiple squads were joined together to form a regiment to fight mock battles against other regiments.

Over time, Flare got to know the other squad members. Atock and Enton, the two foreign warriors, were likable and trustworthy and he quickly became friends with them. Callin, the cocky, outgoing bow-man also was easy to become friends with, although his brazen personality made him seem less reliable and more foolish.

Mikela, the female mage, was shy and unused to close friends, but opened up as time passed. She became a respected comrade, if not a good friend.

Derek, the human male fighter, was friendly but conservative. He appeared to be trustworthy and reliable, but was not very outgoing. Flare's opinion of him was that he would make an excellent leader. He took orders well, and he was single-minded when it came to getting a job done. Plus, he wasn't easily distracted by things that did not relate to the mission.

Heather, the female human fighter, and Kara, the female priestess, were reliable and trustworthy, but they were cold and distant. Kara was simply absorbed by her studies and meditations of her religion, and did not mean to be unfriendly. Heather, however, was guarded and appeared to be afraid to open up her inner self to her comrades. Flare trusted both of these ladies, but was afraid of the problems the lack of communication might cause.

Trestus, the other bow-man, and the human fighter, Aaron, were both friendly and honorable, but had quiet personalities. Flare trusted them, and slowly developed a firm friendship with them.

Murleen, the female fighter, also seemed honorable and reliable. She was a relentless fighter, never giving up on a fight. The members quickly learned that she could be trusted not to make stupid mistakes under pressure.

Phillip and Enstorion worried Flare. Phillip, the human noble-born fighter, seemed to think only of himself and was used to getting his way. In spite of his personality, he was an excellent warrior with a natural feel of how to lead. He had a disdain of foreigners, and Flare felt that it was bound to cause problems.

Enstorion, the elven mage, performed his job well, but had little communication with his comrades, unless his job demanded it. He kept to himself and spoke only when he was spoken to, and then only in short, abrupt comments.

The squad's cohesiveness improved with each and every day, though. The fighters took turns leading the squad so Sergeant Danlion could judge the leadership capabilities of each. Over a two-month period, fighter after fighter was eliminated from consideration for leadership of the squad.

Atock, Phillip, and Flare were the last three remaining fighters in consideration, when Sergeant Danlion addressed the squad one morning in front of the barrack.

Even though he was still under consideration, Flare did not expect to be chosen as the leader. Phillip was the obvious choice, because of his excellent fighting skills and his unrelenting determination to get a job done. Supposedly, the job was open to all regardless of where they were from, but if the choice was between an elven prince, and a Telurian nobleman, Flare

expected the Telurian nobleman to win easily.

Fall was arriving, so the temperature was cool, but not yet cold. The students were wearing the green-and-brown uniforms that soldiers worked and traveled in, as they stood rigidly awaiting their orders.

Sergeant Danlion stood in front of the squad with his hands on his hips, as he looked up and down the line of soldiers. "The time has come for me to choose the leader of this squad. Phillip, Flaranthlas, and Atock are the remaining soldiers from which I must choose. Atock, stand forward." Atock stepped forward, but remained silent. Sergeant Danlion came and stood in front of him. "Atock, you are a good warrior, and you are an excellent addition to this squad. However, I have decided that you are not the one to lead. Your people highly favor honor, and in our exercises, you have demonstrated that you would rather fight to the death of the last man, rather than retreat. Now, honor is a noble trait, but you need to learn that sometimes you can win by retreating. I do not want you to take this as an insult, because you are an integral part of this team. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir!" was Atock's curt response. He had shown no emotion as Sergeant Danlion had spoken to him, and Flare, who had seen Atock mad before, didn't think he was angry now.

"Step back, Atock." Sergeant Danlion said, walking back to where he was centered in front of the squad. "That's leaves Phillip and Flare." Danlion slowly walked over to stand in front of Phillip.

"Phillip, you have the ability to lead and the single-mindedness to get the mission accomplished. However, in your single-mindedness, you have lost your compassion. You have shown your willingness to send soldier after soldier to their death. Granted, these were just exercises, but I can only assume that you will lead in battle the same way you lead in drill."

Flare could see the muscles tighten in Phillip's jaws. From what Flare knew of the man, he was probably about ready to explode.

Sergeant Danlion slowly walked to a position directly in front of Flare. "Flare, you also have the ability to lead, and you have the compassion to effectively guide those under your command, but you appear to lack the toughness to kill effectively. In our exercises, you have easily put your squad in a position to win, but you have hesitated once you reached this point. This hesitation could cost you your life. And if you are the leader, this hesitation could also cost every squad member their life."

The sergeant paced back the other direction in front of the squad. "So whom do I pick? Well . . ." he took a deep breath, "according to tradition, if I cannot pick the best one of you, then leadership of the squad is left up to a trial of arms between the last two candidates. So, this afternoon, Flare and Phillip will cross swords, and the winner will be the leader. Do you have any questions?"

"No, sir!" Flare and Phillip answered in unison.

"Good, the fight will take place on the drilling field. The squad is dismissed until then. Flare, Phillip, take time to prepare yourselves."

The squad broke up and drifted in different directions, leaving Enton, Atock, and Flare.

Flare spoke first, "I'm sorry, Atock. You will definitely make an excellent leader one day. I guess it will just take a little longer."

Atock shrugged his shoulders. "The sergeant's right. This army is different than my people, but I will lead, even here." He paused momentarily, looking at the departing Phillip. "Can you beat him?"

Flare sighed, considering. "I don't know. I'm a good swordsman, but he seems truly gifted. I guess I'll have to fight a defensive battle and try to exploit his mistakes."

Enton, who had been quietly listening, slapped Flare on the shoulder. "That hardly sounds like the man who almost bested me in unarmed combat. You're both good, but he is overconfident. His overconfidence is his weakness."

"I agree. It's an equal fight. Flare, you can take him. Besides," Atock said with a smile, "who wants to follow that pompous ass?"

Flare tried not to think about the fight, though it was nearly impossible not to. By the time the fight was ready to begin, he resigned himself to doing his best. This was another step in gaining the respect and acceptance that he so dearly desired. It would not bode well to fail.

The drilling field was roughly three hundred yards wide by four hundred yards deep. The field was mainly covered with grass, but there also were some patches of sand and dirt. The field was partially torn up, due to the large amount of drilling and horseback riding.

Flare arrived several minutes early, but found the rest of the squad already there, standing around the edges of a huge chalk circle. There was no conversation as he approached the circle, but he saw encouraging smiles and nods.

Flare stopped, blinking in surprise. Phillip was standing on the opposite side of the circle talking to Duke Angaria. What was Angaria doing here? Obviously, Angaria would want Phillip to lead the squad, but his presence seemed out of place.

*Damn, now I definitely want to win, just to show that bastard up,* Flare thought. Success would be so much better, and failure would be so much more bitter.

Sergeant Danlion motioned for both fighters to approach him. He was standing in the middle of the twenty-five-foot circle, holding a sword in each hand.

Flare stepped over the white line, joining Phillip and Danlion.

"This fight will determine who leads this squad. The only weapon you will be allowed to use is one of these two swords. The fight will go until one fighter submits or until one fighter cannot continue. If you step outside of the circle, then you forfeit. If you wish to submit, you must yell your submission. Men have died in these fights, so submit when you are beaten. Flarantlas, do you have any questions?"

Flare, who had gotten more nervous listening to the rules, was pleased that his voice was firm, "No, Sergeant."

"Phillip, do you have any questions?"

"No, sir!" was Phillip's quick response.

"Okay, I want both of you to back up to opposite sides of the circle." When both fighters had their heels on the line, Danlion threw a sword at each fighter's feet. "Pick them up and begin!"

Flare picked his sword up and cautiously walked toward the center of the circle. He was relieved to see that the swords did not have a sharp edge but were flattened instead. It would still hurt, but it shouldn't cut. Phillip had picked his sword up and was testing the weight of it.

"You know I'm going to beat you, so I suggest you submit quickly. We wouldn't want anything to happen to you, now would we?" Phillip said, holding his sword with the point facing down.

Flare didn't answer. He knew his best chance was to let Phillip press the attack and for him to stand back and attempt to take advantage of a mistake. But Phillip was good, and Flare



was not optimistic.

In the blink of an eye, the point of Phillip's sword shot up and he lunged. Flare instinctively jerked his sword upward and toward the right, deflecting Phillip's sword outside the frame of his body. The clang of the two swords hadn't even started to fade, when Phillip threw an elbow, hitting Flare in the face. The force of the blow sent him sprawling backwards and onto his back. He used the momentum to roll over and onto his feet; he immediately had to duck to avoid a vicious swing of Phillip's sword. Phillip was attempting to finish the fight quickly, and he wasn't giving Flare a chance to find any mistakes.

Flare's duck forced him to one knee, and with the hard swing forcing Phillip off balance, he seized the opportunity and drove his sword upward with both hands.

Most men would have been skewered, but Phillip's quickness saved him. Without changing his grip, he jammed his sword downward, deflecting Flare's sword.

The two fighters separated and backed away from each other, collecting their breaths. Flare was pleased, having survived the first barrage that Phillip had thrown his way.

The pause in the fight allowed him to realize that the squad was cheering and shouting instructions. He had been so engrossed that he hadn't even noticed.

"Not bad. I thought the fight would be over by now," Phillip scoffed.

"Me too, I'm surprised you're still standing," Flare bantered right back.

Phillip just grunted in reply and raised his sword.

Both fighters had two-handed grips on their swords, as they inched toward each other. Minor clinks and clanks reverberated from their swords as they jockeyed for position.

Flare, trying to catch Phillip off guard, lunged forward, attempting to punch Phillip with the dull blade. But Phillip was ready and side-stepped the lunge, then brought his sword down on top of Flare's sword. The jarring impact made Flare's arm go numb, and he almost dropped his sword.

Flare, sensing his predicament, dropped to the ground and rolled away from Phillip. He quickly regained his feet and tried to ignore the ache in his right arm. The grin on Phillip's face was that much more infuriating.

Phillip stepped close and answered Flare's lunge with an overhead swing of his own.

Flare braced himself, but his arm still almost collapsed under the impact.

Phillip brought his sword in a sidewise swing from his left to the right, which Flare deflected with some pain. Phillip then jabbed, but Flare brought his sword in from the side and deflected the blow, falling to his knees. Flare's sword was left in a vulnerable position, and Phillip disarmed him with a flick of his wrist.

Flare steadied himself by putting his right hand down on the sand.

"Submit or die," Phillip said, panting for breath. He was standing to Flare's left, with his sword dangling toward the ground.

Flare let his shoulders slump as if he had given up, even as his hand cupped the sand. Then, with a sudden motion, he jerked his body around and threw the sand directly into Phillip's face.

Phillip staggered backward and tried to wipe the sand from his eyes. Momentarily blinded, Phillip was exceedingly surprised when he received a sharp kick to the groin. He dropped his sword and fell to the ground in the fetal position.

Flare picked up Phillip's sword and rested the tip to Phillip's throat.

"Submit," Flare rasped out.

Phillip was lying on the ground, holding his sore manhood, as tears rolled down his face. Flare pushed the tip of the sword harder against Phillip's throat.

"Wait! I submit," Phillip managed to choke out between clenched teeth.

Sergeant Danlion immediately jumped between the two, elbowing Flare away. He helped Phillip to his feet and turned toward Flare. "Congratulations, Flare. You have won the right to be the leader of this squad. Being the leader carries —"

"Wait!" a voice called out. Duke Angaria stepped slowly into the dueling circle. "He cheated. It was not a fair fight. Honor dictates that Phillip be declared the victor."

Sergeant Danlion turned to face Duke Angaria. "I saw nothing unfair about the fight. What do you mean it was unfair?"

"He threw sand in Phillip's face after Phillip had beaten him."

"Flare, what is the objective of a fight?" Sergeant Danlion asked.

Flare grinned at Duke Angaria. "To win, Sir!"

"That is correct. If this had been a real battle, Flare would be alive and Phillip would be dead," Sergeant Danlion said. "That is all that matters. Flare is victorious; therefore, he will lead the squad."

Duke Angaria's face gradually turned red. "This is not over with. You will regret this!" He turned and stomped away from the field.

The other members of the squad gathered around Flare, congratulating him and slapping him on the back.

Sergeant Danlion observed the celebration for several moments. "Are you finished?" he asked, hands on his hips. The squad members quieted and came to attention, even Phillip. Danlion slowly paced back and forth in front. "Now that we have settled the issue of leadership, there is something far more important for you to begin." He smiled. "I am granting the squad a two day liberty, beginning right now . . ."

Phillip pulled Flare to the side as the rest of the squad dispersed. "Flare. I wanted to congratulate you," he said. He actually smiled. "I still think that I would make a better leader, but I guess that will have to wait." He paused and looked off in the distance, "I'm not used to being second best at anything, and I hate losing to you, but I wanted to let you know I will do my best to follow your orders."

"Thank you. I appreciate you talking to me about this."

Phillip nodded. "I will do my best."

"That's all I expect." Flare said, smiling.

The squad split into their separate groups and went their own way. Flare went with Atock and Enton, based solely on Enton's claim of "knowing a place".

They traveled through the streets of Telur to a back alley. A large wooden building loomed in front of them, and Flare was getting apprehensive. The gray paint was peeling off the outside, and a large portion of the lower boards were starting to rot. They walked up the crumbling steps to the doorway.

The difference between the outside and the inside was the difference between night and day. The interior had beautiful wooden floors, which were covered with elaborately decorated rugs. The walls were made of a hardwood stained a dark brown. The door had opened into a small foyer and a circular stairwell led upward to the second floor. Directly in front of the doorway was a short hallway which led to a large room. Soft music and laughter was coming from the room.

Flare finally found the nerve to speak up, and asked, "Enton, what exactly is this place?"

Enton laughed. "Flare, it's a brothel, and who cares how I found out about it. All that matters is that we are about to be surrounded by gorgeous willing women." He paused for a moment, and a devilish grin appeared on his face. "You have done this before, haven't you?"

"No," Flare answered. Enton and Atock both smiled. "But I know what goes where and why."

The laughter of the men brought an older lady from the larger room. She was dressed in a slinky, white, loose-fitting dress, and she had short, white hair. Her skin was wrinkled, and her eyes suggested that she had seen more than her share of bar fights. "Welcome, gentlemen. We're always happy to serve the fighting men of Telur. The young ladies are in the main room, straight ahead here. And it will only cost you four silver pieces for an hour. Or one gold piece will get you the whole night." She stepped back against the wall, motioning them on through into the main room.

Flare mumbled, "thanks," as he passed the older lady. His stomach was doing flips.

The room was dimly lit and an intoxicating smoke filled the air. Red cloth covered benches and chairs that were scattered around the room. There were several men and a large number of scantily clad women. The music was coming from the corner, where several men were playing instruments. A voluptuous blond girl was dancing completely nude in front of the musicians. A bar lined the wall to Flare's left, and men and women sat on stools in front of it.

Flare was extremely aroused by the dance the nude girl was performing, but it was rather embarrassing.

"Flare. Here's a potion that I got at the apothecary. It should protect you," Enton said.

"Protect me from what?" Flare asked.

Enton smile. "Trust me. Take it. Tomorrow, you and I need to talk about some things."

Flare sniffed the potion, and then drank it despite the horrible taste.

Enton and Atock wandered away, leaving Flare all alone.

He walked over toward the bar and sat next to a young lady. She had short, sandy-blond hair, and a long, lean body. Her skin was smooth, and she had a small, perfectly shaped mouth. Her breasts were not as large as most of the women in the room, but they were by no means small. She was a very attractive woman.

Flare looked her in the eye and was embarrassed to see that she had been observing him observing her. He could feel the heat rising in his face, and judging by her smile, she could see it too.

"Do you like what you see?" she asked with a wicked grin.

"Yes, you're very beautiful." He was so nervous; he couldn't hold eye contact with her.

"What's your name?"

"Lalonna. What's yours?"

"Flaranthlas, but you can call me Flare."

"Well, Flare. Want to go upstairs?" she asked, placing her hand on his.

"Upstairs?"

She smiled, devilishly. "Yes. There's where I normally conduct business."

That did not sound good. The word "business" just seemed wrong. "Thanks, but no. I'll just wait on my friends."

Lalonna was surprised. "Are you sure?"

Flare swallowed hard. "Yes. Thank you." He turned away, his heart pounding in his ears.

Flare left the brothel and waited for Atock and Enton outside the front door. He had meant to stay inside, but after a third woman had propositioned him, he felt it was time to go.

Less than ten minutes later, Atock emerged. He saw Flare and smiled. "You weren't in there for very long. You know, where I come from, the men have been known to last an hour and a half making love," Atock said with a lopsided impish grin.

Flare returned the grin; no reason to mention that he hadn't gone upstairs. "Atock, if the men of Entucca last so long, then why did you come out after only ten minutes?"

Atock smiled. "It's been a long time."

## Chapter 9

It was a somewhat hungover and sick group of soldiers that assembled in front of their barrack after their leave was complete. Flare was swaying back and forth, attempting to maintain formation. Sergeant Danlion stood before the squad, smiling. "I see you enjoyed your liberty."

The sergeant's tone was irritating; his amusement at their situation was obvious. Flare fought back the urge to vomit and closed his eyes.

"I wish to explain the next six months of your training," Sergeant Danlion said. "Now that the squad training is complete, your squad will practice with the other squads in regiment and division drill. You will spend two days a week practicing military combat maneuvers."

Danlion paced back and forth in front. "The drill is only a small part of your training. You will accompany the regular army units as they perform their assigned duties. You will assist them in their guard duties and join them on their patrol routes. But make no mistake, they will be in charge. You will follow their orders, and without question." He paused. "Any questions?"

Several soldiers swayed back and forth, and most were pale. Sergeant Danlion shook his head in disgust. "Kara, see what you can do for them. They have a long day ahead, and I don't want to be embarrassed."

"Yes, Sergeant," Kara answered.

Flare winced; judging by the sound of her voice, she wasn't sick at all. *I guess she doesn't drink*, he thought.

Flare was waiting patiently for Kara to reach him with a god-awful smelling concoction, when Sergeant Danlion addressed the squad again. "You will report to Sergeant Latts immediately. He will make sure you are familiar with the layout of the castle, because you begin assisting the guards tonight." The sergeant moved closer to Flare. "I want you take the squad to Sergeant Latts." He looked down the line of soldiers.

Kara was slowly working her way down the line, giving those who were sick the concoction to drink. Whatever it was, it seemed to be helping, but the soldiers still looked queasy.

"On second thought, take the squad through the kitchens. Make sure they all eat something."

"Yes, sir!" Flare said, desperately trying not to think about eating.

They spent the rest of the day in the castle, becoming familiar with its layout and their required duties. Strict rules of behavior were explained to them, and Sergeant Latts, who was a pleasant old soldier, explained that no breaches of etiquette would be allowed.

Late that evening, each member was assigned a different location to stand guard. Flare was the last to be assigned a location. Latts led him through the nicer parts of the palace until they entered a large anteroom. Several chairs and couches were against the walls, and a large, thick rug covered the floor in the center of the room. The room was well lit by lamps placed in the corners. On the far wall, a guard stood at attention beside another door. The guard stood straighter when they entered the room.

"Flare, this is the room of Princess Elizabeth, so please be on your best behavior."

Flare's mouth dropped open. "This is the princess's room?" he asked, surprised.

"This is the princess's anteroom. Visitors wait here for an audience with her. Her rooms are through that doorway," he said, pointing to the door, "and are much nicer."

“Soldier, you're relieved,” Latts said, and exchanged salutes with the soldier.

“Excuse me,” Flare said without thinking, “is the princess already in bed?”

The soldier stopped. “No, she had dinner with the king, and is probably still there. Uh, and besides, Princess Elizabeth sometimes takes her time returning to her room,” the soldier said, looking uncomfortable.

Latts motioned toward the door. “It's pretty simple. Just stand there and don't let anyone through. If anyone wants to speak with the princess, just open the door and notify one of her servants. They'll let you know her answer.” Latts ran a hand through his hair. “Shouldn't be anyone trying to see the princess this late at night, anyway.” He considered Flare for a moment, “the Lieutenant might look in on you tonight.”

*Was that a warning?* Flare wondered.

“Any questions?” Latts asked.

“Uh, no, Sergeant,” he said slowly.

Latts nodded. “I'll leave you then. I have to report the duty assignments.”

Flare had been standing guard for about thirty minutes, shifting from foot to foot, when the princess entered the anteroom.

King Darion had three daughters, and Princess Elizabeth was the middle one. She was eighteen years old, blond, and beautiful. Her blond hair had just a touch of brown. Her eyes were blue, and she had smooth, tanned skin. She had high cheekbones and full lips, and Flare was surprised that she was only eighteen. Her body had already developed the curves that attracted men, and perhaps she was just slightly overdeveloped.

Flare snapped to attention. She paused in front of him and tilted her head slightly to one side. She moved closer, and he became uncomfortably aware of her low-cut dress. “What's your name?”

“Flaranthlas.” His mouth was suddenly dry.

Princess Elizabeth ran her hand along the right side of his head, touching his ear. “You look like an elf, but yet you don't.”

“I'm half elven,” Flare said.

She grinned wickedly, walking through the door. “I've never had an elf before.” She paused. “I mean I've never met an elf before.” Her grin deepened.

The door closed behind her, and Flare's shoulders slumped. What in the name of the abyss had she meant by that? He took a deep breath. The thoughts swirling through his mind seemed awfully inappropriate.

The princess had only been in her room for several moments when the door to the hallway opened, and Latts and another guard entered.

The surprise was evident on Flare's face. “Sergeant. Is something wrong?”

“No. Nothing's wrong, but I have to change the guard assignments. I need you to come with me, and Balandon will guard Princess Elizabeth.”

Flare hesitated just a moment, then said, “Yes, sir.”

Walking through the halls, a suspicion began to grow in Flare's thoughts, until he got the nerve to speak. “Sergeant, why were the guard assignments changed?”

Latts glanced at him. “It's nothing to worry about. It happens all the time.”

“Am I the reason?”

Latts stopped. He sighed, but didn't say anything.

“The king didn’t want me guarding his daughter, did he?” Flare asked.

“When I reported the guard assignments to the Lieutenant, he ordered me to change them.”

“Does the king think I would take advantage of one of his daughters? I swear to you I would never do that.”

Latts smiled. “Flare, it's nothing like that. A lot of the king’s councilors don’t like you. If anything happens to one of the princesses, you would be held more accountable than a typical guard.”

Flare’s ill mood eased at these words, but he was still disgusted with the whole situation. He was striving to be accepted, but in Telur, as it had been in Solistine, he was not being judged on his actions. He was being judged on people’s perception of him. When he arrived, it had made him mad, but now the anger was fading and a depressing resignation was starting to settle in.

Flare spoke in a quiet but forceful voice, “I have done everything asked of me. I have sworn my loyalty to King Darion. So why am I doubted?”

Latts watched as the emotions played across Flare’s face. “The king doesn’t doubt your loyalty or your abilities.” He paused, leaning against the wall. “There is something else I should tell you.” He took a deep breath. “I’m ordering you not to repeat this, but the king’s daughters are rumored to be well versed in the ways of the world.”

Confusion wrinkled Flare's forehead. What did that mean?

“Supposedly, they have shared the beds with their guards on occasion, and they are very vindictive. I have heard that they ruined the careers of several bright, young soldiers. I believe the king is trying to protect you from a similar fate. All it would take to ruin you would be a rumor about you and a princess. But if you’re not assigned to guard any of the princesses, you cannot be implicated in any wrongdoing with them. Do you understand that this is in your best interest?”

“Yes, sir,” Flare said quietly, looking a little sullen. “Well, what will I be guarding tonight? The stables or the kitchen?”

Latts chuckled, and slapped Flare on the shoulder, leading them down the hallway again. “Actually, Flare, I have a much more interesting assignment for you. I’m going to assign you to the king’s magician. Her name is Cassandra MonDarbi.”

“Cassandra,” Flare repeated with just a touch of awe in his voice. The anger at being removed from the princess's anteroom was quickly replaced with a surge of excitement and interest.

“Cassandra doesn't normally have a guard on her quarters, and who can blame her? I mean, who would enter a magic-user's room without permission?”

Surprised, Flare asked, “Then why am I guarding her tonight?”

Latts didn't seem to notice the interruption. “I'm not sure why, but on occasion she requests that a guard be posted in her room.”

With excitement mounting, Flare followed Latts to the northeast corner of the palace. The magician’s chambers were located in a tower that was in an empty part of the castle. Maybe the nobles didn't like having a magician as a neighbor.

Cassandra was stunning. She was simply the most beautiful woman Flare had ever seen. She had long black hair, and smooth tan skin. She was tall, had a slim waist, and was wearing a tight ankle-length red dress. By far the most intoxicating thing was her eyes. They were a magnetic deep gray. Her eyes seemed to catch him and hold him in their depths.

Latts introduced them, and Flare mumbled a greeting. Cassandra smiled at his stumbling, and he realized with horror that he was blushing.

Latts excused himself with a grin.

Cassandra's room was decorated nicely, but it was apparent that functionality was more important to her than luxury. The stone walls were lined with bookshelves. The floor was bare without any rugs or coverings. To his left was a bar which ran most of the width of the room, effectively splitting the room in half. In the half of the room to Flare's left were several tables. In this half of the room there were two couches, several chairs, and two more tables.

Directly opposite Flare, a balcony overlooked the courtyard. The balcony doors were open, and the breeze ruffled the deep purple curtains that hung on the door.

There were no torches in the room, but the room was still brilliantly lit.

To his right, a doorway led to Cassandra's bedchambers. The thought of her bedchambers sent a chill down his back. He felt his face getting warm, as he started to blush again, and he looked to see if Cassandra noticed.

She had been coolly appraising him, as he scanned the room.

"Lady Cassandra, I'll be right outside the door if you need anything," Flare said.

Cassandra crossed her arms, frowning, "First of all, I am not royalty. You will address me as Cassandra. And secondly, I need you in here."

Flare's heart skipped a beat. "In here?"

"The magical experiments I perform sometimes require a man's strength. I have made arrangements to have my guard stationed inside the room. The sergeant knows this and has no problems with it."

"As you wish," Flare said, taking up position beside the door. Cassandra moved to one of the tables and began reading a large leather-bound book.

Cassandra spent several hours preparing and practicing for a magical spell. At first, Flare had found this deeply interesting, but his interest waned over time, and he stood there rocking from foot to foot.

When she was ready, she spoke for the first time in hours, startling him back to attention. "All right. I'm ready to begin, but I don't think I will need your help after all. I want you to be quiet and say nothing. Do you understand?"

"Yes, perfectly."

Enthralled, Flare watched as Cassandra began casting her spell. She used reagents, which she mixed in a small bowl in the middle of the table. While mixing, she spoke slowly and haltingly in a different language. Startled, Flare realized that Cassandra was trying to speak high elven. Although, her pronunciation was less than perfect.

There were bowls of different sizes scattered across the table. Hourglasses of various heights sat along the right side of the table. A large book rested in the center of the table. He rose up on his tiptoes, trying to get a better look.

He continued to watch for several hours as Cassandra continued. He had never imagined that magic was so complicated. Cassandra proceeded slowly, using the different-sized hourglasses to time different steps in the magic spell.

For the first step of the spell, Cassandra mixed reagents in a bowl and then ignited them. She immediately turned over one of the medium-sized hourglasses and began chanting in high elven while she kept an eye on the hourglass.

When the last grain of sand dropped from the top half of the hourglass, Cassandra



poured a handful of what looked like dust into the bowl.

Flare could only wonder at how valuable the ingredients were. He moved several steps closer to get a better look. The small flame in the bowl immediately erupted into a flaming pillar, shooting toward the ceiling. Startled, he jumped backward, bumping into the wall next to the door. His heart was beating like crazy.

He quickly looked at Cassandra, hoping he hadn't disturbed her. Much to his relief, she didn't appear to have noticed. He turned his attention back to the bowl, where the flame turned from yellow to a bright blue, and finally changed to white.

Flare tore his eyes from the flame to look at Cassandra's face. She was still calm. Apparently, everything was happening as she had planned.

Even though the flame was running along the ceiling, it didn't appear to be burning or scorching it. And for all the flame in the room, the temperature still felt the same as before.

The flame abruptly died out, and Cassandra turned over the smallest hourglass. She stood up and scooped up a large bowl. Then she dumped the white sand from the bowl onto the floor in front of a five-foot mirror. She dropped to her knees, right in the middle of the sand, and she began tracing runes and symbols.

She frantically traced the runes, only pausing momentarily to glance at the hourglass. She was still tracing the runes, when the last sand dropped from the top of the hourglass. She grimaced and returned to the table.

For almost two hours, he watched Cassandra perform the steps of the magic spell. Reagents were added to the bowl and mixed in. Phrases and words of high elven were spoken at various points in the process. At one point she paused for so long that Flare was beginning to think that the casting was over, until he noticed Cassandra watching the moon. When she was satisfied, she started again.

Finally, she stood and spoke in a loud voice, "*Alundia sezkiar desnarrath. Alul dā lateth! Paloze en-tafille al gedst. Quintill fa la-cantorri. Yud xil akto!*" When she finished speaking, she collapsed into a chair. She was covered in sweat and looked exhausted.

She forced herself back up with her hands supporting her against the table.

Flare was drained just looking at her. "What now? What's supposed to happen?"

"Well, if everything I did was correct, then I will soon add this tome of magic to my collection. It's ancient and extremely valuable. I gained it at great personal risk." Cassandra's eyes burned with intensity.

"How will we know if it worked?"

Her eyes fluttered, almost closing. "In a moment the book should glow a brilliant white. When it does, the spells protecting it have been deactivated. Do you understand?"

"Yes, but this seems awfully complicated just to read a book."

Cassandra smiled and brushed back a strand of loose hair. "The magician that once owned this book was very powerful, and he was paranoid about protecting his secrets. Quite a few magicians have died trying to retrieve his spells. It was not easy for me to . . ."

Cassandra suddenly straightened up, the color draining from her face. Her eyes focused on something that was roughly halfway between them.

"What's the . . ." Flare started to ask, but cut off at an explosion of light and rushing winds.

An oval-shaped disk of light hung suspended in the middle of the room. The disk was generating winds that were swirling in a circular motion, like a tornado. Books and papers flew

about the room, and with a start Flare realized the winds were increasing.

A book went flying across the room, entered the disk of light, and emerged unscathed from the other side of the disk.

Cassandra came around the left side of the table and hollered, "Get out, or the winds will suck us in!"

The winds were already making it hard for him to stand, so he grabbed ahold of the door with his left hand to steady himself. "Hurry!" he shouted to Cassandra.

Cassandra skirted the disk, giving it a wide berth. The winds were increasing, and she was having a difficult time keeping her balance.

She was about even with the disk, just about to pass it, when an enormously thick book slammed into the back of her head, knocking her to the ground.

"Damn!" Even holding on to the door, Flare was having a hard time maintaining his balance.

A stool flew through the air, and Flare instinctively reached out and swatted it away. But in doing so, he released his hold on the door.

He immediately fell prone to the floor, hoping the winds wouldn't be able to move him.

Cassandra was still lying on the floor, but the winds were slowly dragging her towards the disk.

Acting without thinking, Flare put his right foot against the wall and lunged toward the magician. The force of his lunge propelled him between Cassandra and the disk. The pull of the winds were stronger than he had realized and started pulling him slowly toward the disk.

Grabbing Cassandra around the waist, Flare pulled her to him. He dug the toes of his boots into the floor, and with the fingernails of his left hand, tried to hold onto one of the cracks between the blocks in the floor.

They continued to slide toward the disk, and Flare could think of nothing to stop their momentum.

He was starting to panic when his eyes came back to the cracks in the floor. He pulled the knife from its sheath on his belt and drove it down into the crack. Then, wrapping his left arm around the knife, he held onto Cassandra with his right.

Flare said a silent prayer, hoping the knife would be enough to save their lives.

The winds had increased beyond belief. Books, papers, magical instruments, and furniture were flying around the room.

Flare's arm was aching with the strain of holding both of them. The strain was becoming too much as the winds increased, and he didn't know how much longer he could hold on.

The disk shimmered and disappeared with a loud pop. In the moment it disappeared, the winds seemed to reverse with equal force. Flare and Cassandra were tossed in the opposite direction. He landed first, and Cassandra came down hard on top of him, knocking the breath from his lungs.

The books and the other assorted heavier instruments slammed down hard to the floor. The papers settled easier.

They lay there for several moments, breathing hard. He was starting to worry about her when a low moan escaped her lips.

"What happened?" Cassandra asked.

"You hit your head, so I had to save you."

"Save me, how?"

“I drove my knife between the cracks in the floor and used it to hold us away from the disk until it disappeared. Are you all right?”

Cassandra sat up slowly and touched her head. “My head hurts, but I’ll be okay. Thanks to you.” She smiled, and what a smile it was. Right then and there, he was quite sure that her smile had melted men’s hearts before.

“Do you want me to get a healer for you?”

“No. I’ll be fine, but please help me to the bedroom.”

Her bedroom, unlike the outer room, was lavishly decorated. There were thick carpets, beautiful paintings, and a huge bed that rested on a dais in the middle of the room.

Flare carried Cassandra and gently placed her down beside the bed. She wobbled, but remained standing. When she almost fell, he quickly grabbed her arm to support her.

“Thank you,” she said, smiling. “I guess I needed your help after all.”

She smiled at him as he helped her into bed, and pulled a blanket up to her chin.

“If you’re okay, then I will start straightening up the outer room,” Flare said.

“No!” Cassandra exclaimed, sitting back up. “You must not touch anything out there. My magical supplies are also protected by spells. They can kill you just by touching them. All I want you to do is stand guard at the door, and I’ll clean it up later. Do you understand?” Her eyes burned with such a fire that he almost took a step backwards.

“Yes,” he said hesitantly, “I understand. Anything else?”

Cassandra smiled, lying back down on the bed. “No, but thank you. You saved my life, and you have my thanks. Please stand guard outside my quarters for the remainder of your watch.”

He smiled and left the room. Walking through the rubble that had been her outer room made him grimace. He had the shakes for several moments as the excitement of the events hit him.

Flare was relieved of his guard duties when the sun came up, and he stumbled back to his barrack. Half of the squad had beaten him back, and they wasted no time collapsing into bed. He was asleep before the rest of the squad even struggled in.

After about four hours of sleep, the soldiers were awoken by Sergeant Latts beating two small swords together. “Wake up!” he shouted.

The soldiers, blurry-eyed and weary, quickly stood at attention at the end of their bunks.

Latts looked them up and down with a nasty smile on his face. “You got five minutes to get your uniforms on and get outside.”

The squad drilled with the other squads in regiment formation. The main emphasis of the practice was to improve the ability of the squads to function as a team and to follow orders as a large group.

The practice lasted until sundown, at which time the squad was dismissed and given four hours of free time. Most of the squad, including Flare, used this time to sleep.

Returning to the castle for another night of guard duty, Flare was exhausted. Lack of sleep combined with the intense physical drilling made it hard for him to focus.

The other squad members were also exhausted, which tended to make them testy. Ignoring their groans, he assembled the squad and marched them to where Latts was waiting for them in the castle.

Latts wasted no time assigning the guard duties once again.

As they walked away from where Atock had been stationed, Latts appraised Flare with a knowing smile. "So, tell me, what did you do to impress the magician? She personally paid me a visit and requested you as her guard for as long as you are on guard duty."

Flare felt the heat rise on his face, at what the sergeant's grin suggested. "Nothing! All I did was help her with her experiment. Why? What did you think I did?"

"Come now. This isn't the king's daughter we're talking about. If she wishes the pleasure of your company, well, good for you. But the least you could do is tell me about it."

The feeling of heat spread across his face. "Sergeant, nothing happened. I helped her with her experiment, and that's all. Besides, even if something had happened, I wouldn't be telling you about it." Flare grinned. "Do you know what magicians can do to a person?"

"She is a beautiful woman, but did you know she has been the dream of every man in the palace for some fifty years?"

Flare's forehead wrinkled in puzzlement. "What do you mean fifty years? She can't be more than thirty at the most."

Latts smiled. "You would think so, wouldn't you? But you know what? Her appearance hasn't changed in the twenty-two years that I've been here. Why don't you ask her how old she is? I would love to know the answer myself."

"But how is that possible? She's human, and humans don't live that long."

Sergeant Latts shrugged. "She's a magician. I guess she has spells that help her maintain her youth." The sergeant seemed concerned, "But be careful, Flare. Magicians are funny people. You can't trust them anymore than you can a goblin. Magicians use people to further their own plans. Just keep your head about you and don't let your emotions rule your judgment."

As they walked, Flare breathed a deep sigh, and once again thought, *What have I gotten myself into?*

Flare was stunned when he entered Cassandra's room. When he left, the room had been a disaster. But tonight, the room looked as if nothing had ever happened. The books were back in their shelves, and the furniture had either been replaced or magically repaired.

Cassandra also looked better than when he had left. She was wearing an ankle-length white dress, which was low cut and displayed her full bosom. Her hair flowed down her back and around her shoulders, and her lips were a deep, sinful red. She smiled dazzlingly.

"Hello, Flare. How are you tonight?" Cassandra asked, sitting on a small couch.

"Good. How about you. How's your head feeling?"

"Much better, thank you. Please come here and sit down on the couch next to me," she said, patting the couch. "I want to talk about last night."

Flare sat down next to Cassandra on the all too small couch. He was extremely uncomfortable and couldn't figure out what to do with his hands.

She just smiled at his uneasiness, as if she was used to the effect she had on men. "What do you think went wrong with my spell last night?"

"Well . . . no disrespect intended, but you're the magician. Don't you know what happened?"

"I want to hear your opinion. Perhaps you saw something that I missed."

Flare paused momentarily, recalling the night before. "Your high elven is not very good, and possibly your miss-pronunciation of the elvish words caused something to go awry." He

went through the spell steps in his mind several times, before his face lit up. “Tell me. When you were tracing the runes in the sand, did you finish?”

“Yes, I finished, but I was in such a rush I think I made some mistakes.”

“Would that have caused the spell to fail?”

“It’s possible. You see, each step in a magic spell must be precisely performed, and the more powerful a spell is, the more tragic a misstep can be. How much do you know about magic?”

“Very little. I have seen some of the spells that the magicians in the Guardians use, but those are only spells used in combat.”

Cassandra leaned against the arm of the couch. “Most of the spells used in combat are weaker spells. There is a very good reason for this. If a minor spell is miscast, then the results are usually insignificant, but if a major spell is miscast, then the magician’s life is in danger, and possibly the lives of those around them. In the thick of the battle, a magician doesn’t have the time or conditions to cast a major spell.”

Flare was becoming more comfortable listening to Cassandra.

“Most likely the only time major spells can be used in combat is when a castle or town is under siege. Then the more powerful magicians can cast their powerful spells from the safety of the enemies’ camp.”

She paused, her eyes appraising Flare. “Do you understand?”

“Yes, but I have a question. If this is just a spell book, then why are you using such a powerful spell?”

“The magician who owned this spell book was remarkably powerful and talented. He invented spells that are actually multiple interwoven smaller spells, and his work is legendary. Magicians have died trying to open his spell books. I had never cast the spell that I used last night, but I felt it was my best chance of claiming the book. I think I am going to need your help.”

Flare sat up straight, surprised. “What did you say? Did you say my help?”

“Yes. You can help me with the elven language and assist me in the actual spell casting.” Cassandra leaned closer, placing her hand on his thigh. Her face was just inches from his. “I would be most grateful if you would assist me. If you make me happy, then perhaps we could find a way for me to make you happy. Will you help me?”

Flare’s heart was racing, and his whole body was on fire. The closeness of Cassandra, and what she was offering him, was suffocating.

“Yes, if you’ll teach me about magic.” He was so surprised at the words that came out of his mouth that he almost looked around to see who had spoken.

Cassandra blinked in surprise and pulled away. “What? It’s forbidden for warriors to use magic. You should know that.”

Flare had never had a desire to learn magic, but the events of the previous evening were intriguing. “You are asking me to use magic. I am only asking to have enough knowledge to know what I’m doing and the dangers I face. Besides, the knowledge you reveal to me may save my life someday.” Noting the look of confusion on Cassandra’s face, Flare continued, “We have magicians in our army. It’s likely that our enemies will have magic users, and if I know something of magic, perhaps it will save my life.”

“Flare, as an apprentice, I took an oath not to teach magic to warriors. I don’t think it wise to break my oath.”

“What do you mean when you say ‘teach magic to warriors’?”

Cassandra was flustered by the question. “It’s obvious. It means to impart knowledge of magic to warriors.”

Flare stood up. “When you were explaining the difference in spells to me, you were ‘imparting knowledge of magic to a warrior.’ Your oath is already broken and is no longer an adequate excuse. If you want my help, then you will have to teach me about the basic use of magic.”

Cassandra bounded to her feet, her face turning red, and fire dancing in her eyes. She balled her hands into tight fists by her sides. “Do not forget who you’re talking to! You’re a soldier, and your duty is to follow orders, and I’m ordering you to assist me.”

Flare was strangely calm, whereas Cassandra was in a temper. He answered her outburst quietly, but forcefully, “As far as you’re concerned, I’m just another guard. My duty is to guard you and your chambers, and I will do that to the best of my abilities. That is all that duty requires of me.”

He was amazed at his own calmness, considering he was staring into the face of an angry magician. It felt like he was watching the whole exchange instead of partaking. It felt so right, and the words seemed to flow out of him. “I don’t expect to be a master after several months of instruction, but I do believe that you can help me to understand the basic workings of magic.”

Cassandra’s mouth opened and closed several times, as she was obviously surprised at the path the conversation had taken. Finally, with a look of absolute amazement on her face, she asked, “You’re not the least bit scared of me, are you?”

“What’s to be scared of?” Flare replied, grinning.

Cassandra sighed and absently chewed on one of fingernails. She sat back down, “All right then, if I instruct you, will you help me?”

“I have already answered that question once. You know I will.” He felt his excitement grow as she considered.

“Flare, if I do this, you must promise to take this to your grave. Do you understand? The punishment for what we are about to do is beyond horrible. Neither you or I ever want to be found out.” She wore a look of fear.

He smiled at her, his excitement growing. “Don’t worry. No one will ever find out.”

She seemed slightly more relaxed, but only slightly. “All right, how much do you know about magic?”

“Nothing,” Flare answered, smiling and sitting back down beside Cassandra. “I don’t know the first thing about magic.”

“Well, there are several different disciplines of the arcane arts. The most common is simply called magic. It’s what I practice. Magicians use words of power, reagents, and rituals to influence and alter our environment. An alchemist who mixes a potion to help heal injury, a dwarven weapons master who forges a magical weapon, or a magician such as myself are examples of this type of magic.”

She stood and paced back and forth in front of the couch. “My magic uses the desires or needs of the caster. You must focus your thoughts on what it is you desire while you cast the spell. The great magicians can easily focus their thoughts on their needs and desires. This makes it easier for them to cast spells.”

Cassandra paused, as if expecting a question, and Flare did not disappoint her.

“How does this differ from Sorcery?”

“Sorcerers control their spirit and use this control to affect their surroundings. Magic is learned, but the ability to do sorcery is something a person is born with. Some people have it, while others do not.”

Cassandra paused, and Flare quickly interrupted her. “Sorcerers use their spirit?”

She didn’t seem to mind the interruption. “Each person has a life force, or spirit, which is what makes each person unique. Most people cannot exercise control over their spirit, but some, a select few, can control their spirits to affect their surroundings.” She frowned. “Sorcery has been declining over the centuries.”

“Why? Why are there fewer sorcerers being born?”

“Nobody knows. King Osturlius was a master sorcerer, and ever since his death, ever since his curse, sorcery has been on the decline.”

He frowned at her answer but said nothing. It always seemed to come back to Osturlius.

Cassandra continued her pacing in front of the couch. She was like a teacher warming to her subject. “Wizardry is also called ‘summoning’ or ‘conjuring’. A wizard uses the elements to create a doorway to another dimension, through which a demon is summoned. Then the wizard uses his will to control the creature. I am sure you are aware that the practice of wizardry has been forbidden since the times of Osturlius. He was one of the last known practitioners of this black art.”

“Cassandra, why was wizardry forbidden? I mean without the demons that the Dragon Order summoned, the southern armies would have conquered the northern kingdoms and plunged us into millennia of slavery. Why it is considered a black art if it can be used for good?”

“Flare, some things must be accepted, as they are told to you. If there had never been any wizards, then the Demon Lord Wars would never have taken place and thousands of men would not have died. The death and destruction that took place would never have happened.”

Something seemed wrong with this argument. If one person picked up a hammer and beat another person's head in, it didn't make the hammer bad, just the person. “Just because the art was misused does not mean that the art itself is bad. It just means that the art was abused by evil men.” Flare shrugged. “I mean couldn’t magicians abuse their power to hurt people?”

“Yes, they could, but the damage a renegade wizard can cause is far more than what a renegade magician could, and wizardry has been declared a ‘black art’ and its use is prohibited.”

Flare interjected a question when Cassandra paused. “How was wizardry banned? I mean, who decides these kinds of things?” He had a vision of an ancient room where a group of aged men with long white beards decided what was allowed.

“Well, each discipline of magic is controlled by the masters from that art. And after the death of King Osturlius, the masters of sorcery and the master magicians joined with the leaders of the northern kingdoms and the church and outlawed wizardry. It was an unheard of gathering, and it has never been duplicated since.” She looked thoughtful, “But you must understand that the gathering only outlawed wizardry because of the devastation of the Demon Lord Wars.”

Flare wanted to continue the discussion on wizardry, but she did not look receptive.

“Well, Flare, that’s the background on the magic disciplines. It’s late, and I’m still tired after last night, so if you don’t mind, let’s stop here. We can start again tomorrow night.” Cassandra stood up and moved toward the bedroom. She stopped, then turned around, “Have you thought any more of the reward I offered you?”

She placed a hand on her chest as she spoke, and Flare remembered her promise of the delights she could show him. “Uh, yes, I have.” A smile bloomed on his face.

Cassandra walked over and placed her hand on his right cheek. She seemed to purr as she spoke, “Well, it's too bad you chose learning about magic to be your reward. Isn't it?” She turned and sauntered to her bedroom.

He hungrily watched her strut across the room and close the door behind her. *Damn! I should have demanded that she teach me about magic and sleep with me.*



## Chapter 10

Over the next several months, Cassandra continued to teach Flare about magic. He showed a real aptitude for the art and absorbed everything she taught him.

At first, Cassandra was amazed by how fast and easy he learned magic, but she soon got used to it. The instruction she was giving sped up as she became more comfortable with his abilities. Although Cassandra taught Flare the basics, she refused to let him cast a spell. That was a line that she still absolutely refused to cross.

At the same time that Cassandra was instructing Flare, his squad continued to drill with the other squads in mock battles. Their cohesion, both as a squad and as a regiment, continued to improve. He was impressed with the process made by the squad, but also worried what would happen after graduation.

With Flare's help, Cassandra quickly improved her high elven. Unfortunately, time was beginning to run out as his Guardian training was nearing completion. Soon, he began spending all his free time with Cassandra, trying to remove the guarding spells from the tome of magic. The inhabitants of the castle, and the other members of his squad, wrote off the numerous visits to Cassandra as young love. Neither of them minded, as the misconception gave them the time, and privacy, to continue working.

He was off duty the night before graduation, but instead of celebrating with his fellow Guardians, he was with Cassandra.

"Cassandra, are you sure you want to try this again? We've barely survived the first three attempts."

Cassandra was busy preparing the ingredients of the spell and didn't even slow down. "This could be our last chance. After you graduate tomorrow, you could be reassigned. We must succeed tonight. I will cast the spell, but I want you near in case I make a mistake." She paused, stepping closer. She placed her hands on his shoulders and held his gaze with her own. "Are you ready?"

Flare took a deep breath. "Sure." Under his breath, he mumbled, "With my luck, we'll die in the attempt right before graduation." His hands were slightly clammy, an affect that Cassandra always had on him.

He stood behind her, as she began the spell process. The steps were performed in the same sequence as they had been done previously, but Cassandra pronunciation of the elven language was much smoother than ever before.

As before, the flame emerged from the bowl and ran across the ceiling. The white sand was dumped on the floor, with Cassandra and Flare both tracing the runes in the sand.

For several hours, he assisted with the spell, but he began to get worried. With each step, Cassandra performed slower and slower. It was almost as if she was completely out of energy and was having trouble remembering the steps.

Several times he had to help her complete a step, and each time the step was completed just before time ran out.

Finally, the last step was complete, and all that was left was for Cassandra to speak the ancient phrase. He waited expectantly for her to speak, but she didn't. She just stood there with a dazed and confused look on her face.

"Cassandra, speak the words! Hurry!" There was a feeling of a building pressure. The

magic was building up like it had the first night.

Cassandra raised her right hand to her temple and slowly mumbled, "What? What are you talking about? What words?"

Each of the three previous spell attempts, Cassandra had spoken the words right on time. "Cassandra! What's the matter? Hurry and speak the words!"

"What? I'm not quite . . ."

Knowing that something had gone wrong, Flare rose and spoke in a loud voice, "*Alundia sezkiat desnarrath. Alul dā lateth! Paloze en-tafille al gedst. Quintill fa la-cantorri. Yud xil akto!*"

The magical energy that had been building suddenly disappeared. The magic book, which was sitting on the desk, suddenly glowed a brilliant white, getting brighter and brighter, and then finally went dim.

Flare turned to Cassandra, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Cassandra, are you all right? What happened?"

"I don't know. I felt dizzy, and I couldn't remember the last step of the spell." She looked confused and then smiled. "Flare, we did it. The guarding spells have been removed. The book is mine."

Grinning and laughing, she embraced him in a huge bear hug. Flare was surprised when she kissed him. He was even more surprised when the kiss lingered.

"Cassandra, the graduation ceremony is in a few hours."

Cassandra wrapped her arm around Flare's waist and pulled him against her. "I'll be sure to wake you tomorrow in plenty of time." She kissed him again passionately. "I've already taught you magic, but now I have something else I would like to teach you."

Leading Flare by the hand, Cassandra paused only long enough to pick up the magic book before entering the bedroom.

He followed her through the door. The excitement coursing through his body was followed closely by a bothersome anxiety.

The next day at graduation Flare was exhausted, but he wouldn't have foregone the experience for anything.

The squads were joined into regiments, then into divisions where they patiently stood waiting for the various generals and lords who were reviewing them. The reviewing process lasted the whole day, and Flare only managed to stand at perfect attention while he was being reviewed.

In the middle of the inspection field, a large wooden platform had been built with stairs leading up to it.

The generals and lords each reviewed each student, making sure their appearance was satisfactory. Flare was immensely relieved that Duke Angaria was not part of the reviewing team. It would not have surprised him if the man had shown up just to insult him.

If the student's appearance was satisfactory, then each reviewer asked a simple question, and passed on. The questions were simple, and the soldiers had no problem answering them.

After the graduation review, King Darion climbed the stairs to the platform and addressed the soldiers.

"I have the great honor of proclaiming you the newest members of the Guardians."

A great cheer arose from the soldiers at the king's words.

Flare cheered just as loudly as the rest. It felt as if a huge weight had been flung from his

shoulders.

King Darion stood on the platform, listening to the cheering. He allowed the cheering to continue for several minutes before he raised his arms for silence.

The cheering quieted immediately. “You have done well, and your efforts have made us proud. Your two years of training are complete. You are the essence of what Guardians are supposed to be. But answer me this: Would you give your lives in defense of Telur?”

As one, the soldiers screamed, “Yes!”

The smile faded from King Darion’s face “Unfortunately, you may get your chance.”

King Darion’s words had a dampening effect on the mood of the soldiers.

“I am going to have to ask you to mature faster than you planned. We have discovered that the forces of Dalar and Ontaria are gathering to the east and south of us. I have ordered that all available soldiers be sent to our borders with these two areas. Your commanders will give you your orders. Good luck to you all. I have the utmost faith that each of you will strive to uphold both the reputation of the Guardians and the reputation of Telur, and that you’ll fight and die if necessary. Do us proud.” The king paused a moment, then climbed down from the platform.

Flare’s heart skipped several beats. The chance to earn glory would come sooner than he had expected, and he wasn’t sure if that was good or not.

The weight that had been removed from his shoulders had returned, although the burden was not near what it had been.

## Chapter 11

The day after graduation, Flare was summoned by Sergeant Danlion. He already knew the troops were being sent eastward, and he relished the idea of helping to defend the eastern territories.

He found Danlion having a discussion with several other sergeants and military officers. They were standing near the edge of the field upon which the graduation ceremonies had been held.

Flare stood to the side and waited patiently. It took several moments before Danlion noticed him, but he quickly broke free of the other men and approached.

Sergeant Danlion stopped in front of him, and ignoring Flare's salute, slapped him on the shoulder. "You're early, Flare, but that's good. Promptness is an excellent attribute for a soldier."

"Thank you, sir."

"I sent for you to give you your orders." Sergeant Danlion said.

"Yes, sir!"

"Come, Flare. Walk with me."

They walked for several moments in silence until they reached the shade of several large pine trees.

"Flare, I suppose you know that the other squads in your regiment have already been ordered to the east to help guard our borders with Ontaria."

"Yes, sir. When do we leave?"

Danlion pursed his lips. "Your squad leaves the day after tomorrow, but your squad will not be going with the regiment eastward. The squad is being sent to the west."

The words hit Flare like a blow. "The west? But why? There's nothing to the west. Why are we being sent there?" His spirits plunged at the sergeant's words.

In his surprise, he had interrupted Sergeant Danlion. However the sergeant paid it no mind. "Flare, you are to take your squad to Fort Mul-Dune. A large number of the soldiers have been withdrawn to supplement our forces to the east, and your squad will help reinforce the fort."

"Sir, what good are thirteen more soldiers?" In his surprise and anger, Flare was almost being argumentative, not a good thing to do with a superior officer.

"It's not just thirteen. You will be leading four hundred and fifty soldiers. They're all new recruits in the regular army, but they should be sufficient to improve the level of preparedness of the fort. Do you understand the importance of this assignment?" He paused. "Fort Mul-Dune separates the western frontiers from the wilds of Cail dar'mock. Without the protection of the fort, the savages, goblins, and other monsters would have unrestricted access to our western farms and villages. The fort must maintain an acceptable state of readiness."

Flare sighed deeply. "Yes, sir."

Sergeant Danlion placed a hand on his shoulder. "Flare, a soldier's job is to follow orders. Orders are not always explained, and the reasons behind them are seldom what they appear. Honor your oath, and follow these orders to the best of your ability."

Flare nodded slowly. "Sir, it's not a requirement to like orders, just to follow them."

"Good. Your orders are to be at Fort Mul-Dune and turn over command of the men in two fortnight's time. That's not much time, so you had better get your men assembled." He

smiled. "Oh, and by the way, you have been promoted to sergeant." He held out his hand and said, "Congratulations, Sergeant Flaranthlas."

Flare was quiet at dinner. Was there a deeper reason that he was being sent westward? He was sure it was because of him that the squad had been ordered to the west.

"Flare, what's the matter?" Kara asked. "You haven't spoken at all tonight."

He looked up from his plate. The other Guardians had all stopped speaking and were watching him. It figured that Kara would notice first.

"We are not going eastward with the regiment. We have been ordered to the west, to Fort Mul-Dune."

He wasn't sure what reaction to expect from the other Guardians, but the reaction he got was as varied as the soldiers themselves.

Phillip leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms. "Who ordered that, and for what reason?" Phillip had responded well since losing his fight to Flare. He was becoming trustworthy, although he still got indignant when things didn't go his way. Flare attributed his arrogance to being high born, although he had heard others refer to it as being spoiled.

"General Vergillion gave the orders. Apparently, the fort has been stripped of soldiers."

Flare watched their faces. Atock seemed confused, perhaps his lack of familiarity with the geography of the western mountains. Most of the fighters seemed unhappy, although Trestus looked somewhat relieved. Kara also looked relieved, and he could guess why. If their squad didn't have to fight, then she wouldn't have to tend any wounds.

"How many of us will be going?" Aaron asked, frowning.

Flare sighed. "This squad will go, and we will be in charge of four hundred and fifty new army recruits."

Callin was frowning. "They can't do this. They can't send us away from the battle." His words were forceful and commanding.

Kara paused in the middle of lifting a glass to answer him. "Callin, perhaps it's a good thing we're going west. If you don't fight, then you won't die."

"I don't want to die," Callin answered angrily, "I want to join the fight."

Several of the other Guardians opened their mouths to speak, but Flare cut them off. "Enough!" he said, rising. "Our orders came from General Vergillion, and that's all you need to know. We leave the day after tomorrow, and I need each of you to help me. We'll be in charge of four hundred and fifty green soldiers, and I need you to help keep them in line. I can't afford for them to see you arguing or sulking for the next month." He met their gazes and held it until they looked away. "Do you understand?"

They murmured they assent, and even Callin looked abashed. Flare sat back down and said, "Tomorrow is the last day you have to visit any friends or family."

Atock cleared his throat. "Flare, I'm not familiar with this fort that we are being sent to. Can you explain?"

Flare took a sip of water then said, "The Az'ha'rill Mountains are the western border of Telur. On the other side of those mountains are uncivilized forests and wilds that are the home to savage human tribes, goblins, and other nasty things. The mountains effectively act as a shield to protect the west. There are some small gaps in the mountains, but they are dangerous to use and only a small number of people can use them at one time. The only gap large enough for a large group to travel through is the Fang gap, which just happens to be where Fort Mul-Dune is

located.”

“Why don't they just go around the mountains to the north or south?” Atock asked.

It was Enton that answered. “To the north there are deep ravines and dangerous bogs. The south is guarded by the dwarves. There is a dwarven stronghold at the southern tip of the mountains, and they allow nothing to pass through their territory. The goblins especially have learned to avoid them.”

Atock considered. “And no humans travel these forests on the other side of the mountains?”

“Some do. Mostly trappers and hunters. Although, some men go there to track the goblins,” Enton said, and several Guardians raised their eyes. He quickly added, “There is a large bounty on the goblins. If you are any good, then you can make a lot of money quickly.”

After several moments of quiet, Flare asked, “Are there any other questions?” He paused and waited, but hearing nothing, he said, “Get some sleep. Tomorrow take care of anything that you need to, because we leave the morning after tomorrow.”

Two days later, Flare assumed command of the soldiers on the northwest side of the city. The men were young, barely old enough to be called men, but they looked fit enough to guard the western pass.

Sergeant Danlion was already there waiting for him. He saluted and waited for Flare's return salute. “Good morning, Flare. Are you ready for your assignment?”

Flare smiled weakly. “Yes sir, I am, but honestly I'm surprised to see you here. I thought I was to be in command of the soldiers.”

“You are,” Danlion answered, “I just wanted to give you some advice.” He took Flare by the arm and pulled him away. “Listen, Flare, I know this is your first command, and I just wanted to remind you to keep discipline in the troops. These soldiers are not the Guardians that you are used to dealing with. These soldiers are not quite as well disciplined.” Flare's eyebrows rose, and Danlion quickly continued, “All I'm saying is make sure that you let them know who is in charge. If you have any problems, pick someone and make an example out of them.”

Flare didn't like the sound of that. “That sounds kind of harsh and cruel.”

Danlion nodded his head. “Maybe, but it works.”

They set out shortly before mid-day, heading down the western road. Older women and young girls cried as the soldiers started off. The old women had to be the mothers of the men, and the young women were their sisters, or maybe wives. Flare had also said goodbye to several people, Cassandra included, but no one had cried for him. That didn't bother him as much as he would have thought. He had seen enough tears in his young life.

Callin and Trestus had both hugged an older woman and a young girl. Mother and sister perhaps? Several other Guardians had family there, including Phillip. An aging lord had visited briefly to grasp his son's arm. The lord was the Duke of Atwell, but he surprised Flare by not hugging his son. Phillip's mother had no such compunction, and cried openly as she hugged him.

Not everyone had someone to wish them goodbye. Atock, like Flare, stood by himself waiting to get the trip started. The handle of a sword stuck up over each shoulder. During the Guardian training, Atock had worn the required long sword, but now he had reverted back to his traditional way of fighting. When battle found them, Atock would meet it with a short sword in each hand. His swords were different than what Flare was used to; they were shorter than normal,

and only one side had an edge. In addition, there was a slight curve to the swords. He had seen Atock practicing with them, and it was obvious that he knew how to use them.

Atock was not the only Guardian who had changed his weapons. Enton now carried a massive two-handed ax on his back. The ax had a double-edged end, and the blades were shaped in a half-circle. He shook his head. He didn't know how Enton could carry the ax, much less swing it in battle.

Flare gave them as long as he thought they could spare, and then he mounted his horse and gave the order to form up. The other Guardians moved the fastest, followed more slowly by the other soldiers.

The rising sun had burned off the early morning spring chill, and it felt nice. Flare was thankful that it was a clear sunny day for the start of their trip. The birds were chirping and singing in their trees and bushes as the soldiers traveled past. The stones underfoot quickly gave way to packed dirt, but the dirt seemed almost as hard as the stones and didn't affect their traveling.

Flare rode in the front of the column with the other Guardians riding throughout the company of soldiers. The soldiers marched along the road in their squads. The supply wagons brought up the rear.

Along the western road, farms occupied either side of the road. Farmers were busy working in their fields, but they stopped to watch the soldiers pass.

He was a little uncomfortable at so many people looking to him for their orders, but he relaxed slowly.

They traveled throughout the day, pausing only long enough for a hasty lunch and then they were back on the road. The farms thinned as they traveled through the afternoon. Small copses of trees appeared between the farms, and off in the distance forests could be seen. All in all, it had been a good first day of traveling, and Flare was pleased with their progress.

An hour before sundown a runner came up from the rear of the column. He was a little out of breath, but he didn't let that stop him. "Sir," he said, stopping beside Flare's horse. "One of the supply wagons has cracked a wheel. The wagon master thinks it will take an hour or so to repair."

Flare looked around at the location of the sun in the sky. "Good timing," he said to no one in particular. "All right, we'll stop here for the night." He pointed to a large field that was slightly overgrown with weeds. "That field looks abandoned, so pass the order to make camp there."

"Yes sir," the boy said, saluting.

Flare shook his head; the boy looked like he was thirteen or fourteen.

Flare helped raise the long tent that he would share with the other Guardians. He was the leader, but being the leader was a temporary assignment and it was best that he not get used to having others do his work for him.

Phillip was working to get the tent tied down. "Are we riding in the same spots tomorrow?" he asked.

Flare looked up. Phillip had changed a lot. He couldn't imagine Phillip even considering asking him for orders two years ago. "I hadn't thought about it. Why?"

Phillip motioned to the dust that covered his face and clothes. "I rode in the rear today,

and I was hoping not to eat so much dust tomorrow.”

Flare smiled. “It only seems fair to rotate.”

Phillip opened his mouth, but just then a corporal ran up to the Guardians' campsite. “Excuse me, sir, there's a problem,” the corporal said.

“What's the matter?” Flare asked quickly.

“Two soldiers got into a fight. One of them accused the other of stealing.”

Flare sighed; it seemed he would have to take Sergeant Danlion's advice sooner than he had feared. “All right. Bring both soldiers to our tent.” A knot started to form in his belly. He was not looking forward to what he had to do.

He stepped into the tent; several of the other Guardians followed him. “Before the soldiers get here, I have to be rough, and I don't want any of you disagreeing with me in front of the soldiers. Understood?”

They murmured their assent just as the corporal led in two soldiers. They were both young and bore the scrapes of their tussle. The tall one had a black eye and a bloody lip. The shorter one wore an angry look on his face, but he seemed to have made out better in the fight.

The corporal stepped forward. “Sir, these are the two soldiers we caught fighting. He motioned to the taller one, “Private Delon accused Private Marall of stealing.” He motioned to the shorter soldier, “We searched Private Marall's possessions and found a money purse that bears Private Delon's mark.”

Flare turned to the soldier on the left. “Private Marall, it would seem that you have been caught beyond any doubt. What do you have to say for yourself?”

The gruff young man shrugged his shoulders. “You caught me. What can I say?”

Flare was quite frankly amazed at the lack of concern in the young man. “Well, you could apologize for one thing,” he answered.

Marall spat. “Would that really do any good? I mean we would both know that I was lying.”

Flare blinked, and then anger starting welling up within him. “It might have done some good,” he paused, before quietly adding, “but it won't now.” Marall was making it awfully easy to follow Sergeant Danlion's advice.

Flare turned his attention to Private Delon. “Tell me what happened.”

“Yes sir. I pitched my tent quickly, and then left to go to the privy. I returned and saw him,” he pointed at Marall, “emerging from my tent. I stopped him, but he tried to force his way past me and I punched him.”

“You punched him first?” Flare asked, looking again at darker bruises on Delon's face.

“A lot of good it did him,” Marall snarled. “I whipped his butt good.”

“Enough!” Flare snapped at Marall. “You will keep quiet unless I speak to you. Do you understand?”

“You are no better than the rest of us. As soon as we get to the fort, you'll just be another soldier like me,” Marall mumbled.

Flare's anger had welled up white hot. “Enton, come here.”

Enton jumped at hearing his name called out, but he came over quickly. “Yes, sir?”

Flare pointed to Private Marall. “Take him out, tie him to a tree, and give him ten lashes with a whip.” Marall's eyes bulged. Flare turned his gaze to Kara and said, “You are not to treat him until tomorrow morning.”

Enton merely nodded and started over to Marall. Kara opened her mouth to speak, but



Flare shot her a look and she snapped her mouth shut.

He waited until Enton and Marall had left the tent, then turned his attention to Delon. Delon was smugly watching Marall being escorted out, and it pained Flare to do what he had to do.

"Private Delon. You have admitted to breaking the law of the army of Telur." At his words, Delon's head snapped up and turned toward him. "By striking a fellow soldier instead of seeking out your squad leader, you have committed a crime and you must share in the punishment," Flare said.

"What!" Delon exclaimed. "He was guilty. I caught him in the act of stealing."

Flare held up his hand and Delon fell silent. "He is being punished for his guilt, but you are also guilty of a crime, and I must punish you for it as well." Flare's mouth was dry at watching the young man's fear. He wasn't sure, but Flare thought he might have done the same thing Delon had done. He motioned to Derek. "Escort this soldier to Enton. He is to get three lashes from the whip." Derek led the soldier from the tent.

As he expected, a woman's voice was the first to break the silence.

"Flare! That was cruel and uncalled for," Kara said vehemently.

"Kara," Flare began patiently, "I did what I had to do. These soldiers viewed us not as their leaders but as their equals. Now, they will understand who is in charge."

"And if another one steals or breaks some other rule?" she asked, indignant.

He dropped his eyes. "Then the punishments will only get worse."

Atock, who was standing to one side, looked puzzled. "I don't understand what the problem is," he said, looking first to Flare and then to Kara. "In my homeland, a thief would have had his hand cut off without anyone even blinking. Marall should consider himself lucky that I wasn't judging him."

Kara looked angrily from Flare to Atock. Turning on her heel, she marched from the tent.

Atock asked, "Who is she mad at, you or me?"

"I don't know. Maybe a little of both," Flare answered, shrugging.

The next morning, Flare was up well before dawn. He had slept little, worrying if he had done the right thing. He could never show the doubt in front of the soldiers or other Guardians, but he was afraid that maybe he had been too harsh.

The camp was already alive in preparation for the day's travels. He found that it was easier not to dwell if he was lost in the breaking of camp.

The sun had just broken the horizon when Flare finished breakfast and left to find the two soldiers that he had punished the night before. He found them on the edge of camp where they had been whipped. The two trees that had been used to hold them had also taken some damage from the whips, and those slashes on the trees worried him even more. Was it too much?

Kara was already there and had treated the wounds on the soldiers' backs. Their bare backs had been covered in a gooey, white salve. Kara looked exhausted; she apparently hadn't slept much the night before either.

At Flare's approach, the two soldiers and their corporal snapped to attention.

"At ease," Flare said, and the three men relaxed a little.

The corporal spoke up, "Sir, we were just returning to our place in the ranks."

Flare ignored him and stepped in front of Marall. "Private Marall, do I have to worry about you stealing anything again?"

Fear passed over the soldier's eyes, but Marall did a reasonable job of hiding it. "No sir! That will not happen again," he said, shaking his head to emphasize his words.

"Good," Flare said, before he moved over to stand in front of Delon. "And how about you, Private Delon? Will you take justice into your hands again?"

The young man swallowed. "No sir! I will take the matter to my corporal."

"Good," Flare said, feeling better that at least the discipline had the desired effect. He moved over to stand in front of the corporal. "Corporal, justice is to be swift, but it is to be tempered with mercy. These men have had a rough night, and I doubt they could march until sundown." He paused, as if he was thinking of what to do, even though he had already decided. He just wanted to make sure that the soldiers showed the proper respect and at least pretended that they had learned their lessons. "I know what we can do, let these men ride in the supply wagons for today. Tomorrow they can resume marching in their squads."

A respectful smile spread across the face of the corporal. "Yes sir! I will escort them there myself."

"Good," Flare said, "you better get going. We're leaving soon."

The three soldiers moved off quickly toward the supply wagons, and Flare walked toward the front of the column without saying a word to Kara. The whole time he walked, he could feel her smile on his back.

The weather for the trip was wonderful. This early in the spring, it was cool enough at night to need a blanket, but the days warmed up nicely. The men marching in ranks were sweating through the middle of the day, although Flare rarely broke a sweat on his horse. He was relieved that the two examples of discipline seemed to have been enough. There weren't any more major breaches of protocol after that first evening, although he soon realized that the squad leaders were organizing wrestling matches in the evenings. It wasn't long before he realized that the wrestling matches were being used to settle disagreements. He pretended not to notice what was going on, because he approved of the squad leaders' handling of the problems. He even briefly wondered which of them had first came up with the idea.

They made camp the third night within sight of a small town. Actually, it looked more like a large village than a town. With the sun ready to go down, they had found two small fields on either side of the road that had not been planted, and they had split the men up into two camps. Derek had called the town by name, but Flare quickly forgot the name he used. They had passed quite a few villages in the several days since they had left Telur, and both times their passage had been the same. The adults seemed to line the dirt streets watching the soldiers march through, while the kids ran alongside the soldiers. So far, their passing had not caused any problems, but he still got nervous with all those soldiers marching through.

They had just finished raising their tent, and Flare and the other Guardians were arranging their gear when a sudden thought occurred to him. "Do you think the men will try to visit that town tonight?"

Aaron looked at Derek, and they both shrugged. "Perhaps." Aaron said. "After all, they are just soldiers and they will probably want to have some fun."

"I don't care if they do, except a few probably won't make it back by morning."

Flare thought about it for several moments. "Make their squad leaders responsible. Their squad leaders will suffer any punishments the men do." He raised his eyes to meet Aaron's. "Pass that word to the squad leaders. I don't want to be delayed one minute tomorrow morning. Make

sure they understand that.”

Aaron nodded. “I’ll do it now.” He headed out into the dusk.

Derek smiled, unrolling his blankets. “That was a good idea. It ought to keep the men out of trouble.” He paused, a smile touching the corners of his mouth. “If you keep this up, they will have to make you an officer.” He carefully avoided Flare’s eyes.

The rest of the Guardians also carefully avoided his gaze, but he could see their poor attempts to hide smiles. After a moment of frowning at Derek’s back, Flare turned away to hide his own smile.

Flare was pleased to see that there weren’t any delays in breaking camp the next day. His orders had the desired effect, and all the men were accounted for, although many of them looked unhappy.

They made good time and it was a beautiful spring day. The day remained cool and didn’t get too hot to be enjoyable, and the woods were filled with the signs of life. The trees relaxed him, and he even surprised the soldiers by whistling a merry tune as they worked their way up the road.

His mood lasted throughout the day, and he was still in a wonderful mood as they made camp that evening at dusk. All it took to snap him out of the good mood was a woman.

Flare was wandering through the camp and nodding to the soldiers as he passed. They had set up camp in what appeared to be an abandoned farmer’s field, and the tents had gone up quickly. The soldiers slept three to a tent, and he still couldn’t figure out how they managed to get three men in one of those little tents.

He walked past a small soldiers’ tent just as the flap was swung open and a woman exited the tent adjusting her clothes. He stopped in his tracks, blinking at the woman.

The woman was young, perhaps sixteen or seventeen years old. She was slightly plump, but attractive. She had long, brown hair that hung to her hips and smooth, tan skin. She was wearing a tight shirt that stopped right below her breasts and a short skirt that didn’t reach to her knees. Her eyes were brown, and she had high cheekbones. Even though she was young, she already had that hourglass figure that men appreciated so much. She noticed Flare watching her and smiled.

“Hello, good sir. Is there anything I can do for you?” she asked, licking her lips. Her voice had a strange accent; it seemed that pronounced certain letters with a drawl. “A copper penny for an hour or a silver scepter for all night.” A silver scepter was the common name for the silver coin used in Telur. The scepter had an engraving of the king’s scepter on one side and the throne of the god Adel on the other.

His brow wrinkled in confusion. “What? What are you doing in this camp?” he finally managed to get out.

Now it was the girl’s turn to blink in confusion, “You mean that you really don’t know?” she asked.

A young blond soldier emerged from the tent, only half dressed. “Sir,” he said. His eyes bulging as he saw Flare.

Flare pointed to the girl. “What is she doing here?”

The man appeared to be trying to stand at attention, but he shifted as he glanced over at the girl. “Hawking her wares, sir.”

Flare did not want to discuss her wares at the moment. “Did you bring her with you from

that town we passed last night?" he demanded.

"N-no, sir!" the man said quickly. "She approached me after I pitched my tent and offered –"

Flare cut him off, not wanting to hear the girl's offer. "Where are you from?" he asked the girl.

The girl had quietly watched the exchange between Flare and the soldier, and recognized that Flare was someone of authority. She made a poor attempt at a curtsy. "My name is Elona, and I work for Dale Stonewood. We followed you from Silverwood."

"Silverwood?" Flare repeated, dimly remembering that was the name of the town they had passed last night. "Why?"

The girl shrugged. "Not much business in Silverwood, and Dale thought us girls could stay busy with the soldier boys." Her eyes flicked to the soldier, and he blushed under her gaze.

Flare turned his attention back to the soldier, who was trying not to squirm. "What's your name?"

"Arn Bakersson from Wheils Ferry."

"Arn, I want you to escort Elona to the Guardians' tent, and then –"

"Uh, excuse me," the girl said, interrupting him. "It will still be a copper for an hour or silver for all night."

Flare took a deep breath and looked at the young girl. "Miss Elona, I am not hiring you, I am arresting you."

"What?" Elona said, her voice rising to where it was almost a shout.

"Arn, escort her to the tent!" Flare said, half shouting himself. The soldier jumped to obey.

Flare sat in a wooden chair in the middle of the Guardians' tent, wondering how things had gotten in such a mess. They had only left Telur a few days ago, but things seemed to be spiraling out of control. Several of the other Guardians were present, as well as Elona, who was quietly sitting off to the side.

"It's not right," Kara said emphatically, sitting on a small chest. "No one should be degraded and abused this way."

"No one disagrees with you on that," Murleen responded. "However, it is legal, and there's nothing we can do about it." She was sitting on an oversized outcropping of rock. Several torches were already lit because of the rapidly failing sunlight.

"But there is," Kara argued, "we can at least keep her under arrest until we reach the fort. No one should be allowed to do this."

Murleen bristled at the words, "No one should be allowed to do this?" Murleen repeated. She pointed at the young girl. "She's a free citizen of Telur, and just because she makes a decision that we don't agree with doesn't give us the right to hold her against her will."

Kara squinted her eyes. "Murleen, of all people, I thought you would agree with me."

"Why? Because I am a woman? I hate what she does, but I also hate you trying to tell her what she can and can't do."

Kara turned back toward Flare. "Flare she was trespassing, and that gives you the right to hold her until we reach Mul-Dune. I suggest that you do it. I also suggest that you make an example of the soldier."

A sinking feeling settled on him, and it felt like things were only going to get worse.

“Kara, why do you want me to make an example of the soldier? Is it because he helped a person trespass into camp, or is it because he hired a prostitute?” He respected Kara's strict moral feelings on the issue, but he couldn't overrule the king. After all, it was a legal profession.

Kara folded her arms and scowled at no one in particular. She chose to ignore Flare's question.

Flare sighed. He had never realized how difficult leadership really was.

Murleen opened her mouth to speak but closed it again, as a soldier rushed into the tent.

“Sir,” the young soldier started saying, all out of breath, “there is a man at the edge of the camp who demands to see you. He says his name is Dale Stonewood.” He glanced to where Elona was sitting. “I think it's about her.”

*Here we go*, Flare thought. “Escort him in,” he ordered the soldier, “but only him. No one else is to accompany him.”

Flare turned toward Enton and Atock, who had been quietly listening to the women argue. “I want the two of you to stand on either side of him. I want to put him at a disadvantage.”

Enton smiled as he stood, loosening the axe that hung across his back.

The man who entered the tent was a big man, nearing forty years old, but was in good physical shape. His dirty-blond hair was thinning, and his pockmarked skin was starting to sag. He had a thin mustache that hung down to his chin and was starting to gray. He wore a leather jerkin over a stained shirt, and his britches were brown and had a patch on one knee.

Dale Stonewood marked Flare as the leader the moment he entered. He strode into the tent as if he owned it and headed right for Flare. Enton stepped in his path, stopping him several paces short.

“I demand the immediate return of my girl. I also demand an apology and just compensation for the money that she has lost.” His words were rough, and there was an intense anger in them. His whole body seemed poised on the verge of springing. This was a man who was used to getting his way.

Flare rose to his feet. “You demand a lot of things, don't you? We were just discussing whether or not to hold her until we reach Fort Mul-Dune.”

Dale's mouth dropped open. Apparently, he had not considered that as an option. It took a moment for him to find his voice. “You cannot do that! I am a current member of the guild, sanctioned by the king. We have done nothing wrong, and you have no legal reason to hold her.” As he spoke he gestured wildly with arms to emphasize his point.

Flare motioned to Elona. “She did break the law. She trespassed into a military camp without authorization. I am well within my rights to hold her.”

A sickly smile split Dale's face. “Perhaps we could reach an agreement,” he said weakly, “I'm sure that Elona wouldn't mind spending some time with you and your officers.” He looked up at Enton, who was busy glaring at him. “And I would be willing to pay a small fine for the trespassing.”

*This man is a pig!* Flare thought. “Mr. Stonewood, here is what I am going to do. I will release Elona back to you and have the two of you escorted out of camp. But I also intend to give orders that any person who is caught trespassing is to be arrested and held until we reach Fort Mul-Dune. The next time I catch one of your girls, they will not be released back to you so easily.”

“You can't do that!” Dale said quietly, but forcefully. “You are interfering with our legal right to practice our profession.”

Flare smiled. "Not at all. I cannot stop you, but you will not do it in my camp. Do not let me catch another of your girls, do you understand?"

There was a glint of danger in Dale's eyes, and Atock drew one of his swords. Dale glanced briefly at Atock, then turned and strode from the tent. He slowed only long enough to growl, "Elona! Come on."

They sat in silence for several moments, then Kara stood and stalked from the tent without so much as a word to anyone. Enton and Atock glanced at each other and followed Kara from the tent, leaving Flare alone with Murleen.

"I can't believe that she is as stubborn as she is," Murleen said through clinched teeth.

Flare considered his words. "I almost agree with Kara." Then seeing the surprised look on Murleen's face, he added, "I mean, that man is a pig and I feel bad for Elona."

Murleen nodded. "As do I, but she is a grown woman and she has a right to make a stupid decision. Does Kara think that the church should make the decision for everyone? And what happens when the church makes a decision that she doesn't like?" The frustration in her words was clearly evident. "What I really hate is that it seems like I am defending that man."

Flare smiled. "Yeah. He was a bit of an ass, wasn't he?"

A touch of a smile appeared on Murleen's face, and for the first time he realized that she was sort of attractive, but it was a fleeting thought and was gone almost as quickly as it had come. "I'm hungry. Let's get something to eat."

As they stood and headed out of the tent, he once again had that sinking feeling hit him. *What's going to happen next?*

## Chapter 12

The man walked carefully through the streets of Telur, straining to hear any sound. It was not too late yet, and there was still quite a few people entering and leaving the taverns and inns, and guards still patrolled the streets. It wasn't that he was doing anything illegal, but he still wanted to avoid being seen or recognized.

He stopped suddenly and listened for the noise to repeat itself, but after several moments he moved forward slowly. The hood on his cloak was pulled low to hide his face, but that had the undesired effect of masking the direction of the sounds.

Several times he stopped, stepped back into the shadows, and waited to see if anyone was following him. Each time the result was the same – silence.

As he got near his destination, relief began to wash over him and he moved quicker. He rounded the corner of the building and headed for the side entrance, when suddenly a large figure lurched from the shadows and grabbed at him.

Caught by surprise, the cloaked man almost lost control of his bodily functions, but instead jumped back away from the large shadow.

Making a sound like a ship beaching itself, the large figure fell forward onto his stomach, his chin rebounding off of the stone with a loud clack. A low gurgle escaped his lips.

Relief again washed over the cloaked man as he realized what had happened. Looking around to see if anyone had noticed the commotion, the cloaked figure skirted around the collapsed drunk and headed for the door.

Entering the side door, his heart still beating rapidly, the cloaked figure climbed the stairs to the room at the top. Opening the wooden door, he slipped inside.

The room inside was darkly lit, the only light coming from several small candles. There were no windows, and the only door was the one that the cloaked man had entered through. There were five small wooden chairs in the room, four of which were occupied by figures dressed in cloaks just like he wore.

He closed the door behind him, then stepped forward in front of the lone, unoccupied chair. The other four figures watched him without saying a word until he sat down. Their heads didn't even move, and they gave no sign that they were even alive.

The last person to arrive, the cloaked man sighed loudly as he sat down.

"Trouble?" someone asked. It was hard to tell from where the voice had come, but the words were slightly slurred and hard to understand.

"No, just a drunk who surprised me."

Another figure nodded. "It would seem that we are living in momentous times. It appears that this elven prince may be the one prophesied about."

A gnawing fear settled in the man's stomach, and he rubbed his old, wrinkled hands together, though the cold he felt had nothing to do with the coolness of the room. "Are we sure? The child of prophecy was supposed to be born under the sign of the prince."

Another cloaked head turned toward him. "No." This voice belonged to a woman, and she sounded strangely familiar, but he didn't recognize who she was. Even though this group had met many times before, each time was just like this, cloaked and in complete secrecy. Each member kept his or her identity to themselves. It was a hard group to join – no one volunteered for it – instead, the only way to join was to be asked. "But this young prince seems to satisfy line after line of the prophecy, and now he's headed to Mul-Dune."

The old man nodded his head. "I think that he's a forerunner of the prophecy."

"What's that mean?" the female voice asked.

The old man leaned back in his chair. "I think he is a forerunner of the one that Kelcer spoke of."

Several of the others nodded.

"You mean he's not the one Kelcer warned about?" a man's voice asked. It was impossible to tell who had spoken, and it gave the question a disembodied quality.

The old man shook his head. "He simply doesn't fit the prophecy. Do we have anyone there that can help him and guide him?"

Several heads shook, but only one voice spoke. This time it was a different man's voice, and it too seemed familiar. "No, but we are trying to find someone to get close to him."

That particular choice of words bothered the old man. He didn't like what they implied, but that thought was pushed firmly from his mind by another more urgent thought: "If he's headed to Mul-Dune, then that means that something bad might happen there."

Silence answered the old man's words and the gnawing fear intensified.



## Chapter 13

After the rocky start to the trip, Flare was afraid that the entire trip would be one big disaster. He was relieved when things fell into a somewhat enjoyable routine.

Kara was still angry at him for letting Dale Stonewood's group trail along behind them, and she was also furious at the soldiers who would leave camp every night to visits the girls.

Flare, for his part, completely ignored her. Instead, he chose to follow Murleen's adage, "She'll get over it or she won't."

He enjoyed the trip westward. The road from Telur to fort Mul-Dune was well maintained and made for easy riding. It helped that he rode in front of the troop. The other Guardians always complained about bringing up the rear, as they choked on the dust all day long.

In the first half of the journey, the land started out as farmland and then slowly changed to thinly forested woodlands. The trees were primarily pine trees with a few oaks trees scattered in. Game was plentiful, and gentle streams made the journey seem like paradise. The other few travelers were friendly and peaceful enough.

In the second half of the trip, the trees became more thick, and the ground slowly began rising. The trees gradually began changing from pine to fir. Lone outcroppings of rock became more common, as the soldiers entered the outskirts of the mountains. There were fewer towns in the mountains, but they still occasionally passed a mining town or small mountain village.

Finally, after almost four weeks of traveling, they came within sight of Fort Mul-Dune. Fort Mul-Dune stretched across a valley formed by two gigantic mountain peaks. The fort's walls were made of gray stone block and were thirty feet high. A massive wooden gate was placed in the middle of the wall. The gap between the peaks was just over five hundred yards wide, and the walls spanned the entire distance.

Soldiers paced the tops of the walls, but they were spread far too thin.

Flare was rather proud of reaching Mul-Dune only twenty-five days after receiving his orders, three days ahead of his target date. As the soldiers approached, the gate swung open to admit them.

The inside of the fort was less impressive than the outside. The ground was mainly pebbles and small rocks. A wide avenue led directly from the gate in the eastern wall to another gate directly opposite in the west wall. Even though the fort was only five hundred yards wide, it was a long way from the eastern gate to the western gate. Lodges and other buildings were haphazardly scattered around, and a well was placed directly in the middle of the yard. Small farm animals scurried to get out of the way of the soldiers, as smoke billowed from the tops of the buildings. Fort Mul-Dune was a complete, although small, town.

Flare rode to the middle of the yard where an officer stood waiting. Dismounting, Flare snapped a crisp salute. "Sergeant Flaranthalas Eldanari reporting as ordered with reinforcements."

"Colonel Holt is busy, but he will see you as soon as possible." The lieutenant pointed backward to the right. "All the lodges over there are empty. Separate the men, and get some rest. I'm sure the colonel will want to see you in the morning." The lieutenant pointed toward a large home against the northern wall. "Report to Colonel Holt in the morning."

The next morning, Flare left Atock and Phillip to sort out breakfast for the soldiers and

headed to see Colonel Holt.

He walked up a narrow road that wound around to the northern section of the fort. He was pleased to see several inns, and more importantly taverns attached to those inns.

The fort was primarily a military outpost, but certain necessary trades had forced the establishment of various shops and businesses. He observed a smithy, a brothel, and several small stores on his way to find the colonel.

The Colonel's office was a building that had soldiers streaming in and out. He climbed the three steps and paused in front of the two guards stationed beside the entrance. Both guards had been watching him approach.

"I'm looking for Colonel Holt. Is he in there?" Flare asked.

The guards gave him directions to the colonel's office and let him pass.

Once in the building, he had to wait about an hour before being led in to the colonel's office. He entered the office and snapped to attention, "Sergeant Flaranthlas Eldanari reporting as ordered with reinforcements."

Colonel Holt was sitting behind a large desk. He looked rather prim and proper, but something else caught Flare's attention and made his heart skip a beat. Sitting on a couch and looking smug was none other than Dale Stonewood. He was wearing a wicked-looking grin.

The colonel looked young for his rank. He had a sharp nose that was too large for his face, and thinning blond hair. He was well tanned and tall, but a little on the thin side.

A large wooden desk was sitting in front of a window, facing the doorway. A couch and several chairs were arranged in a semi-circle facing the desk. Several paintings and a notched battle ax were hanging on the walls. One of the paintings was of the church in Telur. Another painting depicted the god Adel locked in mortal combat with the god Thal.

The colonel waited for several moments before he spoke. "Well done, Sergeant. You were not supposed to be here for another couple of days. You made the journey in excellent time."

"Thank you, sir. My orders were to get the reinforcements here as soon as possible."

"Reinforcements?" Colonel Holt stood and walked around the desk. "The force of four hundred and fifty men that you brought doubles the complement of men at this fort. That gives me about nine hundred men to guard and defend this fort. Do you think that is enough?"

"No, sir!" Flare answered quickly. He had no idea how many men it would take, but he could tell that was not the answer that Colonel Holt wanted to hear.

Colonel Holt was pacing back and forth in front of the desk. "No indeed. In times of war, this fort had a complement of almost ten thousand. Ten thousand!" The colonel was working himself into a frenzy. This was apparently not a topic he was fond of discussing. "In times of peace, the complement never dropped below five thousand. So what do they do when Telur is threatened? They take almost all of my men and give me five hundred recruits."

"Uh, sir. I assure you that we will do our best."

"What? Oh. Yes, I'm sure you will, Sergeant." The colonel paused briefly, when Dale cleared his throat. "Oh yes. I almost forgot about guild-man Stonewood. I believe that you owe him an apology, and I guess we will have to confiscate some of your pay as payment for the lost wages you cost him."

"Excuse me?" Flare said, not liking the sound of this at all, and the growing smile on Dale's face was not helping.

The Colonel looked more irritated than anything. "Didn't you interfere with his legal

right to practice his profession?"

"No sir. I interfered with his girls trespassing in a military camp."

Colonel Holt seemed clearly taken aback by his answer.

Dale sensed the weakening of his position. "Good Colonel, the King himself says that our profession can be practiced anywhere in the realm. This soldier obviously overstepped himself by interfering."

"Anywhere in the realm?" Flare repeated, looking at the religious pictures on the walls. "Perhaps then, your profession could be practiced in the middle of the temple?"

Colonel Holt's expression was one of shock, and Dale regarded him with a flat look.

"What do you mean by that?" Colonel Holt finally managed.

Flare responded in a calm manner, "I'm simply suggesting that while he can practice his profession, he cannot do it anywhere he chooses. I allowed the men under my command to leave the camp at night and visit his wagons. I simply did not allow his girls to use my encampment as a brothel."

The Colonel's left eyebrow rose and he half smiled. "I see your point."

"But Colonel, remember our discussion about how he should be punished," Dale said,

Flare spoke quickly, not wanting to give the Colonel a chance to change his mind. He leaned over near the Colonel, "Sir, technically my orders came from General Vergillion. I believe that while under his command, any complaint against me would have to go through him."

Colonel Holt regarded Flare for several moments. "Guild-man Stonewood, please wait outside for a moment."

"Now wait just –" Dale started saying, but the Colonel cut him off.

"Now!" Colonel Holt said, his voice rising.

Dale regarded the both of them for just a moment, his anger and hatred for Flare obvious. Then he stomped out of the room.

Colonel Holt continued to regard Flare for several more moments, and Flare began to itch under the scrutiny. "You're a cunning one, and you wiggled out of that trouble easily enough. I hope that you won't have to wiggle out of anything else while you're under my command."

"No, sir!" Flare said.

Colonel Holt smiled again. "Although, I guess your orders from General Vergillion actually give you command for another two days, don't they?" His comment was a joke, and Flare took it as such.

"Now, this afternoon I am going to ride westward and investigate some reports of the goblins massing. I want you to pick some of your better men to go with me. It will give me a firsthand account of your abilities and the abilities of your men."

Colonel Holt stopped in front of Flare, appraising him. "I want you and five of your best men to ride with me. Pick your men and meet me at the western gate at noon."

"Yes, sir. We'll be ready."

Flare hurried out of the colonel's office and wasn't surprised to see that Dale had left with his tail between his legs. He went straight back to the temporary quarters and hastily selected the most qualified soldiers.

He tried to find all of the squad, but not all of them were around. Derek, Kara, and Mikela were still scattered among the soldiers when he addressed the squad.

"Listen up. Colonel Holt wants me and five of you to ride with him westward. Heather, I want you to go as our woods guide."

Heather ran her hand through her hair. "Fine."

"Also Atock, Phillip, Enton, and Trestus are to ride with us."

Callin jumped up from his chair, "Why are you taking Trestus? I'm a better archer and a better swordsman than he is. I should go, not him."

Flare appraised him with a stern glare. Callin held the eye contact for several moments before dropping his eyes to the floor.

"Callin, you may be better with the bow than Trestus, but he will not question my orders in front of the colonel. If you were better disciplined, you would probably be going with us. Now, I want you to stay here and watch the soldiers. Understand?"

A somewhat-cowed Callin answered, "Yes sir."

"Good," Flare said, nodding. Then to everybody, "All right, people. Let's get moving."

They stopped only to get their equipment and horses, and arrived at the western gate fifteen minutes early, but Colonel Holt was already waiting for them. He was rubbing the nose of a beautiful brown mare with about fifteen well-armed soldiers standing around him.

"You're early, Sergeant, but that's good. Are these your best men?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, put one of them at point and let's get going."

Flare glanced over at Heather, and she moved forward to take the foremost position. Then the rest of the soldiers formed a rough diamond-shaped formation around the colonel. It was noontime when the soldiers rode through the gate.

The mountain range ran away from the fortress to the north and south. The ground ran from the gate at a steep angle, until gradually leveling off at the edge of the forest, and there was a noticeable absence of any trees or shrubs near the fortress. They were afforded a wonderful view of the tops of the trees as the forest ran off into the distance.

They rode for an hour along the remains of the crumbling ancient road. Colonel Holt said no one knew who had built the road; it had just always been there. It was called the Forest Road today, but once it had been known as the Cutting Road. The road was wide and grassy. In spots, tree roots were pushing the stones up from the ground.

The group was moving along at a relaxed pace when Heather came back toward the main formation in a gallop. She pulled up in front of Colonel Holt and Flare.

"Sir, we're approaching a large clearing, and there are goblin prints all around. There are also some prints I have never seen before. Sir, may I suggest that we —"

The colonel raised his hand to cut Heather off. "I'm sure we can handle whatever we find. Lead on."

Flare was surprised. "Sir, may I suggest that we at least send out scouts to explore the area first? That would at least give us an idea of what we're going up against."

The colonel stared at Flare for several moments. "Sergeant, I am not used to having soldiers question my orders. I'm sure we can handle a few goblins. But even if we can't, it is my decision, not yours."

Knowing that no matter how much he disagreed with the colonel, Flare had been placed under his command, Flare bit his tongue and apologized. "Sir, I apologize. I did not mean to question your orders. I simply meant to offer you alternatives."

"When I want your alternatives, I'll ask for them."

Somewhat cowed, Flare answered, "Yes sir." His thoughts drifted back to earlier in the day when he had given much the same speech to Callin.

The colonel turned his attention back to Heather. "Now, lead on."

Approaching the clearing, they spread out and moved as silently as possible.

They broke through the brush and entered the southwestern part of the clearing. There were ten goblins gathered around a fire. Goblins are evil creatures with wicked-looking fangs. They're about the same height as humans, but much stronger. They're furry and wear little clothing. They live in clans or tribes, and constantly fight among themselves. They jumped to their feet as the soldiers entered the clearing.

Colonel Holt drew his sword, shouting, "Charge!" The colonel and his soldiers from the fort quickly spurred their horses forward.

Flare, however, tried to restrain his men from joining the battle. Phillip was in the battle with the goblins before Flare could stop him, but Flare stopped the rest of the squad members from charging.

"Wait! Guard the rear. Trestus, get your bow ready and scan the trees. Heather, get back into the woods and make sure we're not being ambushed. Atock, Enton, draw your weapons and stay alert."

The fight continued for several minutes, but the soldiers' superior numbers were easily defeating the goblins. Eight goblins were already dead, while only two soldiers had fallen.

All of a sudden, Heather burst back through the trees. "Flare! There are goblins everywhere. We're surrounded!"

"How many are there?"

Heather shook her head. "I don't know. A couple hundred, maybe."

"Damn. All right." Flare quickly gave orders, "Form into a wedge, we'll have to burst through them and make a run for the fort, but first I must warn the colonel."

He turned his horse around and sped off toward the battle.

The last two goblins had not been killed, but instead they had been caught and tied up, presumably for interrogation later.

Flare pulled his horse up, kicking up dirt from his horses hooves.

Flare opened his mouth to speak, when Colonel Holt cut him off.

"Sergeant, why were your men disregarding orders and hanging back?"

"Sir, we were guarding the rear in case of an ambush. And —"

"Ambush? These are goblins. They don't ambush. They're just not sm—"

"Sir, there are several hundred of them surrounding us now! We must retreat," Flare said. He interrupted the colonel without thinking.

"What? That's impossible. They don't work together like that," the Colonel said, dismissing Flare with a wave of his hand.

"Sir, we must go, right now."

Flare didn't wait for an answer, but instead turned and rode back toward the forest. When he got close enough, he shouted, "Heather! Take point. Spearhead us a path through!"

She obeyed instantly, charging through a break in the foliage, as Flare and the other soldiers followed right behind her.

For several seconds, it was all he could do to avoid the branches and limbs that were flying at him, but fortunately, the company quickly broke through onto the path. Unfortunately,

twenty-five-or-so goblins were advancing on the clearing, and they came out right in the middle of them.

The goblins were as surprised as the humans, but both sides quickly recovered. Atock drew one of his swords and cleaved the head of the nearest goblin so quick that Flare couldn't follow the movement.

A goblin jabbed a spear at Flare, but he clumsily slapped it with his sword. He didn't have much force behind the swing, but it was just enough to deflect the spear head behind his back. Reversing the motion of his swing, Flare caught the goblin in the throat. The blood from the wound sprayed Flare across the face, soaking his shirt.

The events had transpired too quickly, and he hadn't had time to think, just react. In that instinctive action, he had taken his first life. He had prepared himself for this, ever since he joined the Guardians, but he still was not ready for the conflicting emotions that surged through him. The disgust that he had expected was there, but it was not as pronounced as he had thought it would be. He felt relief at having survived his first battle and joy at his first killing. The joy sickened him.

He didn't have time to think, as he spotted Enton pinned between two goblins. Spurring his horse, Flare drove at the goblin on Enton's left. The goblin had his back to Flare, which made it all the easier. He rammed his sword into the goblin's lower right back. It slid between several ribs, and emerged through the other side. Enton made quick work of the remaining goblin.

Twelve-to-fourteen of the goblins were already dead when the remaining goblins fled into the woods.

Flare looked down at his blood-covered hands. His joy and elation were gone, and disgust was all that was left. He dismounted and spewed up what was left of his breakfast.

"Flare! Get back on that horse. We're leaving now. You can come with us or stay behind." Colonel Holt shouted as he spurred his horse along the path toward the fort.

Flare stumbled to his feet, and climbed back on his horse. "You're welcome," he mumbled in the direction of the Colonel. He was about ten yards behind the rest of the company, but he managed to keep up with them on the way back to the fort. They rode their horses hard all the way, but the goblins did not catch them.

When the company reached the fort, it was mid-afternoon, and Colonel Holt and his officers immediately left for the fort headquarters, leaving Flare and the rest of his squad to return to their rooms.

"The colonel took off in a hurry. What do you think he will do?" Heather asked, rubbing her left shoulder.

Heather's question was directed at Flare, but Phillip answered. "What will he do? He will gather his forces and lead a counterattack." Phillip's eyes lit up as he spoke. "Did you see how fast he headed back to his office and the look in his eyes? He wants to obliterate the goblins. It will be glorious."

Atock spat on the ground. "The only glorious thing about war is surviving it. Killing is necessary, not glorious."

Flare felt the same as Atock, but he too had become excited by the promise of battle, and that was confusing. He continued to wrestle with the excitement and hatred of battle even after he reached his quarters.

As commanding officer of the reinforcements, he had received his own room. After two

years of military training, having a room to himself was magnificent. Even though it was only midafternoon, he lay down on the bed and fell asleep almost immediately.

Later that evening, Flare was awoken by a messenger summoning him to appear before Colonel Holt. He quickly dressed and followed the messenger to Colonel Holt's office.

Once again, Flare was forced to wait in the ante-room before being admitted into the Colonel's office. This time, however, the wait was only about twenty minutes.

Entering the office, it was as he had feared. The Colonel's office was quickly turning into a war room. The office had been rearranged since Flare's last visit earlier in the morning. A long table had been set up in the middle of the room and was currently loaded down with a large number of maps. Four officers besides Colonel Holt were present in the room. There was a major, two captains, and a lieutenant. Three of the officers were sitting in chairs along the wall, with the major apparently speaking to the group. When Flare walked in, the major quit talking, and moved away from the table several feet. Colonel Holt was standing in front of his desk listening to what the officers were saying.

Flare stood in the middle of the room, assuming a rigid military stance.

"Sergeant, we will be attacking the goblins tomorrow at first light, and I will need you to help coordinate with Captain Hawk. You will be responsible for integrating your reinforcements with the regular soldiers under his command," Colonel Holt said, holding Flare's gaze. "Do you understand?"

*If you participate in the battle, you will die,* a voice rang through the room.

"Sir? What did you say?" Flare asked, confused.

The colonel bolted forward into the middle of the room. "Are you deaf? Your orders are to follow Captain Hawk's orders! You will assist him in the management of the new soldiers. Is that clear?"

Colonel Holt had misunderstood Flare's question. He had not been questioning the colonel's orders, but instead had been questioning the other voice he had heard. The colonel and the other officers had apparently not heard it.

*You will die if you follow your orders, and the fort will fall.*

This time, Flare was sure that none of the officers had spoken, but the voice had sounded as if it was right beside him. The words had a chilling effect on him. They seemed to seep into his very soul, and without even knowing where the voice came from, Flare believed completely that it was the truth.

Not sure of what the voice meant, he addressed the colonel. "Sir, am I to understand that you intend to attack the goblins without knowing how many there are? Shouldn't you hold off until you have determined how many we face? And how many soldiers will be left to guard the fort?"

The colonel's face went from white to red. He sputtered a moment before he managed to get intelligible words out, "How dare you question my orders? I'm in charge, and I will give the orders."

"I'm sorry, sir, I just thought --"

"I didn't ask you to think, just to follow your orders!" Colonel Holt shouted at him.

A thought occurred to Flare, and he acted on it without even considering the consequences. "Sir, my orders from General Vergillion are to turn control of my troops over to you the day after tomorrow. Until then, they are under my control, and if you wish to use them,

then you will have to convince me of the value of this battle.” The last words came out slowly, as if what he was saying was starting to occur to him.

Colonel Holt was speechless. He stood there moving his lips, but no sound came out.

Flare felt sick to his stomach. He had used a technicality to get around having to follow Colonel Holt’s orders. But he doubted that a military tribunal would uphold his decision. If he was wrong, then his military career was over.

When Colonel Holt regained his voice several seconds later, he spoke with a cold, quiet authority, “Lieutenant, place Sergeant Flare under arrest and take him to the stockade.”

The lieutenant stood up and took several steps toward him.

Flare’s heart skipped a beat, but he was committed now, and he couldn’t change his course. He dropped his right hand to his sword and withdrew it several inches from the sheath.

“Colonel Holt, are you going to defy the orders of General Vergillion? That would not be an advantageous career move.”

Colonel Holt moved back behind his desk and sat down. “Flare, we both know that you are twisting the wording of your orders. It will not stand up in front of a military council. You’ll be found guilty of disobeying a direct order from a commanding officer. You’re finished.”

Flare smiled, masking his nervousness. “Perhaps, but if you arrest me and commandeer my soldiers, then you too will face a tribunal. The last time I checked, a colonel could not override a general’s orders.”

“Flare, if I went in front of a tribunal over this, I would be cleared.”

“Perhaps, but I have never heard of a general who faced a tribunal when he was a colonel.” At these words, the smile faded from the colonel’s face. “It doesn’t take much to prevent a colonel from getting promoted. Any scandal or hint of a scandal is all it takes. Isn’t that right?”

The smile returned to the Colonel’s face. “All right, Flare. Here’s what I am going to do. Tomorrow, I will lead my troops to a glorious victory, while you and *your* troops remain here and guard the fort. The day after tomorrow, you will surrender the troops to me and then I will have you arrested in front of all *my* soldiers.”

The major spoke up, “Sir, shouldn’t we leave a couple of soldiers here just to make sure that the gate is opened when we return?”

*Stupid man*, Flare thought. *If I intended to keep the gates closed and I had the full support of my troops, what good would a couple of soldiers be?*

Colonel Holt leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. “I do not think that will be necessary. Even if several of the soldiers don’t want to follow orders, I’m sure the rest of them understand what will happen if they are found guilty of disobeying a direct order.”

Colonel Holt stood up and came around the desk to stand in front of Flare. In a quiet and cold voice, he said, “You are dismissed for now, but we will finish this the day after tomorrow.”

Flare slunk out of the headquarters building, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. If things went as he expected, then the soldiers who left tomorrow would not be returning. And if they did return, then he was through as a member of the Guardians. And where had that voice come from? That bothered him more than anything.

The next morning was cool and brisk. Flare and the other members of the Guardians stood atop the western wall watching the soldiers leave. They stood there in silence watching rank after rank of soldiers march or ride past.



“Flare, I cannot believe that you refused a direct order from Colonel Holt,” Heather said to break the silence. “I sure hope you know what you're doing.”

“Like I told you, the colonel's an idiot. If he brings half of those men back, he will be lucky. He has no idea how many goblins are out there, but he goes marching out like some hero from the sagas.”

Phillip shrugged and said, “But that idiot will put you in chains when he comes back.”

Atock arched his eyebrows, “Are we going to allow that to happen? Couldn't we stop it?”

“What?” Flare, and several other people, said at the same time.

“Atock, you're talking about armed rebellion!” Phillip burst out.

“Atock! I will not have it. I got myself into this, and I'll handle it. If Colonel Holt survives today's battle, then I'll surrender to him.” Flare held Atock's gaze for several seconds, before continuing. “I will not allow my decisions to negatively affect you. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir,” Atock said quietly.

There was silence for several moments before Mikela spoke up, “Sir, all of the soldiers are through the gate.”

“All right, Mikela, have them close it up,” Flare said.

Mikela left with Heather toward the gate house. Moments later, the gate came together with a loud CRASH!

“What do we do now?” Callin asked with his hands held out.

“We wait,” his brother, Trestus replied quietly.

The wait was unbearable. Flare didn't know what to hope for. If the force was wiped out, then he was right and most likely dead. If the force defeated the goblins, then he was wrong and under arrest. Perhaps he should have held his tongue and simply followed orders.

The time passed slowly. At first, he tried to pass the time by correcting the positioning of the soldiers on the walls, but he quickly ran out of things to correct. He finally gave up and returned to the western wall to watch for the soldiers' return.

It was mid afternoon when the first warriors were spotted approaching the gate. Unfortunately, the warriors were not human, they were goblins. A large number of them moved rapidly toward the fort.

Flare was standing on the walkway above the gate when they were first spotted. Turning back toward the center of the fort, Flare spotted Heather moving along the base of the wall. “Heather, get to the gate, and make sure it's secured!”

He returned to the outer wall and attempted to get an idea of how many goblins were approaching. He quickly gave up, as the numbers kept swelling. The emotions surging through Flare confused him – a mixture of relief and devastation. And with that many goblins, what chance did they have of holding the fort?

Atock, Phillip, and Enton were out of breath after sprinting to Flare's location. They stopped, and with hands on hips, tried to catch their breath.

“Flare . . . how many are there?” Atock asked breathlessly.

“I lost count. There are thousands, maybe tens of thousands of them,” Flare answered.

“Well, what do we do?” Phillip asked.

“If we concentrate our forces on this side of the fort, we should be able to hold it long enough for a messenger to catch up with General Andatell's forces.”

Flare spotted Heather running towards them. "Heather!" Flare yelled, waving at her, "We are going to need to take a message to Gener . . ."

"There are a good thousand soldiers outside the eastern wall," Heather called up to him.

"Excellent, I didn't know the fort was expecting any more reinforcements." Flare's relief turned to dread, as he read the bad news on her face.

Heather spoke in a quiet voice, "They're human, but there not our soldiers. They look like mercenaries to me. We're surrounded, and I think we're in trouble."

## Chapter 14

Flare was the first to reach the top of the eastern wall, and his hopes were dashed as he looked out over the valley.

Nearly a thousand human soldiers were spread out in a semi-circle. They were advancing closer to the fort, and Flare's first thought was that they were preparing to attack. But they advanced and stopped about five hundred yards from the fort. The ends of the semi-circle were closer to the fort than the middle. It was, he knew, an old military tactic. If the defenders of the fort attacked the center of the mercenaries, both ends of the semi-circle could swing around and engulf the defenders.

"Adel protect us," Callin said quietly.

"We're sure their unfriendly?" Flare asked, knowing there could be no doubt.

"Probably mercenaries. They must have snuck through the border in small groups," Phillip answered in disgust.

"Well, what do we do now?" Trestus asked. "They make it kind of hard to focus our forces on the west wall, and how are we going to get a messenger through all that?"

"Remain calm," Flare said, projecting a calmness he didn't feel. "If we remain poised, we might be able to find a way out of this."

Murleen, who was staring at the ground, looked up suddenly. "The magi! Couldn't they send a warning message without having to leave the fort?"

"Of course!" Flare exclaimed, his face lighting up. "Where are Mikela and Enstorion?"

They found the magi having a heated argument in the center of the fort. Mikela was standing with her hands on her hips, shouting at Enstorion. She was using all the foul words Flare had ever heard, and a few he hadn't.

Enstorion was leaning against a small waist-high wall, with his arms folded across his chest, refusing to look at Mikela. The redness of his cheeks and neck, however, betrayed his rising anger. He interrupted Mikela in mid-sentence, "Mikela! It will not work, neither one of us is strong enough."

"Mikela! Enstorion! What is the matter with you two? Why are you arguing in the middle of the street like a couple of children?" Flare shouted at the bickering magicians.

Enstorion met Flare's gaze, but didn't say a word. Mikela, however, wasn't so quiet.

"Flare. I'm trying to tell him that we could send a message using our magic. He doesn't think we can do it, and I don't know why."

"Enstorion, why won't it work?"

Enstorion looked up and answered, "Because I have already tried it."

Flare's hopes evaporated at Enstorion's words.

"There appears to be some sort of magical barrier preventing us from sending messages out. As much as I tried, I couldn't punch through it."

"Next time you get a wonderful idea like that, tell me first. Okay?" Flare said, staring at Enstorion. His anger grew when Enstorion just stared back. After another moment or two of silence, Flare rubbed his eyes. "All right, tell me about the barrier. Does it keep you from using magic?"

"No. My other spells are working. I think it is a magical isolation spell. In essence,

magic performed on this side of the barrier, which affects things on this side of the barrier works fine. Magic performed on the outside of the barrier, which affects things on the outside of the barrier, will also work. But for magic to affect something on the other side of the barrier, the magic must be strong enough to break the barrier.”

“And you couldn’t break the barrier?” Flare asked, already knowing the answer.

“No,” Enstorion admitted, wincing as he did so.

“Well, how about if you and I combined our magic? Would that be strong enough to possibly break the barrier?” Mikela asked calmly, her earlier anger all forgotten.

“No, I don’t think so. I threw everything I had against it, and I couldn’t even feel it fluctuate.” Enstorion paused. “It took a really powerful magician or several powerful magicians to create such a barrier.”

“That’s bad, huh?” Flare asked, noticing as he spoke that Mikela had gone white. But he already knew the answer, thanks to Cassandra.

Mikela, not Enstorion, answered the question. “If that’s the case, you’re going to have to find another way to get a message out.”

Flare returned to the western wall. He thought his mood couldn’t go any lower, but he was wrong. The magnitude of the host arrayed against them was overwhelming. The goblins were arranged in a semi-circle which stretched from one mountain to the other. They had setup camp half a mile downhill from the fort and were settling in for a siege.

Flare watched the enemy for a while and was getting ready to inspect the eastern wall, when he noticed some movement among the goblins’ line.

Dusk was approaching and it was hard to see, but he continued to study the movement that had caught his attention. The movement slowly turned into three riders slowly approaching the fort. Flare watched until the riders came to a halt halfway between the fort and goblin encampment.

*Well, if they want to talk, let’s talk.* Then, turning to the nearest soldier, he said, “Quickly, find Atock and Phillip, and get three horses ready.”

Turning back to look at the riders, he could tell that they were patiently waiting.

Flare studied the three riders as he, Atock, and Phillip rode out to meet them.

The rider in front, who had to be the leader, was a tall muscular man. He sat proudly on his horse, observing the Guardians as they approached. He wore a black cloak and a sword handle poked up over his shoulder. He had long, curly, brown hair that was very unkempt, and a short, thin mustache. He was a proud, cruel-looking man.

To the right and slightly behind the leader, was a tall dangerous-looking warrior. As he was in the saddle it was hard to judge his height. Even so, Flare guessed he was close to Enton’s height, perhaps just shy of seven feet. He was a muscular man, his head was shaved clean, and he had a round, full face. An ugly vicious scar ran across his throat. He watched the Guardians in a bored manner.

The third and final member of the opposing trio was a blond woman. She was simply beautiful, but her face lacked any warmth or compassion. She had white-blonde hair that came down between her shoulders and her skin was tanned and smooth. She had full lips and high cheek bones. She was very slim, slimmer than most of the human women he knew. She watched Flare and his companions the way a butcher watches a pig in a pen. The only softening on her

face was momentary, and it happened when she glanced at the man in black she was following.

Judging by their appearance, all three of these warriors were dangerous fighters.

As they approached, Flare rode in front, with Atock to the left rear and Phillip to the right. He had chosen Atock and Phillip, because of all the Guardians he trusted these two the most. The fact that they were intimidating had also crossed his mind.

Flare reined his horse in a good ten yards from the opposing leader.

"Who are you, and what do you want with us?" Flare asked, trying to muster all the bravado he could. He hoped he sounded confident, not hesitant or scared.

"My name is Prince Zalustus. Isn't it obvious what I want? I want that fort." He rested his right hand on the pommel of the saddle and waved his left hand back at the assembled goblins. "You know you don't have a chance. Why don't you make it easy on both of us and surrender?"

"Surrender?" Flare asked, incredulous. "You can't be serious! You may have the advantage in numbers, but we only have to defend the walls." A lie suddenly occurred to him, and he added quickly, "Reinforcements will arrive any day now, and you will be driven back."

Prince Zalustus laughed. "You're lying, Flare. I know that no reinforcements are on the way. You're on your own."

Stunned, Flare asked, "How do you know my name?"

"I know quite a lot about you. You may not know it, but we're brothers." Before Flare could object, Zalustus continued, "Oh, I don't mean brothers related by birth, but we are brothers, nevertheless."

"You're insane," Flare said.

The man and woman behind Zalustus tensed, but Zalustus only smiled. "If you surrender the fort to me, I personally guarantee that all of your soldiers will be allowed to live."

Flare shook his head. "You will have control of that fort, when we're dead. We won't surrender it to you, and we will make the price of taking Mul-Dune very high."

Zalustus nodded gravely. "So be it. Perhaps we will meet on the battlefield. If you have such a longing to die defending Mul-Dune, I will be glad to accommodate you." He turned and started back toward the other two warriors. After a moment, he stopped and turned back, tossing a bag to Flare.

Flare instinctively caught the bag.

"I almost forgot that I brought you something." Grinning, Zalustus turned and led his warriors back toward their encampment.

Flare paused a moment and opened the bag and looked in. He recoiled in disgust at the sight of Colonel Holt's severed head. He quickly closed the bag and then sighing, he led his companions back toward the fort.

After several hours of preparation for the impending attack, Flare was exhausted. He didn't expect the goblins to attack until the morning, but that left less than ten hours for them to get prepared.

Fifty soldiers would be stationed along the eastern wall, with the remaining soldiers placed on the western wall. If the mercenaries to the east attacked and suffered too many losses, then it might be possible for a messenger to sneak through. So it followed, that the mercenary force would guard the eastern road, and not attack.

The few shopkeepers and residents would be on guard within the fort to extinguish fires,

or stop any goblins that got through. They would also help keep the soldiers supplied with weapons and act as messengers between the two groups of defenders.

Even though the fort had been reduced to a skeleton force, the stores and provisions had been meticulously maintained. There was plenty of food to withstand a long siege, but Flare was afraid that they would run out of soldiers well before they ran out of food.

Weapons and armor were also well stocked, but without a miracle, they would soon be out of soldiers to use the weapons.

It was well after midnight when Flare finally retired to bed. He didn't even bother taking his clothes or armor off. He didn't sleep much, and all too soon, a soldier woke him up.

"Sir, a large force is approaching from the west."

Flare was up and moving immediately. The sun was just coming up as he sprinted for the wall, rubbing the sleep from his eyes as he ran. He reached the wall moments later and was dismayed at the sheer number of the approaching goblins. There were no discernible formations – the troops were spread out in a long line, marching toward the fort. Some carried ladders, some carried ropes with hooks, but they all were heavily armed.

Flare quickly gathered all the squad leaders. "All right, listen up. They will try to get a foothold on the wall and pour their troops into the breach. We cannot allow them to get a hold on the wall for even a moment!" He spoke slowly to emphasize the importance. "I think you all know what goblins do to their prisoners, so don't hold anything back. Attock will be in charge on the northern part of the wall, Phillip will take the southern part of the wall, and I will lead the defense of the middle. Any questions?" After a brief silence, Flare continued, "All right. Then may the gods watch over us, and grant us a victory this day. Dismissed!"

He watched the men separate and head to their assigned posts. They were young and looked scared to death. But they had a right to be scared; there was a good chance that most of them would not be returning from this siege.

Flare took up position with his troops and awaited the attack. He was wearing chain armor and had a sword strapped to his back, but he was carrying a pike as his main weapon. The pike was a combination ax head and sickle head mounted on a six-foot staff. It could be used to push the ladders away from the wall or to strike at the goblins before they could get within sword reach. The sword on his back was in case the goblins got onto the wall. The sword would be much easier to wield in such close quarters.

The goblins attacked with a relentless ferocity that simply amazed and disgusted him. The goblins in the front immediately placed their ladders and began climbing furiously.

The defenders used the pikes to thrust the ladders from the walls. When a goblin got close to the top of the wall, the razor-sharp pikes were used to hack at the goblins, who fell screaming into the throng below.

It was sickening to watch the goblins callously throwing their lives away. But for every goblin that died, another three seemed to take its place.

After two hours, Flare was exhausted, and his arms felt like they were going to fall off. He swung the pike and sliced the head off a goblin that had gotten too close, and then began searching for another attacker.

A cheer rose from the soldiers assembled on the walls, and Flare couldn't believe his eyes as the goblins began retreating. The goblins left their dead and dying piled in heaps at the bottom of the wall.

Flare set the pike down and looked up and down the defenders' line, searching for

causalities. He didn't see any wounded, but he did see Atock and Phillip approaching quickly from their respective directions.

Phillip reached Flare first, with Atock close behind. "They didn't even get a foot on the top of this wall, and did you see how fast they ran from the battle?" Phillip said, grinning.

"But they will be back, and soon," Atock said. "They probably thought we would fall apart. When they come back, they will not make the same mistake again." His words smothered the relief that Flare had been feeling.

"He's right. This fort was well constructed. They probably will attack differently next time." Flare turned and look out over the western wall. "As long as we have a break in the fighting, let's get the townspeople up here with some food." He sighed before continuing, "The gods only know when we will get our next break."

Much to Flare's surprise, the goblins took their time and didn't reappear until early in the afternoon. But Flare had been right in assuming that they would attack differently. Three monstrous siege towers rolled slowly toward the fort. They had been hidden in the edge of the forest.

The siege towers were monstrous wooden boxes, but with the base much wider than the top. They rolled on massive wheels, apparently being pushed from behind the safety of the tower itself. There were numerous slits in the wood for archers inside to use.

The siege tower worked by getting in close to the wall, then expelling the goblins inside through a doorway at the top of the tower. Then more goblins could enter at the back of the base of the tower and climb to the top to join the attack. While at the same time, goblins would be climbing ladders and ropes all along the wall of the fort. One siege tower could take the undermanned fort, not to mention three siege towers.

"Get some archers up here, now!" Flare yelled to the soldiers in the courtyard below the wall. He frantically scanned the crowd for Mikela or Enstorion. He spotted Mikela first, running toward the wall. "Mikela, find Enstorion and get up here fast!"

He turned back toward the towers. Even though they were going slowly, they were still moving way too fast to suit him.

"What's the plan?" Atock asked, having just reached Flare's position.

Flare turned and noticed Phillip also. Shaking his head, Flare said, "We've got to burn them or we lose the fort today. Archers and the magicians are coming up."

Phillip spoke up, "Do you think the magi can do anything against those towers? Surely, their magicians have also thought of that."

Flare shielded his eyes to get a better view. "I don't know, but we have to try." Turning back to the soldiers, he added, "I want you to get the archers ready to go, but hold off until I give the command. Make sure their arrows are lit before they loose them. All right?"

Atock and Phillip ran to their posts, just as Mikela and Enstorion reached Flare.

"Damn! They want to end this thing now. Don't they?" Enstorion said.

Flare ignored Enstorion's comment. "Listen. We've got to burn those things before they reach the wall. Once they get here, we're through. I need you to burn them using your magic. Can you do it?"

"Yes," Mikela answered, at the same time that Enstorion answered, "No."

"What do you mean, no? All it takes is a simple fire spell. Those things will go up in flames like a torch," Mikela said.

"Think about it. If it is obvious to us, then it's obvious to them. They put this isolation

spell to prevent me and you from getting the message out. Don't you think they will have protected those siege towers from magic flame?"

Mikela sighed. "Makes sense, but we still have to try."

Flare interrupted Mikela, "Wait a second, you said they would protect the towers from magic flame, but what about normal flame?"

"Well, it will work, but I don't think you can burn that wood as quickly as you need to. It looks fresh, probably was recently chopped down. I'm sure it's still full of water and sap," Enstorion answered.

"Yes," Flare said with a grin on his face that was getting bigger as he spoke, "but can you help the normal flame burn it. I don't know, can you dry the wood abnormally fast so that the flaming arrows burn it easily?"

"Yes!" Mikela answered. "That would allow you to burn the towers."

"Wait a moment," Enstorion interjected, "that kind of spell would take a lot of concentration and power."

"So?" Flare asked. "If you don't do it, then we're dead for sure. No reason to be holding anything back."

"But in order for this to work, I will have to concentrate on one of the towers, and Mikela will likewise help take out another. But one of the towers will go unchallenged, and it will make the wall."

"How long will it take to burn one?" Flare asked.

"It will take as long as it takes. Remember, we're not used to dealing with normal flame," Mikela answered.

Flare thought for several moments, "All right. Mikela, go to Atock's position. I want you to help them burn that tower and have Atock send me as many reinforcements as he can spare. Enstorion, you go to where Phillip is located, and do likewise. Any questions?"

"You're going to let this tower get through?" Mikela asked quietly.

"You said one was going to get through, and I can't ask my men to do something that I won't. So, we'll fight the third tower."

Flare's orders were carried out, but all too soon the towers neared the walls.

As great as the walls were, they were not built very wide. This meant that once the goblins were onto the wall, they could pour reinforcements in and push the defenders north and south along the walls. This would leave a huge breach in the fort's defenses.

As the tower drew near, Flare positioned heavily armored men with pikes in the front, near where the door on the tower was. They formed a semi-circle on the wall, hoping to contain the goblins. Behind these pike men, soldiers armed with swords and axes waited for the goblins to get through the pike-men. Outside the semi-circle, archers waited to start shooting at the goblins. The soldiers waited for the goblins, crouched down, so not to give the archers inside the towers a target.

The tower stopped rolling a couple of feet from the wall, and with a massive thud the door of the tower opened like a drawbridge, giving the goblins inside a bridge onto the walls of the fort. The door of the tower overlapped the battlements of the wall.

Flare was ready for a massive number of goblins to come pouring out of the tower, but he was not ready for the black goblins. Up to now, the soldiers had only been fighting the man-sized, white goblins. But the tower expelled the much-bigger and much-meaner black goblins.



They were near seven feet tall, thickly muscled, and covered with thick, black hair.

Flare hoped and prayed that the other two siege towers had been stopped, and then he turned his full attention to the task at hand.

The first wave of black goblins ran straight into the pike men, impaling themselves on the long, wicked-looking pikes. The weight of the dead goblins drove the pikes into the ground, and left the men undefended against the second wave of goblins. In a matter of seconds, the pike men were gone.

As disgusted and dismayed as he was, Flare didn't hesitate. Drawing his sword, he screamed, "Telur!" and charged into the battle.

An extremely large goblin had just killed a soldier, and didn't even notice Flare's charge, until Flare drove his sword into the brute's back. The goblin collapsed to the ground, wheezing and blowing bubbles of blood. The goblin was dead in a matter of seconds, but Flare had already moved on.

He was near the edge of the wall, just to the north of the siege tower. The screams of the dying soldiers and the screams of the goblins as they killed were sickening, but the sounds were lost as he fought furiously for his life. His second opponent was not distracted and was waiting for him.

The goblin studied Flare. "Elvvess, hates 'em I do, but tastes good, they do." The goblin raised his evil looking single-edged ax and drove it downward in an arc meant to cut Flare in half.

Flare's reaction was instinctive, and stupid. He raised his sword to deflect the blow. He deflected the blow all right, but his sword was knocked out of his hand and flew over the wall. He landed hard on his butt, his right arm tingling from the impact.

The goblin chuckled as he raised his ax for the killing blow. He quickly began his swing.

Flare did the only thing he could think of – he struck out with his right foot and kicked the goblin in his right knee. He heard a satisfying crunch, and the goblin's swing went wild, hitting the wall less than a foot from Flare's head.

The goblin dropped the ax, grabbed his knee, and fell against the wall, his back to Flare.

Flare jumped to his feet, grabbing the ax. As sore as his right arm was, and as heavy as the ax was, he wasn't sure he could even raise it. But slowly Flare managed to get the ax up over his head and brought it down on the back of the goblin.

The ax sliced open a large chunk of the goblin's back, and the goblin fell onto its side. With his head lying on the blocks of the wall, the goblin spit its last words, "Elvvess, hates 'em."

Flare once again raised the ax, but this time he used the flat side of the ax to crush the goblin's head into a bloody, gooey mass.

Dropping the ax, Flare attempted to catch his breath. The goblins were quickly overrunning the human soldiers, with more goblins streaming from the siege tower. The battle had already moved away from the tower, with the goblins pursuing the human soldiers. The battle was lost if the siege tower remained.

*What can one soldier do against that?* Flare thought.

*One soldier can do nothing, but one mage is more than sufficient.* It was the same voice that had warned Flare not to go with Colonel Holt.

"But, I know very little magic!" Flare answered aloud.

*You know enough to do what needs to be done,* the voice answered.

Flare quickly began running through the spells that he had learned from Cassandra. The

first one that popped into mind was a wind spell, but he didn't think it would be strong enough to overturn the tower. After running through the spells he knew, the only one that seemed to apply was a force spell. Perhaps he could move the top of the tower away from the wall, causing it to topple.

He was standing near the tower and would be spotted soon. He needed time to try and work the spell. He looked around for a hiding spot and noticed the door of the tower overlapping the wall. There was plenty of room under the door to hide.

Flare quickly and quietly dropped to the ground and made a dive for safety. It was somewhat cramped, but it was the best hiding place in the whole fort. He reached up and broke off a splinter of the tower door. He would need it for the magic spell.

The magic spell was simple. It required three maxims to be chanted, and then two pieces of the two objects that the caster wanted to repel each other. The only problem was that the three maxims were not short.

He closed his eyes and attempted to relax and tune out the battle. He had to focus his need, his desire, to make the magic spell work. He took a deep breath and began chanting as Cassandra had taught him. He remembered to be as quiet as possible, since goblins were still coming out of the tower over his head.

Flare concentrated on the words of the spell. Quickly losing track of time, he allowed himself only a moment between maxims before continuing the spell casting. When he spoke the last word of the spell, he slammed the splinter of wood onto the block of the wall.

The tower began to creak and slowly pull away from the wall, and for a moment he thought the spell would work. But then the tower started slowing.

Flare closed his eyes, and felt the magic aura around him. He could feel the weakening spell as it sought to overthrow the tower. He focused his need, the absolute necessity of the tower being repelled.

Slowly, the tower began pushing away from the wall again. Flare could hear the shouts of the goblins as they tried to figure out what was happening. He continued to focus, even as his vision started blurring, and everything he saw took on a yellowish tint.

Finally, the tower reached a point of no return and toppled over away from the walls of the fort. With a deafening roar, it collapsed, killing not only those inside the tower, but also a large number of the enemy who were around its base.

## Chapter 15

Flare opened his eyes to see several people leaning over him.

"I hope you're happy. You about scared us to death," Murleen's voice said from somewhere above him. "We thought you were dead."

Flare sat up, grimacing. "Are you sure I'm not?"

Kara helped him up. "Your right shoulder looks to have been sprained, but I treated it. You probably will still have some soreness."

Flare mumbled his thanks and tried stretching his right shoulder in a rotating motion. It was definitely going to be stiff and sore tomorrow, but at least he could use it.

He looked to the north and noticed for the first time the burnt-out husk that had once been a siege tower. He quickly looked to the south, and there too were the remains of a tower. He turned back to his companions and asked, "Give me a report. Did any of them get through?"

Phillip answered, "No. Both towers burnt before they could get to the wall. But what happened here?"

Flare answered carefully, not wanting to lie to his companions, "We were beaten, and the black goblins were everywhere, with more coming through the siege tower. And then the siege tower toppled over, and I lost consciousness somewhere around then. Mikela, –did you or Enstorion topple it?" He had told the truth, or at least a portion of it. Lying by omission was not the same as outright lying, but it sure felt like it.

Mikela looked confused. "No. Flare, neither of us did this. We were still engaged with the other two towers. We were hoping you could tell us what happened."

Flare lowered his eyes. "Could it have been the ground giving way beneath the tower?"

Atock, looking over the edge of the wall, answered, "No. The ground is still packed and hard beneath where the tower was. It had to be magic that destroyed it."

"Well, if it wasn't Mikela or Enstorion, then who could it have been? Are there any other magicians in the fort, or could it have been a magician from outside the fort?" Flare asked.

"We're not aware of any other magicians. And why would one of the attacking magicians topple their own tower?" Murleen said in obvious confusion.

"That doesn't make much sense. Does it?" Flare agreed. "How many men did we lose?" he asked, quickly changing the subject.

The soldiers looked at each other before Atock answered, "Forty-three soldiers are dead. Another fourteen are injured bad enough that they are out of the fight for good."

"Fifty-seven? That's leaves us below the four hundred mark," Flare said, his mood sinking. "We're not going to last long at this pace." He paused briefly, just long enough to rub his temples. "All right, we have got to get a messenger past those soldiers to the east."

"But how? Those soldiers are spread out with bonfires at night. What can we do to get a messenger past them?" Derek asked.

Flare thought for a moment, and noticing the tired looks on the faces of his fellow Guardians, he said, "Post sentries, and let's hold a council over dinner. It's hard to make decisions when you're tired and hungry."

Just after sunset, the Guardians gathered for dinner. They had seen to the injured and checked on the morale among the soldiers. Flare was saddened by the looks on the faces of the

young soldiers. It was a somber gathering. They ate quietly, mostly in silence.

Flare was so tired and anxious that he hardly even noticed the food. He was relieved when the food was finally gone. He stood. "Okay, we have to get a messenger through the enemies' barricade. Suggestions?"

Enstorion answered, "Well, we can't use magic to get a message or messenger through the barrier."

"Couldn't we magically change a person into the form of an animal and get them through the barrier that way?" Flare asked.

"We could shape shift a soldier, but –" Enstorion started saying.

"But the spell would be broken as soon as the soldier hit the barrier," Mikela finished.

"Unless the shape-shift spell was stronger than the barrier spell," Enstorion said, interrupting Mikela in turn. "And if the barrier breaks a spell, the enemies' magicians would know about it immediately."

"Does the barrier form a semicircle above us, or could we get a messenger out through the air?" Phillip asked.

Enstorion shook his head. "The barrier meets in the air well above our heads. We can't get a soldier out that way."

Atock leaned forward and asked, "And does the barrier run below the ground?"

"Yes," Mikela said, "as far as I have been able to tell, the barrier forms a bubble around us. We can't get around the barrier – we have to go through it. We have to break the spell."

"But, Mikela, we don't have the power necessary to break the spell!" Enstorion retorted rather rudely.

"Remain calm, you two," Flare said, trying to soothe the nerves of his fellow Guardians. "Couldn't we shape shift our messenger and change him back right as he approaches the barrier? That way the soldier can get safely to the barrier, but not alert the enemies' magicians."

"That would get the messenger to the barrier, but they would still have to get past the soldiers on the other side. How do you intend to do that?" Derek asked.

"To be able to change the messenger back to human form quickly, I would have to keep my concentration on him, and I wouldn't be able to see where the barrier was in relation to the messenger," Enstorion added.

"Wait! If you cast the magic spell, I could watch the messenger and warn you when he got near the barrier, and I could maintain communication with him," Mikela said, excitement starting to bubble up in her eyes.

"Okay. We can get a messenger to the barrier safely, and we can get him though the barrier safely, but what about the other side? How does he get past the soldiers?" Flare asked while pacing back and forth. Excitement was taking hold of him again.

There was silence for several moments, as the soldiers thought about the problem at hand.

Finally, Callin spoke up, "It seems to me that the only way we can do this is if we have a messenger sneak through the barrier. And at the same time, we create a distraction that confuses the enemy."

"We could attack them with a small group of soldiers," Derek said.

"Anything short of an all-out attack is too obvious a distraction," Flare answered, shaking his head. "We have to think of another way."

"I have an idea," Callin said quietly, "we could send one soldier as a distraction."

"One soldier? But what good would that do?" Phillip asked, confused.

Callin stood up and paced behind the chairs of his fellow warriors. He seemed excited. "Think about it! A small group of soldiers is an obvious distraction, but one soldier could be sent as a fake messenger." The other Guardians looked confused. "One soldier could be sent as a decoy, pretending to be the real messenger, while the real messenger sneaks out magically disguised as an animal."

"That's not a bad idea," Flare said.

"Wait. Who's going to be the decoy?" Phillip asked.

Callin answered the question, "It was my idea. I'll be the decoy." Before his brother, Trestus, could interrupt, Callin continued. "It was my idea. I have to be the one to go. If somebody else dies while trying my plan, I just couldn't live with that. It has to be me."

"It's your plan, but I can move a lot quieter than you," Flare said.

"But that's defeating the plan. The plan calls for a decoy to get noticed! I will make a much better, noisy decoy than you will," Callin argued passionately.

"He's right, Flare. Besides, you are the commander of the fort. You cannot abandon your post," Atock said.

"I was not talking about abandonment. I was talking about leading through example," Flare said, a touch of anger rising in his voice.

"It's called being a leader. You cannot risk yourself on every mission," Atock responded.

Reluctantly, Flare gave in, rested his head in his hands, and was quiet.

Phillip stood from his chair and asked, "All right, Callin will be the decoy. But who will be the messenger?"

It was Flare who answered without so much as raising his head. "That much is obvious. It has to be Heather. She is the only one, besides maybe me, who has the ability to sneak quietly past the soldiers."

Heather sighed and crossed her arms across her chest. "Right now, I cannot imagine anything more dangerous than staying in this fort. If you can get me through the barrier, I will deliver your message, but where am I to go that it will make much difference?"

Derek cleared his throat and leaned forward to rest his arms on the table. "I think I can help answer that. I spoke with Colonel Holt's secretary, and he gave me some good information."

Subconsciously, Derek rubbed his right knuckles and Flare wondered if the secretary had volunteered the information or not.

"General Andatell is gathering soldiers to send to the south and east. He started in the south of the western territories and is working his way northward along the mountains and will eventually make his way eastward."

Phillip's forehead wrinkled in confusion. "I don't understand. Why wouldn't he just start in the far west and move eastward picking up soldiers? Why start in the south and move northward?"

Derek studied the table for just a moment. "It seems that some of Lord Efflen's bondmen have openly discussed not sending aid. The general is picking up soldiers from the loyal southern lords and moving northward toward the rebellious bondmen. By the time he reaches them, they won't dare hold any soldiers back. He will have enough fighters to obliterate them if they do not keep their oath."

Hope bloomed in Flare at Derek's words. "Perhaps, if we can get word to General Andatell his host can save the day."

“Perhaps,” Derek agreed, frowning. “But we have to get word to him quickly. He is still supposed to be several weeks south of us.”

Flare refused to hear the negativity and focused on the hope. “Okay. So we have a messenger, we have a plan to get her through the enemy, and now we have a destination.”

Heather looked at Flare. “Now we just need a message.”

Flare smiled and nodded. “Leave that to me. I’ll write it myself.”

Trestus broke the silence, “So we try tomorrow night?”

“No! We need to do it as soon as possible,” Phillip replied. “We don’t even know if anyone will be left tomorrow night.”

“We need time to plan, and they need to be rested before we try this,” Trestus replied.

It was Callin who responded, quietly answering his brother’s objections. “We will be no more rested tomorrow night, than we are tonight.” Looking at his brother, Callin continued, “Phillip is right. We have to try right now.”

Flare had to admit that tonight was perfect for trying to sneak somebody out. The moon, which was just a sliver at this time of the month, was hidden by thick clouds that had rolled in since the sun had gone down.

Enstorion shape shifted Heather into the form of a rabbit. The spell was slow and complicated. At first Heather could feel nothing, but as the spell continued, she began to feel her body changing. She became more disorientated as time passed. The rest of the Guardians were gathered around her, and as the spell was being cast, they slowly began to appear larger.

The popping and snapping of Heather’s joints caused several of the spectators to get sick. Flare ushered them away from the magician, so they wouldn’t interfere with the spell.

Finally, Enstorion turned from the rabbit at his feet and said, “Finished. We’re ready to go.”

Enstorion started to move toward the battlements, when Flare stopped him. “Wait. Is it going to take that long for her to be changed back? She could be dead long before the transformation is complete.”

Enstorion looked irritated. “Of course it won’t take that long. I took extra time in transforming her, so that when I transform her back it will be much quicker. I know what I am doing.”

“And it’s much easier returning something to its natural form,” Mikela added, looking smug.

Flare had been relieved that the magic spell had also hidden Heather’s clothes and weapons. It had also hidden the letter he had written to General Andatell, and one other thing. To make sure that Heather was believed, Flare had given her the bag containing Colonel Holt’s head. He was sure the head would be recognized and hoped it would spur the General into action.

Heather was placed in a small wooden box, and she was then gently lowered down to the ground on the northern edge of the eastern wall. Mikela was to keep in magical contact with Heather, as she moved toward the barrier.

## Chapter 16

The ground was parched, since there had been no rain for almost a week. Heather was amazed at how sharp her senses were. She could smell and hear things that she never thought possible. Behind her, she could smell meat that was still cooking over fires within the fort, and she could hear conversations that were far off. Ignoring the day-old scent of a squirrel, she hopped toward the mercenaries.

Even from this distance, Heather could locate guards placed in hiding along the human picket line. She heard their rustling in the vegetation, and smelled their scents as they went about their guard duty. She slowly moved toward the second largest gap in the humans' picket line. She avoided the largest gap – perhaps it had been left open as a trap.

*Stop!* Mikela's whispered voice called from Heather's right. *You are right against the barrier. You can move north or south, but do not go any more eastward! I'll contact you right before we change you back. Find the best place to move across the barrier.*

Heather spent several moments trying to find the best place in which to be transformed back. She found several bushes growing close together. They were just the size that would hide her as her body was transformed. She hopped into the bushes and waited.

All of the Guardians were gathered in the shadows of the battlements on the eastern wall. "She's against the barrier." Mikela told the group.

Looking a little nervous, Callin stood up and took a deep breath. He was dressed in a dark outfit and had mud smeared across his face and arms. He paused for just a moment, and then he climbed over the wall and descended a rope.

Callin dropped to the ground and immediately went prone. He lay on the ground quietly for several moments with his eyes closed. He listened to the sounds around him as he tried to absorb the locations and origins of the sounds. He formed a map in his mind of what type of sound was coming from which direction, hoping this would help him as he moved toward the barrier. Any sound that changed would be a warning.

There was a slight wind that rustled the bushes and the small trees growing around the fort. The chirping of crickets gave the night a constant background noise, interrupted occasionally by the calls of various birds. He said a silent prayer of thanks for the crickets; they should provide an advance warning of danger. The crickets would quit chirping if something or someone moved around them.

Callin got to his feet and ran hunched over to the nearest obstruction. It was a small outcropping of rock that at least provided him a hiding place. He sat there for several more moments and listened to the sounds of the night once again.

The wind picked up as he moved toward the barrier. His heart was pounding as he moved from hiding place to hiding place. He stopped at each hiding place and listened for a change in the night sounds. At every stop, he could detect nothing different than what he expected. Everything was as it should be.

The rest of the Guardians waited, somewhat impatiently, for Callin to reach the barrier. Mikela monitored the location of both Heather and Callin and reported their progress.

"All right. Heather has been in place for a while now, and Callin is approaching the

barrier,” Mikela said. “He should be noticed anytime now. Enstorion, are you ready?”

A look of irritation briefly passed over Enstorion's features, his distaste of being questioned clearly showing. “I’m waiting only on you,” was his answer.

Callin was moving toward the enemy’s picket line, worrying as he advanced. *I should have seen somebody by now*, he thought. A gnawing suspicion began to grow in his gut. What if he slipped right through the picket line and was now on the other side of the barrier? The whole plan counted on the mercenaries spotting him and chasing him back to the fort. If he had slipped past the mercenaries, then he would have to try and deliver the warning himself. He knew he was a decent woodsman, but he didn’t begin to compare to Heather.

The wind was starting to blow harder, and it was beginning to drown out the other sounds of the night. He took another step forward when a sensation of wrongness sent a shiver down his spine. He froze and tried to determine what had changed.

*The crickets!* The wind hadn’t drowned them out; they had just quit chirping.

Trestus paced back and forth across the battlements, alternating between cursing one moment and praying the next. How could he have let Callin go on this folly of a mission? Of the two he was the eldest and he was responsible for his brother. He dreaded the thought of Callin not returning, but the thought of having to break the news to their mother was almost as bad.

Their father had made quite a respectable fortune as a merchant. For the right price he could acquire anything, but the majority of his business was spices, silk, magical ingredients, and other hard to get commodities. He traveled extensively, bringing goods back to Telur in enormous wagon trains. The wagon trains were normally safe, because of the sheer size of the convoys and the hired guards that traveled with the wagons. Bandits and thieves normally refused to attack such a well armed convoy.

Sometimes, however, even a well defended convoy could be attacked. Trestus remembered the convoy that had brought their father back to them in a coffin, the victim of a bandit attack. Trestus and Callin had only been twelve at the time and the death of their father had been a hard blow for both of them. Callin had took it harder than Trestus, and ever since then, he had been Callin’s protector. Their older brother had take over the family business, and they had been given an opportunity to work in the business, but when Callin had applied for entrance into the Guardians, Trestus had dutifully followed him.

His mother had taken the death of her husband hard, and had avoided the pain by spending all her time raising her children. She had not liked the idea of her sons entering the military, but she had agreed, since Callin had his heart set on it. Trestus remembered the fear in her eyes when they had graduated from the Guardian training. She had tried to hide it but she had failed.

Trestus had never regretted joining the Guardians before now, but now he silently wondered how he would go on if something happened to Callin.

Deeply worried, Trestus stared out over the battlements.

Flare was busy marshaling the archers. As soon as the excitement began, the archers would provide cover for Callin as he made his retreat to the safety of the walls. He double-checked their equipment and got them into place as quietly as he could, then he rejoined the rest of the Guardians. He opened his mouth to ask if anything had changed, when Mikela spoke.



“Now, transform her back! They've spotted him.”

Callin was standing on a gentle slope, with several bushes to either side of him, and two oak trees growing side by side in front. There were several small boulders scattered around that could be hiding soldiers.

Callin hadn't moved since he first realized that the crickets were quiet. He was trying to determine where the sentries were, or if they were there at all. He immediately dismissed the bushes, since they were too scrawny to conceal a man. The ridges and boulders didn't appear to conceal anybody. That left only the trees in the immediate area, but Callin could see the shadows coming from the other side, and there was nothing out of place.

He breathed a little easier, but still he didn't move. Something was still gnawing at him, and he couldn't figure out what it was. He looked up at the moon and noticed for the first time the low-hanging branches of the oak trees. Staring down on him, with weapons in hand, were several sentries.

Heather, still in the form of a rabbit, was enjoying the acute senses that her new form offered. Even though the moon was behind the clouds, she could see clearly, even making out the form of several sentries that were moving behind the barrier. The sentries didn't worry her, because they were too far to the south to interfere in the plan.

Her smelling was equally acute, as she could make out the smell of the dinner the human sentries were eating in their encampments. The smells didn't tempt her stomach, since in her current form, she was only craving vegetables.

As she sat there, listening to the sounds of the night, she began to feel odd.

It took several moments before she realized she was being changed back into her human form. Although the change started slowly, it was over in a flash.

She lay there momentarily, her heart beating so fast, she thought she was having a heart attack. Ever so slowly her heartbeat returned to normal, but after having extremely acute senses, she now felt like she was blind and deaf.

She slowly crept forward from her hiding place.

Callin cursed himself, then thanked the gods above with his next breath.

The sentries plan was simple and brilliant. They could wait quietly until a soldier walked underneath their hiding place. Then they could drop down and cut off the only escape route.

These thoughts passed through his mind in a flash, then he turned and ran as fast as he could back toward the fort.

Callin heard several thuds as the sentries dropped from their branches and took up the pursuit. He ran through bushes and stumbled over rocks, trying to run in a zigzag route.

He knew the sentries were close behind him, and was therefore surprised when he heard the alarm being raised back near where the sentries had originally been placed.

Callin was in good shape, but he was still breathing hard and gasping for breath. He thought his heart would burst, but the rush of fear motivated him to run even faster. The night was cool, but he was sheathed in sweat. He was running for his life, and he knew it.

Bushes whipped his arms as he ran, but he hardly noticed. The only things he heard was his labored breathing and the footsteps of the sentries behind him. As he ran, he slung branches, bushes, and anything he could get his hands on in the general direction of his followers. He was

rewarded when he heard muffled curses coming from behind him. He wasn't foolish enough to think that the damage was even remotely serious.

Callin was about halfway back to the fort when he caught his foot on a rock outcropping, and went down. The mercenaries were on him immediately.

Heather moved slowly through the bushes and undergrowth. She had already passed through the barrier, and so far had managed to avoid encountering any sentries.

There was evidence that Callin had done an excellent job of distracting the sentries and drawing them to the south. Heather had heard shouts coming from that direction, and had even observed several sentries running that way.

She was picking her way through the enemy's camp. She would have preferred to avoid the camp completely, but it was spread out and covered a large area. Heather wanted to get away as quickly as possible, and the quickest way was right through the middle of the camp. The evening fires were between the tents, and she avoided them at all costs.

Saying a silent prayer for guidance, she moved forward through the camp.

Callin landed flat on his stomach. He knew immediately that the sentries were right behind him, and his options were limited. He rolled over to his back and sprang to his feet. He swung his knife at the nearest sentry as soon as reached his feet. The speed of his move caught the sentry off guard, and Callin slashed him across the face. The sentry fell to his knees, bleeding profusely.

Callin reversed the motion of the swing and threw the knife at a second sentry. He heard a gratifying *thunk* as the knife hit home.

The sentry fell backward into his three companions, slowing them down. Callin took full advantage, once again sprinting back toward the fort.

Ever since Mikela had raised the alarm, Flare had been preparing the soldiers for Callin's retreat. The archers had been moved to the battlements and were now spread out all across the top of the wall. The cavalry were mounted and waiting just inside the gate. The plan called for Callin to climb a rope that was hanging down over the wall, but Flare was prepared to risk opening the gate if Callin was in danger.

Flare and the rest of the squad watched from the battlements near where the rope had been hung over the wall.

They were all worried about Callin, but Trestus looked like he was waiting on the birth of his first child. He was nervously pacing back and forth, chewing on his lip as he peered out over the wall. A light sheen of sweat lay on his forehead.

Flare's elven sight detected Callin first. "Here he comes!" he shouted, pointing.

The guards were gaining on him, and Callin knew it. He had run in a zigzag pattern, and it had cost him time. He could hear their footsteps and arduous breathing, and he could now hear shouts coming from other mercenaries as they joined in the chase.

The wall of the fort was in sight inspiring him to run even faster. He could see the defenders strung out across the top of the wall as he headed for the rope.

As he neared the wall, Callin heard the whiz of arrows flying past him. The archers on the top of the wall were shooting at his pursuers. He didn't look back, but the screams were

enough to let him know that the archers had been effective.

Reaching the wall, he spotted the rope swinging to his left. He bounded to the rope, and began frantically climbing up.

The rope had knots tied in it every foot to help him climb. Even so, he didn't know if he had the strength to reach the top of the wall. He was exhausted from the long run, and he thought his heart would soon burst. He struggled to put one hand over the other.

Flare was ecstatic when the archers had cut down the three sentries that had been closest to Callin. The elation had quickly turned to anxiety, as the second wave of mercenaries approached. There were twenty or thirty in close pursuit.

"Keep shooting!" Flare hollered, sprinting to the wall where Callin should be climbing. Looking over the wall, he was dismayed. Callin was climbing, but at an extremely slow pace. Apparently, he was exhausted.

Flare turned back toward the rest of the Guardian squad. "Atock, Phillip, give me a hand!"

Not waiting for a response, Flare turned back to the rope and began slowly pulling the rope and Callin up.

Phillip and Atock were quickly by his side, and with their combined efforts, the rope was raised faster and faster. The knots that were intended to help Callin climb also helped the Guardians pull the rope up with ease. Knot by knot, they pulled the rope up, until at last they found Callin holding on for dear life.

Flare held the rope, while Phillip grabbed Callin's right shoulder and Atock grabbed his left. Combined, the two soldiers began pulling the young man up over the wall. Flare waited until they had a good hold of Callin, and then he let go of the rope and grabbed Callin by the front of the shirt.

Callin was almost over the wall when Flare heard a *thunk*, and the look on Callin's face changed for the worse. He didn't know what had happened until they got Callin over the wall, and they saw a long arrow sticking out from between his shoulder blades. They pulled Callin over the wall and laid him down on his stomach.

"No!" Trestus shouted, running up to where his brother lay in a growing pool of his own blood.

Flare ignored him for the moment, and shouted, "Kara, get over here! Now!"

Kara came running down the battlements, but before she could reach the soldiers, Callin breathed his last breath and slipped into death's cold embrace.

It was several hours past midnight when Flare finally made it to bed. He was sleeping in the house that had formerly belonged to Colonel Holt.

Trestus had demanded the right to prepare Callin's body for burial. He took his brother's body and locked himself in the temple to grieve. He had refused to allow the other Guardians to enter.

Flare had talked to the other Guardians, trying to raise their spirits. Trying to encourage his fellow soldiers had been tough, since he was so shaken up by Callin's death, and since they had no idea if Heather had escaped the barrier.

Soldiers under his command had died earlier in the day, but this death was so personal. Callin had been a comrade in arms, a friend, and he was not sure how to deal with his friend's

death. He was depressed and the stress was beginning to show. The stress of being in command, the probable annihilation of the fort, and the death of Callin were causing him to question himself and his abilities.

The mood of Flare's fellow Guardians was not good, and he was worried about the soldiers' morale. He knew that depressed soldiers did not fight well.

Flare had been in bed for about five minutes, lying in the dark and trying to go to sleep. It was pitch black and he was dead tired, but sleep was the farthest thing from his mind. His shoulders and legs had passed the sore stage and were now in the dull aching stage. He tried to ignore the aching, and instead thought about the defensive arrangements for the following day.

Lying on his back, deep in thought, he heard a noise come from outside the bedroom door. Guards were stationed outside the entrance to the house, so nobody should have been able to enter. The door opened, and somebody was silhouetted in the door. Before Flare even had a chance to think about it, he uttered a simple magic spell that caused the room to burst forth with light. "Il-lum." He was halfway out of bed moving toward his sword when he realized that it was Murleen that had entered the room. He breathed a sigh of relief and was about to speak when he noticed the confused look on her face.

"Murleen. What's the matter?" Flare asked, getting nervous. He hadn't even bothered to clothe himself.

"You used magic," Murleen said quietly. "The use of magic is forbidden to warriors."

Flare opened his mouth to deny it, and then closed his mouth just as fast. What was the use of denying something that didn't matter anyway? "Why is it forbidden, do you know?"

"The prophecies. They say that the restorer of the Dragon Order will bring war, death, and disaster upon us." Murleen paused and looked hesitant. "Are you the one prophesied about?"

Flare smiled. "No, Murleen, I'm not. I guarded Cassandra as part of my training, and I must have picked some of the spells up. When you opened the door, instinct took over and I spoke the spell." He shrugged his shoulders. "That's all." He tried to sound confident, but he didn't think he did a very good job. Murleen didn't look too sure, and she seemed ready to question it some more when he spoke again. "Murleen, has something happened?"

"No. Everything's fine." She paused and dropped her eyes to the floor. "Even if Heather makes it, won't we be dead before she gets back?"

Sighing, he sank back onto the bed. "Murleen, let's try to prevent that from happening. Okay? All we can do is fight the best fight we can." He sounded anything but confident, and she could see it also.

"Flare, I know what the goblins do to female captives. Please promise me that you'll do whatever it takes to prevent that from happening to me, and, I do mean anything."

The way Murleen said it, made Flare's heart skip a beat. "Murleen, what are you asking? Are you asking me to kill you?" he asked incredulously.

"If the fort is overrun, and all hope is lost, then yes," Murleen said quietly. "It would be much quicker than what the goblins would do to me, and less humiliating."

"If it comes to that, then I will, but let's keep it from getting there."

Flare silently wondered if he would be able to follow through with his promise. Life was not something that elves took lightly.

"Is that the only reason you came here?" he asked, afraid that he would have to talk with her about Callin's death. He didn't want to talk about it. Not yet.

Once again her eyes dropped to the floor, and she moved to stand beside the bed. "No, I

didn't want to be alone, and I thought maybe I could spend the night here," Murleen said.

He was surprised and intrigued at the same time. "Murleen, I don't think I would be good company tonight. You know with Callin's death and all . . ."

Murleen was silent for just a moment. "Flare, I would still like to stay here, even if all we do is sleep."

Flare considered for just a moment, then slowly pulled the blanket back as an invitation for her.

Murleen undressed and climbed into bed beside Flare.

## Chapter 17

The next day brought a downpour. The clouds of the previous evening turned into a deluge of rain, but the rain only raised the moods of the fort's defenders. The rain would make it easier for the defenders and much harder for the attackers.

Flare arrived at the western wall shortly after dawn and was pleased to see the rain had changed the ground into a soggy, muddy mess. There would be no siege towers approaching the fort today.

Scanning the valley, his pleasure grew when the attackers were nowhere in sight. He could just make out tents on the far end of the valley, just short of the tree line, but those had to belong to the humans, since goblins didn't use tents. Strange that humans were helping the goblins. What was the connection, and why now? He shook his head and went back to scanning the valley. Nothing moved. Smiling, he posted double guards, and left to get out of the rain.

Flare joined the rest of the Guardians in the mess hall; everyone but Trestus was already there. Callin's empty seat caused a welling up of remorse, but he pushed it away. There wasn't time for that now – if they survived, then he would deal with the regrets.

The Guardians were seated at the officer's table, away from the rest of the soldiers. They just sat there talking quietly, looking depressed.

"The rain is really coming down out there. I hope the rain will keep the goblins from attacking, but I posted extra guards just to be safe," Flare said, brushing water from his cloak. "Has anybody seen Trestus today?"

An embarrassed silence engulfed the table.

"He's in the temple, and won't let anybody inside," Phillip answered.

Flare rubbed his face, sighing. "I don't want to sound callous, but we need him. I'll go talk to him. We should have plenty of advance notice of an attack. But if anything happens, let me know immediately." Reaching down, he grabbed a hunk of bread and a slice of ham, then strode from the hall.

The temple was located at the center of the fort and looked ancient. It was built of weathered stone and was several stories tall. All the windows were on the second floor or higher, and only the entrance on the front of the building allowed access. Flare gave the building's construction an appreciative glance and thought that it would make an excellent place for a last stand, if it came to that.

He climbed the steps to the temple entrance and banged on the heavy oaken door.

Silence greeted Flare's knock, so he knocked again.

He waited several more moments before deciding to take action. *Well. If he won't let me in, then I'll let myself in.* He gave the door a mighty kick and only managed to start his ankle throbbing. "Fool!" he cursed, hopping on one foot.

There was no lock on the door, but when he peered through the cracks, he could just make out a bar on the other side. The temple had not been built to resist thieves, since no respectable thief would rob a temple. After some close inspection, he discovered that there was a narrow gap between the door and the doorjamb. He slid his sword into the narrow gap and attempted to lift the restraining bar. After a lot of lifting and grunting, the bar crashed noisily to the floor inside the temple. Pushing the door open, Flare slipped in.

The majority of the first floor of the temple consisted of one large chamber. There was a small foyer that led to the main chamber. The main chamber was full of wooden pews lined up in rows on either side of the walkway. At the end of the walkway was an altar and a lectern. The interior shutters were all closed so the interior of the temple was remarkably dark. Several candles were lit and placed on the altar.

Lying on the altar was Callin's body. The body was covered with a bloody blanket, leaving only his head exposed.

Grief settled on Flare. Until now, out of necessity, he had managed to block out most of last night, but Callin's body drove those emotions home. Seeing his friend's open, empty eyes caused his eyes to tear up. He stood there thinking about the brave soldier who had given his life for the soldiers of the fort. A deep-gnawing doubt grew in his stomach.

"It should have been me," Flare murmured.

Trestus was sitting on the first pew with his head resting in his hands. Flare hadn't even noticed him. Without moving, Trestus said, "Go away, Flare. I want to be alone with Callin." His voice was past being choked up and seemed tired and dry.

Hating himself for what he had to do, Flare said, "Trestus, we need you. Callin gave his life for us, and if you hide in here then it was wasted."

Trestus bounded to his feet and shouted, "Hiding! I'm not hiding. I'm trying to think of a way to let my mother know that her youngest son is dead. How do I tell her that? How do I tell her that I failed Callin?" Trestus's voice cracked, and he fell to his knees, sobbing.

Flare approached and placed his hand on Trestus's shoulder. "Trestus, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way." He paused and chose his words carefully. "We need you. As inexperienced as we are, we are the leaders, and we need you if we are to hold the fort. You didn't fail Callin; he made the ultimate sacrifice for us." He paused, blinking back tears. "He died a hero, and now you must make a smaller sacrifice. You must give up this period of mourning and honor Callin by helping us lead."

Trestus raised his eyes; tears were still streaming down his face. "How can I go on living without him?"

"Because," Flare said, more roughly than he intended, "you have no choice."

There was no attack that day. Apparently, the downpour and the mud kept the attackers away.

The mood of the soldiers rose initially with the rain, but as the day slowly dragged on, the soldiers got restless and minor scuffles broke out. Flare was forced to inflict harsh and quick punishment in the hopes of preventing further fights.

Trestus emerged from the temple and spoke briefly with the other Guardians. He then left to get some much-needed sleep.

The rain didn't let up until late in the evening, when it slowed to a drizzle. A couple of hours before midnight, Flare and Atock were standing on the eastern wall observing the sky.

"It looks like the rain might stop," Flare said. "What do you think?"

Atock studied the sky before he answered. "Judging by the clouds, you're probably right." After several moments, he added, "You think they'll attack in the morning?"

Flare looked over the wall at the ground far below. "Possibly, but the ground will still be a mess. Maybe later in the day. Even then, we should have a distinct advantage."

Atock considered. "Do you think we have a chance of coming out alive?"

Flare knew he should have said 'yes' immediately, but Atock was one of the few that he felt he could speak honestly with. "Is there a chance?" Flare repeated. "There is a chance. If Heather escaped through the enemy line alive, and if she can find General Andatell quickly, and if he can reach here with his troops in time. Yes, Atock, there is a chance, but I'm not holding out hope." He didn't look at Atock, but he could feel the other man's eyes on him, and another pang of guilt hit him. He had failed Callin, and perhaps he had just failed Atock. Maybe it would have been better just to lie.

They stood there for several moments before Flare spoke again. "Atock, would you see to assigning guards? I want to get some sleep."

"Sure. Good night."

Flare returned to his newly claimed quarters, intending to go straight to bed. The long day of keeping the troops in line had worn him out as much as the fighting had done the day before.

He entered through the rear door and headed straight for the stairs. Halfway up the stairs, Flare froze. The door to the bedroom was closed, but there was light coming from underneath the door.

Standing as still as stone, he listened for any sound. After several seconds, Flare noticed shuffling sounds coming from his bedroom.

Drawing his sword quietly, he finished climbing the stairs. It seemed that every board squeaked as he stepped on them. He approached slowly, listening for any disturbance. He reached the door and rested his ear against it, but the sounds had stopped.

Flare waited for several more seconds, but the sounds were not repeated. Taking a deep breath, he kicked the door open. He dove into the room, rolled over, and came quickly to one knee.

"Nice roll. Very cute," Murleen said from where she lay on the bed.

Flare shoulders slumped, and he placed the point of the sword on the floor and leaned on the hilt. "You scared me half to death. I didn't know you were in here." It was a measure of his extreme tiredness that he hadn't even thought of Murleen being in the room.

"Well, who did you expect?" Murleen asked indignantly. "When I saw that long, hard sword, I was hoping that perhaps you wanted to do more than sleep this time," she said, pouting.

Flare smiled and began taking off his clothes.

Flare's fears were not realized, as it continued to rain throughout the next day.

Trestus rejoined the Guardians, apparently having forced the emotion away, at least for now. He joined in with the planning and seemed totally engrossed in the conversation. He did not, however, take part in any of the humorous banter.

Flare and the other Guardians had their hands full keeping the inexperienced soldiers in line. The soldiers were beginning to lose control because of the fear of the coming battle, and the immediate problem of being cooped up in the fort. The soldiers took out their frustration on each other with minor fights and squabbles breaking out. In defense of the soldiers, the fights were minor, with no weapons being drawn.

Flare and Murleen, having spent their second night together, spent the day working side by side. He was enjoying her presence. Her closeness was the only bright spot in an otherwise dreary day.



No goblins or mercenaries were seen that day, but nobody believed they had left.

The rain stopped falling about dusk, and the Guardians made plans for the return of the siege on the morrow. Trestus was to lead the defense on the western wall with the rest of the Guardians fighting on the eastern wall. Flare trusted Trestus, but he wanted him as far from the main battle as possible. A soldier had to be completely alert in order to survive. With the death of Callin, he didn't know how much he could depend on Trestus.

Flare had dinner prepared early in the evening, and the Guardians ate shortly after dark. He had ulterior motives, and shortly after they were done eating, Flare and Murleen retired. They left the mess hall separately, trying to be discreet about their relationship, but he wasn't sure they were fooling anybody. He wasn't sure exactly what to think about their relationship either. It had started quickly, mainly because of the hopelessness of their situation. Neither of them expected to survive the siege, and their affair was an easy way to share warmth and pleasure prior to death. He enjoyed her immensely, but was not sure what would happen if they survived.

Derek and Atock stood on the western wall looking out into the night. Derek smoked a small pipe, and the smoke moved lazily out over the valley below. He was smoking the bloom of a flower that gave the smoker a feeling of dizziness and made them light headed. Well, normally it would, but Derek was used to the effects.

Atock leaned against the top of the wall and regarded the fires of the goblins with some concern. "It's the first time they've had fires in two days," he said. "I guess they'll have full bellies tonight." That did not bode well for the defenders; the goblins would be at full strength tomorrow.

Derek nodded. He had been trying not to think about either the goblins or tomorrow, but it seemed there was no avoiding it. He was holding the pipe in his right hand and he pointed toward the two sword hilts sticking above Atock's shoulders. "You really prefer two swords to one?"

Atock smiled and nodded as he reached over his shoulders and drew both of the swords in one quick motion. The swords were shorter than a long sword, and they were slightly curved with a sharp edge only on one side. "In my homeland, it is called the art of the snake." Seeing the look of puzzlement on Derek's face, Atock smiled. "Those who are truly a master of the art can use both swords at the same time, and each sword is moved independently of the other. It can remind you of a snake's movement, the head and the tail moving at the same time. It is difficult to counter both swords at once, and even more so here where no one has heard of it."

Derek nodded. "I can see your point, but I'll stick to my long sword." He smiled and rubbed his hand over the hilt of his sword. "This weapon has been in my family for generations." He drew the sword. "One of my ancestors named it Surdim el Aldanon. It means the Sword of Aldanon in the old tongue of the Steel Kingdom, but now we just call it Surdim. It was given to me by my father when I graduated from the Guardians." The smile slid slowly away. "I hope that I can make him proud."

Atock looked confused and asked, "What is this Steel Kingdom that you mentioned? I have never heard of it."

Derek smiled. "House Steel governs the southern regions of Telur, but they used to be a separate kingdom. Oh, it was many generations ago, before Telur conquered them and converted them to the common speech. My family remembers even though we are only a merchant house."

Derek fingered his sword hilt. "My grandfather told me that this sword was dwarven

crafted.”

Dwarven swords were rare and some of them were worth their weight in gold. The dwarves had quit selling them generations ago, when they had quit trading with humans, and the swords were more sought after than ever.

Atock studied the weapon again, noticing for the first time the runes on the blade near the hilt.

The dwarves had made the strongest weapons, even stronger than steel and the dwarves had guarded their secrets religiously.

Atock looked at his swords. “These swords were first used by my grandfather's grandfather, but they have no name.” He sounded regretful.

Derek sheathed his sword. “Well, perhaps it's time to change that. What would you like to call them?”

After a moment, Atock looked up. “I do not know. It's not something done lightly.”

Derek chuckled. “You're right. Think on it, perhaps something will occur to you.”

Flare had the soldiers up and in the mess hall two hours before sunrise. He wanted them to be on the walls when the sun rose.

The morning dawned a beautiful bright and sunny day. Momentarily, the sunshine cheered the soldiers, but the impending attack quickly brought them back down.

Flare arranged the defense of the western wall the same way he had done on the first day of the siege. He took charge of the soldiers in the center of the wall, Phillip took the south side of the wall, and Atock took the northern part. Then they waited.

He had put fifty soldiers, under the command of Trestus, on the eastern wall. The wall was woefully undermanned, but the western wall took precedence. That left approximately three hundred fifty soldiers to guard the five hundred-yard-long wall.

The townspeople and tradesmen were the backup. They were not soldiers or fighters, but if the fort fell, then they were dead also, and they knew it. Nothing motivated people like fearing for their lives.

The goblins didn't attack at first light; instead, they waited until noon, perhaps for the sun to dry up some of the water. There was no sneakiness to their attack – they just marched slowly toward the walls. Scattered throughout the more common white goblins were the more fearful black goblins. The black goblins held whips in their hands which they used from time to time to keep the white goblins moving.

The goblins used the same tactics they had used the first time they attacked the walls. They carried ropes and ladders, and attacked ferociously, not hesitating to throw their lives away.

Archers and townspeople stood in the courtyard and launched arrows over the wall. There was no reason for them to see the attackers, since the goblin army covered the valley floor. Any arrow launched was assured to hit an attacker.

Flare waited until the goblins reached the wall and screamed, “For Callin!” Dropping the head of his pike, he thrust the nearest ladder away from the wall, but for every one that was pushed away, another three took its place. The mud did help with the ladders, as some of the ladders would sink in the mud and topple on their own, but not enough. The goblins surged forward like ants rushing over a stick.

*Swish!* The metal hook attached to one of the goblin's ropes narrowly missed Flare's head. Reversing the motion of his pike, he sliced the rope in two, dropping a goblin onto his

brethren down below.

Flare heard a scream and whipped around. Five feet to his left a Telurian soldier was lying in a pool of his own blood, his bowels spilled on the wall. A white goblin was standing over the soldier with a bloody scimitar in his hand. The goblin had reached the wall unnoticed, and had taken advantage of that fact, killing the soldier.

“Guard the wall!” Flare shouted at the soldiers nearest to him. “I’ll take care of him!” He dropped his pike, and drawing his sword, charged the goblin.

The goblin sneered an evil grin, laughing as Flare charged him. “Isss this the best? Tonight I take your woman, and if you live, I’ll make you watch.”

The words were probably meant to enrage him, to make him fight without thinking, but they had the opposite effect on him. The words calmed him and cleared his head.

The goblin started the fight with a massive overhead swing. Flare blocked the blow, but felt the jolt all the way down to his toes. He stepped back and to the right, preferring not to fight too close to the goblin.

The goblin then slashed at Flare horizontally, from left to right. Flare dropped below the swing, placing his left hand on the ground and kicked with his right leg at the goblin's knee. The goblin was too fast and jumped out of the way of the kick.

Regaining his feet, Flare assumed a fighting stance. His feet spread shoulder width apart, with the right foot slightly ahead of the left. He assumed a two-handed grip on the sword and watched for the goblin's next move.

The goblin drove right at Flare, attempting to skewer him with the scimitar.

*Clank!* Flare knocked the scimitar to the right and tried to whip his sword back across the throat of the goblin. Once again, the goblin was too fast and moved a step back. Flare pressed the situation by trying his own thrust at the goblin's belly.

*Clank!* The goblin slapped Flare's sword to the side and rushed him. Flare was caught off guard and pressed back against the wall. His sword and the goblin's scimitar were locked together, and the two combatants wrestled to gain an advantage. The goblin was clearly stronger and was forcing Flare to lean back over the wall.

Flare released his sword with his left hand and made a grab for his knife. He missed it and grabbed at it again, this time he was relieved to feel the knife hilt in his left hand. He reversed his hold and slashed across the throat of the goblin. Reddish-black blood sprayed across Flare, as the goblin stumbled back, spewing blood through his hand, which had instinctively grasped his ruined throat.

Pressing the goblin's plight, Flare swung his sword at the monster's throat, nearly severing its head in the process.

Flare breathed a sigh of relief as he sized up the defenders' predicament. The defenders were holding the attackers at bay, with just a few sneaking onto the wall. The few that managed to reach the wall were being dealt with by groups of two or more soldiers. Loss of life had been minimal for the soldiers, but he felt every loss like a knife in his stomach. The defenders couldn't afford to lose even so much as a single life, and since they were under his command, the loss hurt that much more.

The attack continued all afternoon with much the same results. The goblins continued to try and storm the wall, and they succeeded occasionally, but they were repelled almost instantly. The attackers pushed on with unrelenting stubbornness, throwing their lives away in a concerted effort to take the wall.

Flare fought all afternoon beside his fellow soldiers. His arms were sore, and his back hurt from swinging the heavy pike. His heart hurt from watching all the death around him, as well as having to take so many lives, albeit goblin lives.

The soldiers, who were serving under him, were obviously scared to death. Their faces reflected the fear and frustration at the siege and at the death of their friends.

The goblins pushed on until dusk, then fell back. The soldiers manned the walls for another hour, just to make sure that the goblins were through, and then Flare sent the troops to the mess hall. He posted guards, then went looking for the wounded.

He found Mikela, Atock, Kara, and Enton tending the wounded in a barracks building, which had been turned into a makeshift infirmary.

"Flare, over here," Atock called out, waving Flare over.

"Atock. How many injured?" he asked.

Atock sighed deeply before answering, "Twenty-two dead. Three injured badly and not expected to survive the night. Six more are injured badly enough where they will not fight again for a long time, if ever."

Flare took the news silently, struggling with another possible twenty-five dead on his conscience.

"How many soldiers are left? About three hundred and seventy?" Flare asked.

"Yes," Atock asked quietly.

Atock leaned in and spoke quietly. "Flare, you are doing everything that you can. These soldiers knew what they were getting into when they joined. These soldiers are defending thousands of farmers and merchants. If they get through us, there's nothing between them and Telur."

"Don't you think I know that?" Flare said, raising his voice, but instantly feeling guilty. He reached out and grasped Atock's shoulder. "I'm sorry, I guess the strain is getting to me."

"Forget it. The stress is getting to all of us, and we're not even in charge." Atock paused, considering his friend, "Are you going to be all right?"

Flare laughed a laugh he didn't feel. "No," was the only answer he could give.

As miserable and heartbreaking as the days were, the nights were the exact opposite. Flare's relationship with Murleen was developing nicely, and he felt for her like he had never felt for anybody else. He was rather inexperienced with affairs of the heart. This was as close to being in love as he had ever been.

For her part, Murleen embraced and returned his affection with a passion that numbed him to the core of his very being.

In her arms, Flare escaped the troubles and tribulations of command. The deaths seemed to melt away and for a short while, he found happiness.

The fourth day since Callin's death and Heather's hopeful departure dawned sunny and cool. There were a few white clouds in the sky, but there was no hint of rain. Birds could be heard chirping, and everything seemed peaceful. To anyone who had not been at the fort the past week, it would seem to be a perfectly wonderful morning.

Flare stood on the battlements, watching the horizon for any sign of the goblins approach. He could smell cooking fires and hear the townspeople as they prepared for the coming attack.

He assigned Trestus to the eastern wall again, but only assigned him forty-five soldiers. Most of the forty-five soldiers were injured in one way or another. Nothing serious, but enough for them to be assigned to the less-dangerous side of the fort.

Flare only had three hundred twenty-five soldiers left to guard the western wall.

The goblins once again made the defenders wait until noon for the attack. The goblins were probably doing it on purpose. Sometimes the anticipation of an event was worse than the actual event.

When the attack came, it was sudden and surprising. A solid wall of goblins rushed the fort in the same manner they had previously attacked.

Flare was surprised. He was expecting the goblins to try something different, but once again they attacked carrying ladders and ropes. He briefly noticed that a large number of the black goblins were concentrated in the middle of the attackers, but he quickly forgot about it as he was forced to cut ropes and push ladders away from the wall.

Shortly after the fighting began, he heard a shout come from behind him. He spun around and saw that two goblins had gained the wall and slaughtered a defender. The goblins were trying to hold their ground, while more goblins climbed up behind them. Flare opened his mouth to shout a command when he saw that the soldiers were already aware of the situation.

Three soldiers charged the goblins. Two soldiers took the goblin on the left, and the other soldier engaged the goblin on the right. Flare realized, with a start, that the soldier on the right was Derek, his fellow Guardian.

Flare sprinted toward the fight, hoping to get there before any more goblins climbed over the wall.

Derek squared off against the goblin, saying a silent prayer as he drew Surdim from its sheath. The goblin was a nasty-looking brute. He was six feet tall and heavily muscled. He had several inch long fangs, and his hands ended in long claws. He carried a long, wide scimitar.

The goblin swung the scimitar on a downward swing. Derek was smart enough to not try and block the scimitar; instead, he used his sword to deflect it away from him. Then, he quickly tried to reverse the motion and spear the goblin with his sword, but he was too slow and missed.

The goblin started a massive swing from Derek's left to right and Derek swung upward hoping to deflect the sword again. The goblin somehow stopped his swing, and used his scimitar to knock Derek's sword away. Both the sword and the scimitar went flying from the collision, and Derek found himself in unarmed combat with a monstrous goblin.

Sensing the advantage, the goblin roared a primitive cry and brought a massive forearm down on the top of Derek's helmet.

Derek collapsed to the ground dazed and seeing yellow spots, as the goblin scurried to retrieve his scimitar. After a moment his head began to clear and he looked up to see the goblin raise his scimitar over his head.

Derek was sitting on his butt as he stared up at the scimitar in the goblins' hands. He watched as the sword began its downward swing, bringing his death with it. Praying, Derek closed his eyes and hoped it would be quick.

Derek heard a *Thump*, and a *Clank*. He opened his eyes, and saw the goblin lying beside his scimitar in a growing pool of blood. It took several moments for Derek to realize that its head was lying several feet from the rest of its body.

Standing over the body of the goblin Flare smiled at Derek. "Hey, Derek, need some

help?”

Derek closed his eyes and relaxed his head backward against the wall, looking like he was trying to not pee himself.

Flare was surprised that there were no more ladders or grappling hooks hanging on the wall. He would have thought the attackers would have tried to pore as many goblins as possible into the breach.

*Boom! Boom!* A thunderous noise rolled over the battlements.

*What in the name of the abyss was that?* Flare thought, jumping toward the battlements. For a moment, he thought the goblins had brought some more siege towers. That thought was quickly displaced by a new danger.

“What is it?” Derek asked.

*Boom!*

Flare hesitated in amazement at what was taking place below him. “The goblins are using a battering ram. And it’s huge! I –” He never finished that sentence.

*Boom!*

The resounding boom had cut him off, but Flare had quit speaking even before it rang out. He finally got a good look at who was swinging the massive battering ram. “Derek, I was wrong. It’s not goblins using that battering ram . . . it’s trolls.”

Trolls are a gigantic humanoid race that primarily dwell below ground. While trolls have the same basic shape as humans, they are gigantic in comparison. Trolls are usually nine feet tall or taller and their strength is legendary. Their skin color is grayish, though some have a slight greenish tint, and their hair is typically coarse and oily.

The worse part of trolls is from the neck up. In one word, they are simply hideous. Oversized noses and ears, and eyes that are used to squinting in the dark places of the earth. They have teeth that are normally black or brown, and bent at all different angles. They are ferocious in battle, and more than a match for a human in even combat.

Flare watched in awe, as the trolls swung the massive battering ram.

*Boom!*

There were twenty trolls swinging the battering ram, ten on each side. The battering ram was made of steel and over twenty feet long. It had handles jutting perpendicularly away from the sides, which the trolls were using to carry and swing it.

Flare observed all of this in a flash.

*Boom!*

The gate could withstand the bombardment only for a short while. *We have got to stop them quickly! But How?* Flare wondered. He leaned out over the wall and looked for a weakness in the enemy. The trolls were directly in front of the gate. A host of goblins was gathered on either side of the trolls, but they were just standing there, having stopped trying to scale the walls.

*What are they waiting for?* Then it dawned on him. *They expect us to open the gates.* It actually made sense now that he stopped and thought about it. They would have to open the gates to stop the trolls, and that would allow the goblins access to the fort. If they didn’t open the gates, then the trolls would beat down the walls, thereby giving access to the goblins. Either way they were in trouble.

*Boom!*

Derek tried to pull himself to his feet, but he stumbled and fell back on his rear. The movement jarred Flare from his hesitation.

“Derek! Don’t move. I’ll get Kara to see to you.”

“I’m okay,” Derek said, looking like he was about to be sick. “Help me to my feet and find my sword for me.”

Flare ignored Derek and called over to a nearby soldier. “Soldier, find Kara and get her over here quickly!”

*Boom!*

He dragged Derek away from the battlements, then sprinted down the wall. The rest of the Guardians were already waiting for him. They were all there except for Trestus, Derek, and Kara.

“Flare, what do we do?” Phillip asked.

He looked from face to face. Everyone was looking at him, as if he had all the answers. They were waiting for him to come up with some brilliant plan. He felt like the pressure was going to bury him. He wanted to cry and laugh at the same time. “Does anybody have any suggestions? We can’t open the gates, and we can’t let them pound the walls down around us.”

*Boom!*

“Archers? Can we shoot them?” Atock asked.

“No. Trolls have skin like leather, and arrows won’t cut their hide,” Phillip answered quickly.

Silence engulfed them.

*Looks like I’m not the only one who’s run out of ideas,* Flare thought. “We’ll have to open the gate and rush them.”

*Boom!*

“He’s losing his mind,” Enstorion mumbled under his breath. “If they open that gate, they’ll be overrun by goblins. And me with them.”

“Get all the archers on the wall, and send all the soldiers to the courtyard!” Flare yelled over his shoulder as he bolted for the downward stairs.

“Fool.” Enstorion said. He walked to the battlements and leaned out over the wall.

*Boom!*

A thought occurred to Enstorion as he observed the arrangement of the goblins and trolls below him. He closed his eyes and began quietly casting a spell.

Flare was busy arranging the soldiers around him. It had already taken much longer than he had hoped to get the soldiers assembled. He left Trestus with the forty-five soldiers on the eastern wall, as well as fifty archers on the western wall.

*Boom!*

He had Atock, Enton, and Aaron on his left. Phillip, Murleen, and Heather were to his immediate right. They would lead the charge. He had arranged them in a spearhead, and the idea was that they would thrust through the enemies, hopefully taking out a large number of the trolls. There were two hundred soldiers assembled in the spearhead of the attack. There were another one hundred soldiers arranged in a half circle behind the spearhead. Their job was to keep the enemies from breaking through into the fort.

*Boom!*

Flare felt like he was going to be sick. He was about to die and he knew it, but strangely enough it seemed almost a relief. At least it would be quick. He turned slightly to his right and

caught Murleen's attention. She smiled at him in a grim sort of way, and he smiled back. He was going to miss her. Was this love? He pushed the distracting thoughts away.

*Boom!*

He turned back toward the soldiers; realizing that they were looking at him and were ready to go. He sighed deeply, then drew his sword and pointed it toward the heavens.

Judging by the looks on the faces of the soldiers, he knew they were aware that they were charging to their death. It worried him that they were so easily following him to their deaths. Apparently, their faith in him was growing.

*Boom!*

Flare took several deep breaths, trying to work enough courage to meet his death. He opened his mouth to give the order, when he felt a wave of magic roll over him.

"What was that?" Atock asked.

"I . . . it feels like they're using magic against us!" Flare responded angrily. "Open the gates! We have to stop them quickly."

The soldiers manning the gate pulled the locks, and the gate slowly began to swing open.

The gate opened, and Flare's jaw dropped.

The area around the gate had been turned into a wasteland. The bodies of goblins and trolls were heaped upon each other, blackened, torn open, and smoking. The battering ram had warped as if from a great heat and was lying uselessly across the bodies of the trolls.

The soldiers behind the first tier were pushing forward, not aware that the threat was gone. The jostling, from behind, snapped Flare backed to the present.

"Stop pushing! I want all of you back up on the wall." Turning to the other soldiers at the gatehouse, Flare said, "Get that gate closed! Right now!"

Turning, Flare sprinted to the stairs that led up to the battlements. Pushing and shoving got him through the throng of soldiers attempting to regain the wall, and he headed straight for where the archers were standing.

He skidded to a halt in front of Mikela. She was sitting down with her back to the battlements, holding Enstorion, who looked to have passed out. Enstorion looked bad. He was pale and sweating profusely.

"What's the matter with him?" Flare asked, leaning out over the battlements, trying to get a better view of the desolation outside the fort. It was a mess out there, with a multitude of bodies scattered around. The earth was scorched for several hundred yards in all directions; even the wall was scorched and black.

Mikela was silent for several moments, and when she raised her head and made eye contact, Flare got an icy cold feeling in the middle of his stomach. Her fear was spelled out plainly across her face.

"He cast some sort of fire spell, and it got away from him."

Flare looked back over the wall at the destruction below. "He did this? I didn't realize he had that kind of power," he said in amazement. "Is he going to be okay?"

"I don't know. He may not survive this." Mikela answered quietly.

"What? What can we do?" Flare asked.

"The spell was an extremely powerful one, and he was weakened from lack of rest. When he cast the spell, he lost control of it, and it almost consumed him. He's barely alive, and I don't know if he will live. But right now we need Kara. Quickly!"

*Great! Who will be next?* Flare wondered, as he sprinted to find Kara.



The magical explosion apparently took the motivation out of the attackers. Those who survived the explosion withdrew.

Flare was pleased, since the goblin withdrawal had given the defenders time to rest and heal up. Today the casualties had been few and for the most part minor.

Kara had treated Derek and pronounced no major damage, just a painful headache as a result of the blow to his head.

Flare joined the rest of the Guardians for dinner, while Kara was tending to Enstorion. The Guardians had sometimes taken to eating dinner separately from the rest of the soldiers since they used dinner to plan strategy.

Flare entered the dark and smoky room and took a seat at the table.

"How's Derek?" Aaron asked.

"He'll be fine. Just a major headache, or at least that's what Kara tells me," Flare answered. "Kara is treating Enstorion now, and she'll join us later."

"Things are looking up," Murleen said, hope shining in her face. "I mean we didn't have many injuries today, and we took out a bunch of the goblins and trolls."

"We got lucky today. If we had opened the gate a few moments earlier, goblins would be sitting here eating," Atock said quietly.

Murleen's mentioning of the trolls brought another thought to Flare's mind. "Has anybody ever heard of goblins and trolls fighting on the same side?"

"No. Well, not since the Demon Lord Wars," Enton said.

"I have never heard of goblins and trolls fighting along with humans. And who is this Prince Zalustus, anyway?" Phillip asked.

"I have no idea. But what I want to know is how did he get the goblins and trolls to follow him?" Flare said. "Do you think he just promised them a portion of the spoils?"

"Possibly, but I don't think they would throw their lives away just for spoils," Atock said. "Perhaps he's controlling them somehow. You know, if he has magicians that can create a barrier like the one surrounding us, then perhaps he could control the minds of the goblins."

"I don't know. It seems to me that controlling that many minds would be damn near impossible, even for a powerful magician," Trestus said.

Flare silently agreed with Trestus. There was no way one magician could control that many minds. He wasn't even sure that magicians could control minds.

Silence engulfed the group as they ate dinner. No one spoke again for several minutes. Trestus broke the silence first.

"Flare, what are the arrangements for tomorrow's battle?"

"Well, I guess we'll keep them the same as today. Why?"

"Because, I want to be on the western wall tomorrow. I'm tired of being kept away from the battle because you think I might do something stupid," Trestus said in an angry voice. "Derek was hurt today. I suggest you put him on the eastern wall tomorrow."

A brief intense anger flashed up within Flare. He held his tongue for several moments, letting the anger fade away. He opened his mouth to speak, but Atock beat him to it.

"He's got a point. Besides, Derek will probably be slowed tomorrow."

Flare agreed, but wanted to make sure that Trestus was ready. "Trestus, if I put you on the western wall, are you going to do anything stupid?"

"You mean like opening the gates with an entire goblin horde on the other side?" Trestus

answered, grinning.

Chuckles sprang up from various points around the table, and after a moment Flare joined in. "That wasn't one of my brightest decisions. Was it?" he said when the laughter had quieted down. "All right. If you think you're ready, then you can join us on the western wall."

The conversation wandered for a while, and he was pleased to see that the Guardians were flippant. It meant they had hope.

Kara entered shortly thereafter. She looked worn out and exhausted. She was pale, her hair hung in her face, and she was sweating.

"How's Enstorion doing?" Flare asked.

Kara sighed before answering. "I'm not sure. He's sweating and running a high fever. If this were a typical sickness, then I would say either he would die tonight, or the fever would break. But since it was caused by his use of magic, I just don't know." She paused, and her words sunk in. "Mikela said it can go either way."

Kara's words destroyed the positive mood of the Guardians. They spent several minutes making conversation, before the dinner broke up. Murleen was the first to leave.

After she left, Atock waited several moments and then looked at Flare and said, "Shouldn't you leave too? I mean isn't she waiting for you?" A huge grin split his face.

Snickers ran along the table. "So much for being discreet. How long have you known?" Flare said.

"Since the first night. You didn't really think you could fool us did you?" Atock answered. "Things like that have a way of being found out."

"You wouldn't have spoken to Colonel Holt like this," Flare said, grinning and getting up.

"I was afraid of him," Atock answered, still grinning.

Flare and Murleen were lying in bed together, both spent from lovemaking. Murleen had her head resting on his chest.

"Murleen, when we were standing in front of the gate, just about to open it, I realized how I felt about you. I've never felt this way about anybody, and –"

"Stop!" Murleen said, cutting him off. "Don't do this. At least not now. If – if we make it out of here, then we can talk like this, but let's not do it now. Please."

Flare looked into Murleen's eyes and saw tears forming there. "Okay."

Murleen wiped her eyes and said, "Besides, there are some other more important things that we should be doing."

"Like what?" Flare asked.

Murleen pulled the covers back and raised herself up in the bed.

"Again?" Flare said.

Murleen's answer was an evil grin as she leaned over to kiss him.

## Chapter 18

Flare woke earlier than usual. He left Murleen asleep and went to check on Enstorion.

Enstorion had been placed in a small room just off the main barracks. It was still a couple of hours until dawn, but Kara was already there.

"Kara, have you been here all night?" he asked.

"No. I slept in the next room, and I just came over a few minutes ago to check on him," Kara said, yawning.

"How's his condition?" Flare asked.

"No change. He still has a high fever, and he's sweating profusely," Kara answered. "But you go on. I'll stay with him until daylight. You go work your magic with the troops."

Flare almost stopped at her words, "work your magic with the troops." What did she mean by that? It wasn't brilliant leadership that had kept them alive so far; it had been dumb luck instead.

Aaron left his room and walked slowly toward the mess hall. As he walked, he lifted his arms over his head to stretch out the sore muscles in his back. So far the fighting had been pretty intense, and the stress had kept him from sleeping well. He was sure that Kara could help him with the muscle soreness, but it was a trivial thing and he didn't want to bother her. The gods only knew that she was overly busy as it was.

He walked slowly, knowing he still had a couple of hours until sunrise, so he should have plenty of time to get his breakfast and be ready when the attack came. A thought occurred to him about what would happen if the goblins attacked before dawn, but he chased it away. No use looking for any more trouble; they already had all the trouble they could handle and then some.

Flare was doing a good job, no, a great job in his opinion. Honestly, Aaron was surprised they still held the fort. By all rights, they shouldn't have survived the first attack, but here they were on their sixth day. He hoped they would make it to seven.

"Hello," a female voice said, jarring him from his mental wanderings. He looked up quickly, tensing as he did so, but then relaxed quickly when he saw the girl who had spoken. She had long, brown hair that was braided and reached to her belt. Her skin was somewhat darkly tanned, and she was somewhat plump. Her eyes were brown, and she had high cheek bones. She wore pants like a man would wear, and a thick long sleeved shirt. Something about her made Aaron think he had seen her before.

"Uh, hello," he responded politely.

She seemed almost embarrassed to talk to him and kept lowering her eyes to look at the ground. "Hi, Aaron, My name is Elona."

Suddenly, he remembered her. Flare had arrested her on the trip from Telur for trespassing. "Yes," he said, smiling, "is there something that I can help you with?"

"I noticed you in the camp and you had such kind eyes. I was wondering if you would like to meet tonight." Her eyes dropped to the ground as she spoke.

Aaron brow wrinkled in thought; he hoped she wasn't still trying to sell herself with the siege and all. What good was money if you were dead before you could spend it?

The girl must have realized how her question sounded, because she quickly added, "To talk. I mean to talk."

“Oh, I thank you, but I will be busy planning for tomorrow.”

He started to move past her, but the girl stepped in front of him. “Please, all the soldiers know what I do and they're not interested in just talking to me. I was hoping that you might be.”

Saddened, he paused, studying her. She seemed lonely. Perhaps all she wanted was someone to talk to, so how could he deny her that? “Okay, but it may be late before I can meet you. I will have to help plan the fort's defenses.”

Elona's eyes were a little misty, and she smiled. “Thank you.”

Her smile was infectious, and Aaron found himself smiling back at her. He touched her on the shoulder and then moved on toward the mess tent.

“I'll wait for you on the steps to the temple,” she called out after him. He responded by smiling and waving back at her.

Flare stood on the western wall waiting for today's inevitable attack and wondering what the goblins would do today. The sun was just coming up, and judging by the lack of clouds in the sky, rain would not save them today. The sun caused the entire eastern sky to be lit up with a bright-reddish glow, but his thoughts were to the west. Goblins and trolls did not join forces. How could they all of a sudden join together? What could make them join forces now? Flare quit worrying about their motives and went back to watching for the attackers.

They attacked earlier today, charging across the valley a couple of hours before noon.

Flare had positioned his troops the same as in previous days, with Atock in charge of the north, and Phillip in charge of the southern part. Flare took charge of the middle and kept Trestus close to him. Trestus swore he was ready for battle, but Flare wanted him close enough to keep an eye on.

The goblins charged in two main columns. One column charged and attacked the northern part of the wall, and the other column charged and attacked the southern part. The goblins attacked in the same manner as before, with ladders and grappling hooks, trying to scale the walls.

“What in the name of the abyss are they doing? If they have a chance of getting in the fort, it's in the middle, where the gates are,” Flare said to Trestus.

“I don't . . .” Trestus started to say before the explosion cut him off and sent them flying.

The wall underneath them and the battlements around them had just shook, and splinters of stone flew through the air. All Flare had seen was a bright blue light, and then the wall had started moving under their feet. He and Trestus slipped and fell to the ground.

They picked themselves up off the ground and quickly moved to the battlements and looked over. The ground was still scorched and barren from Enstorion's spell, but there wasn't anybody down there.

Just then, a blue ball of fire flew in from over the valley and slammed into the wall just to the left of the gates. The whole wall shook, with dust and splinters flying in all directions.

Flare quickly scanned the valley floor, trying to locate the source of the fireballs. He spotted two humans in robes standing at the far end of the goblin columns. They were several hundred yards from the walls of the fort and were surrounded by guards. He watched them for several moments, then ducked as the magician at the end of the column on the right let loose another fireball. This one struck the gates and rattled the wall again. He was positive that he heard the gates creaking under the strain.

“It’s never easy. Is it?” Flare asked to no one in particular. Then turning, he grabbed Trestus by the arm and said, “Split these troops in half, and send half to Atock, and the other half to Phillip.”

“Right. But what are we going to do about those magicians?” Trestus asked, pointing out over the wall.

“You worry about those troops, and let me worry about the magicians,” Flare hollered over the impact of another fireball.

Trestus scurried away, and Flare turned back toward the wall. What was he going to do about those magicians? They were well out of range of the archers, and Mikela couldn’t reach both of them with a magic spell.

Flare stood there for several moments, considering his options. He quickly realized that the magicians could not be reached from here, so someone would have to take the fight to them.

“Mikela! Come here!” Flare shouted.

Mikela was on the wall but not currently involved in the fight. She jerked around at the sound of her name and came running.

Trestus came running up behind, out of breath. “Flare, the troops have been split up, per your orders. What’s the plan?”

Flare didn’t answer him, because at that moment Mikela finally reached them. Enton and Aaron came running up behind Mikela.

“What are we going to do?” Aaron asked, slightly out of breath.

*They’re all looking to me for answers, Flare thought. How did I get myself into this? All I wanted was to be accepted. I never wanted to be a hero or be in charge.*

*Thump. Thump. Thump.*

Flare looked from side to side, trying to find out what was making that sound. To his chagrin, he discovered it was his own heart beating faster than he ever thought possible.

He looked back toward the magicians, who were still pounding fireballs into the wall. “We must take the fight to them. We’re going to have to go through the goblins and try to kill the magicians.”

Flare looked back at the Guardians, and instead of surprise, they wore looks of grim determination. *They’re getting used to battle; nothing is surprising them anymore.*

“Mikela, can you get the four of us through the goblins near the magicians?”

Mikela considered. “I can muddle your appearance, which should confuse them into thinking you’re just another group of goblins. It might be enough to get you through, but I can’t promise you it will work.”

“We’ll take our chances. What happens if we put an arrow into one of those magicians when they are casting that fireball spell?” Flare asked, thinking of Enstorion.

“Well, I would imagine that it would be like one of their fireballs radiating outward from the magician,” Mikela answered. “You had best have a boulder or ridge or something to hide behind, and I don’t know if that will be enough. The heat might still kill you.”

“Listen up. Aaron and I will go after the magician on the left. Enton and Trestus will take the one on the right,” Flare said. “Trestus, get close enough to use your bow, but wait for me. When we’re both in position, I will give you the hand signal for move forward.” It was one of many common hand signals used in their guardian training. The hand signal was done by making a fist with the index finger pointing straight out, and then the finger was waved in a circle. “After the signal, count to three and shoot your arrow.”

Mikela interrupted Flare. "Once you shoot an arrow at the magicians, the magic spell will be shattered, and they'll be after you. You had better not miss that first shot."

Flare looked first at Mikela, and then at the rest of the Guardians. "Any questions?" He paused. "All right. Mikela cast your spell."

As Mikela began casting her spell, Flare was surprised at how easy it was to follow the spell. Apparently, his time with Cassandra had taught him more than he had realized.

All too soon Mikela was through, and the soldiers were ready to go over the wall. Their appearance had not changed, but Mikela assured them that the goblins would see them as fellow goblins, at least for a short while.

He grasped the hands of his fellow Guardians. "Good luck. Remember, kill the magician, and get down. After the explosion, try to make it back to the fort, however you can."

Flare got up to the battlements and knelt down. The silence was eerie and unnerving as they waited. He attached one end of the rope to a ring on the wall and waited.

Two fireballs slammed into the wall in rapid succession. He waited until the stone chunks had landed, and then he heaved the rope over the side of the wall. He slid over the side and climbed down as quickly as possible. Reaching the ground, he dropped into a crouch in a small depression that was all black from Enstorion's fire spell.

Trestus, Enton, and Aaron followed Flare down the rope. Flare was nervous the whole time Aaron was climbing down the rope. A fireball would be hitting the wall at any moment, and he could easily see Aaron getting caught in it. Aaron reached the ground only moments before a fireball slammed into the wall, shaking the wall and covering the soldiers in dust and stone chips.

Trestus tried to speak before the dust had settled and ended up in a coughing fit.

Flare waited several more moments. "Good Luck," was the only thing he could say as Enton and Trestus sprinted off to the right.

Flare and Aaron ran, hunched over, trying to keep hidden. They used everything from ridges, to boulders, to outcroppings of rock to cover their approach.

At first the going was easy. The goblins were staying well away from the gates, because of the fireballs. As they moved further away from the gates, they began to encounter more goblins. Fortunately, they were ignored.

It took about ten minutes to reach a favorable spot where Flare felt comfortable that he could hit the magician and not have any goblins interfere. They stopped on a slight ridge, which was to the north of the magician. Flare got his bow and arrow ready and looked to see how Trestus and Enton were doing.

Trestus and Enton had made better time than they had and were already in position. They had reached a boulder that was to the south of their magician. They were using the boulder for shelter and were awaiting Flare's signal.

He watched the magicians for several seconds to make sure they were in the process of casting. He was about to signal the others, when he noticed the people standing near the tree line. He recognized two of them. The big, bald fighter and the pretty woman he had seen when Zalustus had first rode out to speak to him. The others he did not know. Some of them were fighters, but there looked to be several magicians as well. They were just watching the siege of the fort, but they were too far away to interfere. *Worry about them later*, Flare thought, and then he quickly signaled to Trestus.

Keeping a count in his head, Flare notched an arrow and drew the bow. He aimed for the magician's chest and tried hard to ignore the beads of sweat that were running down his face and

nose. He reached the count of three, breathed out, and held his breath. Still holding his breath, he ever so smoothly let the arrow fly.

The arrow flew straight and true, but at the last second the magician moved. Flare's heart skipped a beat, as he thought he had missed. Fortunately, the magician was still struck by the arrow. It slammed into his throat with the head of the arrow clearly protruding out the back side. The magician fell to his knees, his hands clawing at his throat, and his eyes bulging in their sockets.

"Beautiful shot, Flare," Aaron said quietly.

"Not really. I was aiming for his heart," Flare answered.

Flare watched for several more seconds until the magician fell onto his face. Then, heeding Mikela's advice, he dropped into the depression next to Aaron.

He was lying face down when he thought about the other magician. He started to rise to check on Trestus and Enton, but at that moment the effects of the magician's shattered spell flowed over them.

Scorching waves of flame rolled over their flimsy and insufficient hiding place. The heat seemed to suck all of the oxygen out of the air, and they gasped for breath. They could feel hair being singed and skin starting to burn. Their weapons and armor became white hot and burnt their skin. The pain and agony reached such a point that Flare wondered if death wouldn't be preferable.

Finally, the heat and flames subsided. Flare and Aaron slowly sat up. Each movement seemed to bring another piece of metal into contact with their skin, and the pain was excruciating.

Aaron looked simply horrible, and Flare knew that he probably looked as bad. Aaron's skin was bright red and blistered, and his hair was singed and smoking. There was a disgusting smell of cooked meat in the air.

"I've eaten venison that was less cooked than you," Flare said to Aaron, grimacing.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Aaron said, breathing deeply.

"Save it. We've got to get moving," Flare answered, getting to his feet.

The ground was scorched and burnt all around their depression, and he could clearly see his and Aaron's outline burnt onto the ground.

The devastation had spread in a circular pattern from the location of the magician and had reached almost to the walls of the fort. The dead and dying were everywhere. The goblins that had been within a hundred yards of the magician had died almost instantly, but the rest of the goblins had been burnt horribly and were dying slowly.

Flare thought of Trestus and Enton, and turning his head in their direction saw a similar scene of destruction. Much to his relief, Enton and Trestus were already making their way to the walls, although it appeared that Trestus was requiring assistance from Enton.

"Come on, Aaron. We got to get moving," Flare said to Aaron, who was still sitting on the ground.

"I can't make it," Aaron answered weakly.

He turned back to Aaron, and grabbed him on the shoulder. In a quiet voice, Flare said, "Do you know what goblins do to prisoners? The pain you feel now is nothing to what's coming." He had to get Aaron moving. But how? "If you can't make it, I'll have to take mercy on you. I'll finish you quickly." He made as if to draw his sword.

Understanding dawned in the eyes of Aaron. "What?"

Flare's words had the desired effect, as Aaron scrambled to his feet. He looked unsteady, but he maintained his balance, although he kept glancing in Flare's direction.

Flare grabbed him by the shoulder and dragged him. They moved toward the walls as fast as they could, but they barely could maintain a slow jog. They headed to the gates and back toward Trestus and Enton, hoping they could catch them.

It was the longest walk of Flare's life. His whole body was sore from the burns and blisters, and it hurt even to breathe. They continued to press on, but he had to stop several times to push Aaron on, although Flare himself wanted to stop. He forced one foot in front of the other, not even looking where they were going. He stopped walking when he realized he was about to walk over Enton.

Enton was standing with his hands on his hips, breathing deeply. Trestus was lying on the ground at Enton's feet, and he too was breathing heavily.

"Enton, how did we catch you? I thought you would be at the fort by now," Flare asked.

"We would have, but some of the goblins survived the blast, and they're between us and the wall," Enton answered.

Flare looked out over the remains of the attackers and was surprised to see that they had only covered half of the distance to the fort. Burnt and charred bodies were scattered everywhere. Most of the goblins had perished in the fire blast, but maybe a hundred had survived. Even though they were only about a hundred yards from the wall, there were a growing number of goblins in their way.

"We had better hide before they spot us," Flare said, sighing. *Why can't anything be easy?* he thought in disgust.

"Too late," was Enton's quiet reply.

Several black goblins had taken charge and were trying to bring some form of order to the survivors.

Flare watched in dismay as the goblins slowly moved toward them. He looked around, hoping to find a position that could be held against superior numbers. His hopes were quickly dashed.

Panic began to slowly rise in Flare, as his death quickly approached.

The quiet was broken by Enton drawing his battle ax from his pack. "I guess I will get a hero's death. It's a shame nobody will ever know."

Enton's sad tone touched the very core of Flare's being. All thoughts of panic vanished quickly and were replaced with an utter calmness that filled him with resolve.

"If this is the day that the gods have chosen for us to die, then so be it. But let us make them proud," Flare answered.

Flare saw grim agreement in the face of Enton, but Aaron and Trestus were beyond the point of caring. In fact, he thought they might even welcome death as a release from the pain.

Flare shook his head to clear it of such thoughts and drew his sword. He turned toward the goblins and waited.

The goblins didn't take long to surround the humans, forming a circle around them.

After several moments, a large and ugly goblin stepped forward and spoke, "Youse caaann't git baack. Giive op," he said.

It took a moment or two before Flare realized what he was saying, but it didn't matter. There was no way they would willingly go with the goblins. A death on a goblin sword was much preferable to being one of their prisoners.



Flare chuckled, more as an insult than in merriment. “Ugly and stupid. That’s quite a combination.”

The goblin simply stared for a minute, hate showing in his eyes. “Giit dhem,” he said. Flare and Enton stood back to back over Aaron and Trestus.

A horrible thought occurred to Flare. “Enton, the last thing you do before you die is finish Trestus. I’ll take care of Aaron.” He paused, but Enton didn’t answer. “Enton? You do know what goblins do to their prisoners, don’t you?”

“I don’t agree with it, but I will do it. May Adel have mercy on us,” Enton answered.

The first charge, the goblins were overconfident. They rushed the soldiers, thinking their superior numbers would overwhelm them.

Flare deftly knocked the first goblin's sword to one side, then reversed the motion of his sword and gutted him. One lesson he had learned from his instructors was that any advantage was to be exploited. The goblins were still disorientated, and he preyed on this by gutting the first goblin and leaving him alive to scream. He hoped that he would further demoralize them and gain some time for the soldiers.

Flare could hear the thunks, thuds, and screams that came from behind him. Apparently, Enton was causing some damage with his ax.

The black goblin screamed something in his own language and pointed at Flare. Six of the goblins closest to Flare drew their swords and advanced.

*Six? I could handle two, maybe three, but not six!* Flare thought. Glancing down, he located the prone form of Aaron. “Enton, get ready. They’re fixing to rush me,” he said almost choking on the words. He drew his knife with his left hand.

The first of the goblins reached Flare and jabbed his sword at Flare’s midsection. Flare parried the thrust and swiped his knife across the eyes of the goblin. The goblin fell to his knees, screaming and grabbing his gory face.

The second goblin reached Flare and raised his sword to deliver a massive blow. Flare jabbed his knife at the throat of the goblin and stabbed him cleanly. The goblin had already started his swing and it was too powerful. The massive swing slammed into Flare’s sword knocking it from his hand. Flare, stunned by the blow, fell to his knees. The goblin also fell to the ground, dead before he landed. However, the damage was done, as Flare was stunned and armed only with his knife.

The third goblin to reach Flare grinned an evil grin and raised his sword.

Flare watched the sword as it began its descent. The sword seemed to move at an impossibly slow speed, and he wondered if it would ever reach him.

Halfway through the swing, a horse barreled into the goblin sending him sprawling. The rider, a massive black man, swung a pike beheading another goblin and impaling another.

“Quickly, Flare, put Aaron across my horse,” The rider shouted, turning the horse around.

Only when he spoke did Flare's numbed senses recognize the rider. “Atock?! How –”

“No time. There are more goblins are approaching. Quickly, get him up here.”

Flare scrambled to his feet and saw forty to fifty mounted soldiers scattering the goblins. He had a hard time keeping the ground from spinning. Losing his balance, he fell flat on his face. Spitting dirt, he fought to remain conscious.

Several moments passed and Flare began to feel better. Then, all of a sudden, rough hands gripped him by the shoulders and pulled him to his feet. It took several moments, but he

finally recognized Phillip.

“Phillip, what’s going on?” Flare finally managed, his voice cracking.

Phillip didn’t even waste any breath answering, instead he leaned Flare against a horse. Phillip quickly mounted and then reaching down he pulled Flare across the saddle horn. Turning the horse, Phillip raced back toward the open gates of the fort.

Flare had never felt something as horrible as the ride back to the fort. The saddle horn repeatedly pounded into his stomach, bruising him badly. The one good thing about the pain was that it helped clear his mind. By the time they had regained the safety of the fort, he was quite conscious, although he would rather have preferred to be unconscious.

Phillip rode the horse just inside the gate where a group of soldiers waited for them. The soldiers, including Kara, gently helped Flare off the horse and laid him on the ground.

Flare was getting woozy once again, but he focused on Kara’s face as she bent down over him.

“You look horrible,” was all she said.

“You don’t look too good either,” Flare replied, grinning.

Kara ignored his attempt at humor. “You’ll live. Minor burns and some bad bruises. You got a knot on your head, but I don’t think it’s serious. I’ll be back.”

Flare wondered at her abruptness, but when he rose halfway up, he realized she had left to attend to Enton, Trestus, and Aaron.

Another wave of nausea swept through his head, but this one was milder than the previous one. He struggled into a sitting position, wincing at the pain in his stomach. He was pleased to see Atock and Phillip approaching.

“Hey, it looks like I owe you both. Whose idea was it to come after me?” Flare asked.

“We wouldn’t watch a companion die and do nothing,” Atock said, stoically. “We did nothing that you wouldn’t have done for us.”

“Well, thank you anyway. What’s our situation?” he asked. “Did we suffer any major losses?”

“No. We would have if you hadn’t pulled off that little stunt of yours,” Phillip answered. “We managed to keep most of the goblins off the wall until you burnt them up.”

“Excellent,” Flare said. “Every extra day we hold onto the wall is another day for Heather to find reinforcements.”

“If she got out at all,” Atock said. “Phillip didn’t tell you the bad news.”

Flare, with a cold feeling settling in his gut, looked from face to face trying to determine what they were talking about. “Well? What is the bad news?”

Phillip glanced at Atock before continuing, “It’s the gates, Flare. They took a massive beating from the magicians. We don’t think they’ll hold against even a modest assault. It would probably only take a couple of trolls, or even some goblins with a battering ram to beat the gates down. Not only that, it looks like several parts of the wall might collapse as well.”

Flare rested his head in his hands as the pain began to sweep through his head again, only this time the pain intensified instead of lessening.

*I can’t win. We score a major victory, and in it we discover the key to our total defeat. Why can’t anything be easy?* Flare thought.

The gates were indeed a mess. They were still attached to the walls and still shut tight, but they were in bad shape. The heat from the magicians’ spells had actually started to warp the

metal parts of the gates and several portions of the wall were damaged although still standing.

Flare stood looking over the wreckage, his body still itching from the ointment that Kara had rubbed on him. The blisters were already gone, but his skin still felt sore and tight.

“What do we do?” Aaron asked.

Derek had followed Flare to the wall to inspect the damage. Flare suspected that Kara had sent Derek to watch him. She seemed to be overprotective of her recent patients.

Flare rubbed his cheek. “Find the craftsmen – the stone layers and masons. See if they can reinforce it.”

“If it's sealed, we won't be able to mount a rescue mission like today,” Derek said.

Flare nodded. “I know, but if we don't seal it off, then the goblins will pour right through tomorrow.” He turned back to Aaron. “Get those craftsmen up here quick. I don't think that they will attack again today, but you never know.”

The goblins did not attack again that day, but Flare posted extra sentries anyway. With the wall crumbling, the defenders needed all the warning they could get before the goblins attacked.

The stone cutters and the brick layers quickly reinforced this side of the gate. They had stolen stone from any available structure and hastily slapped it together in front of the gates. It wasn't much, but at least it would take more than a goblin's shoulder to push the gates down.

Flare was walking through the throng of soldiers eating dinner, hoping to encourage them. He stopped to talk here and there, but he quickly decided it was a hopeless cause. The eyes of the soldiers all had the look of somebody who is waiting for death.

Flare tried to comfort a few more soldiers, then turned to leave. He was halfway through the mess hall, when a soldier rose and blocked his path.

“Sir, what are the plans for tomorrow?” the young soldier asked.

Flare was surprised by the question. He thought the battle plans would be the last thing these young soldiers wanted to talk about. “Well, it will be pretty much the same as today. We'll just have to adjust to whatever the enemy throws at us.”

“Sir, I have an idea that just might save us all.”

For a brief moment, anger welled up within him. He was in charge, and he was doing everything in his power to hold this fort, and now he was being offered advice from his troops. The anger quickly faded, and he realized that just maybe the soldier did have a good plan.

“Tell me about your idea,” Flare said, his hope rising.

“It seems to me that we can't hold this fort much longer. We have done our job, so let's storm the troops on the eastern side of the fort. If we attack while mounted on horseback, we should be able to get a sizeable portion of the troops through their lines,” the soldier said.

Flare's hope faded at the words of the soldier. “What about the merchants and craftsmen? Surely you realize that you would be leaving them to their death.”

The soldier grinned. “If we stay here, then they die. If we escape, then they die. Either way they die. I say we take our chances.”

Things were getting worse and worse. Flare could see more of the soldiers nodding their heads in agreement. He had to put an end to this quickly. He noticed with relief that the Guardians were edging into the back of the crowd of soldiers.

Flare smiled and placed his hand on the shoulder of the soldier. “I appreciate your input, but we can't abandon our responsibility.”

He started to walk past the soldier, but the soldier blocked his path again.

“Just how do you intend to stop us? There are over three hundred soldiers, and only twelve of you Guardians. It seems to me that the odds are in our favor.”

Flare could feel his panic rising. He could not let the soldiers flee now. He still needed them.

The young soldier turned and looked at the soldiers that surrounded them. Flare could hear murmurs of agreement and acted without thinking.

The soldier was not looking at him, but instead was measuring the crowds. Flare dropped his right hand to his knife, and in one smooth motion drew the knife and swiped it across the throat of the soldier.

Surprise and shock registered on the soldier's face as he fell to the ground, his hands moving to his throat. A thin line had appeared across his throat, but it quickly turned into a torrent. The soldier collapsed and died quickly.

Utter silence greeted Flare. His actions seemed almost as if they had been done by someone else. He looked at the gory knife in his hands with surprise, not sure how it had gotten there. He let the knife fall to the hard stone floor. It clattered loudly in the eerie silence. Everything seemed distant and remote. Only one thing still stood out in his mind; the soldiers must be convinced to stay and fight. That one idea seemed to pulse inside his head.

Looking around, he could see his fellow Guardians moving into position, but they would still be overwhelmed if it came to a fight. A cold resolve settled into the pit of Flare's stomach, and steeling himself, he addressed the situation head on.

His head seemed thick, almost as if it was stuffed with wool, but he ignored it. He quickly climbed onto the nearest table, and cupping his hands to his mouth, he shouted, “Soldiers of Telur. How do you want to be remembered? Do you want to be remembered as betrayers of women and children?”

He paused for a moment to let the words sink in. The affect of the slain soldier lying in a pool of blood on the floor had still not passed. He shook his head as if to clear it, and then continued speaking, “History will judge you based on your actions over the next several minutes and days. Do you want to be remembered as cowards who fled in the face of death? If we flee, then every common person in this fort will be slaughtered! And what’s more, every farmer and craftsmen between here and Telur will be slaughtered as well! If we flee, then you are just as bad as the goblins and trolls who will rape and kill your lovers, sisters, and mothers. Is this how you want to be remembered?”

“No!” was the only reply. It was shouted loudly by some and quietly by others, but no one challenged the sentiment.

He had stopped speaking, not to get an answer from the soldiers, but because he had almost lost his balance. His head still seemed thick and foggy. However, he could sense that his words were having the desired effect.

“I will be truthful with you. You deserve at least that much.” Flare spoke quietly, measuring the resolve of the soldiers gathered in the great hall. “I do not think any of us will survive this siege, but I fight on because every minute more that we hold this fort is another minute for Heather to find and return with reinforcements. I do not believe that we will live to see those reinforcements, but if we hold the fort long enough, then when the goblins get through the fort and into Telurian territory they will encounter not unarmed farmers and peasants, but an army marching to the rescue. We will have done our job!”

Flare noticed that the expressions on the faces of the soldiers were changing. They still were not hopeful – there was nothing he could do to make them hope – but there was a quiet resolve replacing the fear that had been there earlier. Hope had sprung up. The soldiers were listening to him and considering, perhaps he had a chance to pull this off.

“I took an oath, as you did, to give my life for Telur if it was necessary. It appears that it will be required much sooner than I had expected, but I will honor my oath. If you die keeping your oath and defending Telur, the gods will surely reward you.”

He quickly cast a small magic spell intended to magnify his voice. His words were spoken quietly, but the words reached to every person in the chamber. “If you break your oath, the blood of innocents will stain your soul forever. The gods will surely punish you in like measure.”

Flare paused for several moments, measuring the soldiers. Fear had left the faces of the soldiers and had been replaced by a peaceful resolve.

“Soldiers of Telur! The goblins do not have courage for fighting a battle in which they outnumber us. We show courage because we are fighting knowing we will die. But you must decide for yourself! What path do you choose to follow? Cowardice and death, or sacrifice and eternal reward?” Flare shouted.

“Sacrifice! Sacrifice!” they screamed.

A chant of “Telur!” quickly broke out among the troops.

Flare was relieved to see their resolve. The soldiers’ spirits were raised by the truth of the situation. Honesty was freeing them from their fear and allowing them to face death with courage.

Flare climbed down from the table and moved toward the Guardians.

“Nice speech, Flare. I thought we were dead for sure,” Phillip said quietly, still watching the soldiers.

“All I did was tell them the truth,” Flare answered slowly, still trying to understand what had just happened.

Phillip grinned. “Yeah, and they fell for it.”

Murleen moved closer. “Flare, are you okay?”

Flare breathed deeply as he turned his eyes to her. “I don’t know. I feel dizzy.”

He started to turn and look back at the dead soldier, but Murleen stopped him. She stepped close and slid an arm around his waist, hoping she could support him if he fell. It would not do for these soldiers to see him pass out after making his impassioned speech. “Phillip, I’m going to get Flare out of here. Would you make sure that somebody sees to the body?”

Phillip nodded, but Murleen had turned without waiting for a response and led Flare from the hall.

Murleen was lying across Flare, gently kissing his chest. They were both spent from lovemaking and were basking in the closeness of the other. The closeness of her body had helped him put the events of the evening out of his mind.

“Murleen, this may be our last night together. I don’t think we can last through tomorrow.” Flare paused. “I just wanted you to know that I care deeply for you. In fact, I think I’m falling in love with you.”

All the while Flare had been speaking, Murleen kept her face hidden from him. When he stopped speaking, Murleen raised her head up and looked him in the eyes. He could see her tears.

"I've had lovers before, but I haven't ever had someone love me. Do you know what I mean?" Murleen said. The anguish and joy seemed almost run together to the point where one was indistinguishable from the other.

"Yes. I have never felt this way before," Flare answered.

"You are the most wonderful man I've ever met. There aren't too many like you," Murleen said. She stopped for a moment, considering her words. "I think I love you too, it's just so hard for me to experience love. It wasn't something I really grew up with, you know?"

It wasn't exactly the resounding response he had hoped for, but it was probably as close as he was going to get. Murleen opening up to him like she was caused a surge of elation to flow through him. "Murleen. You are everything I have ever wanted, even before I knew what I wanted," Flare answered.

They lay there in silence until they fell asleep. They spent the rest of the night sleeping soundly in each other's arms.

Aaron left dinner early once it had become apparent that their plans had not changed. The gates were in sad shape, but they had done everything they could to reinforce them.

He tried to put all the fighting out of his mind as he walked from the kitchen toward the temple. He had promised to meet Elona, and he wanted to get it over with quickly. The girl was cute enough, but this morning she had seemed depressed and the last thing he wanted was to spend several hours cheering her up.

He walked down the street from the kitchen toward the temple. It was dark out, and the streets were quiet and deserted. The only sound he heard was the crunch of dirt and pebbles under his boots as he walked.

Drawing near to the temple, he noticed Elona already sitting on the steps. The little available moonlight seemed to be spotlighting her. He smiled. "Hello. I thought I was early."

Elona smiled back. "I enjoy the night, so I came here early. I had hoped that you would show up." She dropped her eyes to the ground. "Thank you."

"Sure," Aaron said, walking up the steps and sitting down beside her. "I'm the luckiest man in the fort tonight. I mean, who wouldn't want to spend time with the prettiest lady around?"

Her smile seemed to slip a little, and he thought that perhaps he had said something wrong. "Are you okay?"

The smile vanished completely now, her eyes growing misty. She shook her head and then spoke quickly, "I'm so afraid of dying. It's all I can think about." She turned a little away from him. "You must think that I am a coward. I mean, you are fighting on the wall every day and I'm the one who's scared."

*Sometimes I think that I'd rather fight an overwhelming number of goblins than deal with women*, he thought. "Uh, I don't think you're a coward. Every one of us is scared." He slid closer to her and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

She turned back towards Aaron, a small tear running down her cheek.

Ever so softly, he reached out to rub the tear away. "Why are you here?" he asked.

Elona blinked in confusion. "Dale brought me and the other girls out here to make money off the soldiers."

"No, I understand that," Aaron said, "what I mean is, what are *you* doing here? How did you start working for that guy?"

Elona pursed her lips, "I didn't have much choice. My father was unhappy about having

four daughters, so he sold me and my younger sister to Dale.”

Aaron's mouth dropped. “Your father sold you into prostitution? How could he do that? Is that even allowed in Telur?”

Elona took a deep breath. “I was not born in Telur. I was born in the southern kingdom of Aranell. It is a common practice to sell unwanted daughters to men such as Dale. My father received one hundred gold pieces for me, and I was branded with the mark of the slave.”

She pulled up her left sleeve to show the tattoo that was branded on her left shoulder. The tattoo looked like a chain attached to a collar.

“Telurian law insists that I be allowed to buy my way out of slavery, but since Dale gives me what wages he sees fit, I will never be free.”

Aaron was dumbfounded. How could this be? Surely, fathers did not sell their daughters into prostitution. The poor girl's plight saddened him as much as it enraged him. He shook his head. “I had no idea that such things happened, and especially not here in Telur.”

She smiled. “I thought that you were a kind man, naïve perhaps, but kind.”

As they talked, the night air got a little chilly, as it tended to do at night in the mountains, and Elona snuggled closer to Aaron for warmth.

## Chapter 19

The next day dawned clear and sunny. Phillip was standing next to Flare gazing out over the valley. As of yet, the goblins hadn't been spotted, but it was only a matter of time.

Phillip looked up at the sky and said, "What a beautiful day."

"A beautiful day to die, huh?" Flare replied, casually.

Phillip nodded. "Perhaps, and perhaps not. We should have been dead a long time ago." He nodded at Flare, "You know, your actions last night may have been just what these soldiers needed."

Flare winced. "I was trying to forget about last night." He turned towards Phillip. "What makes you say that?"

"Haven't you noticed them today?" He motioned toward the soldiers. "Yesterday they were listless, but today they move as if they believe in what they are doing."

Flare turned his attention to the soldiers moving about. Whether they were carrying weapons to the wall, stretching before the upcoming battle, or helping the townspeople get ready, they did seem to move as if they believed. Perhaps it was worth it, but he kept picturing the soldier he killed last night.

Phillip opened his mouth but quickly closed it again in bewilderment.

Flare turned to see Atock striding toward them. He had completely shaved his head. He had been proud of his long, thick locks of hair, but now they were gone.

Phillip snickered. "Did you lose a bet?"

Atock locked gazes with Phillip, and Phillip stepped back. "It is a custom of my people that when a warrior dies, his head is shaved before he is buried."

"But you're not dead yet," Phillip said, confused.

Atock moved past Flare and Phillip, heading toward his position. "No, but it won't be long."

"He's awful depressing," Phillip said quietly after Atock had moved away.

Flare posted guards on the western wall, and then had the Guardians gather the rest of the troops and merchants in the courtyard.

When they were assembled, he scanned the faces of the defenders, seeing bravery and fear in the eyes of every person. His stomach was already tightening, and he said a silent prayer for a quick death, both for himself and the rest of the defenders.

Flare took a deep breath. "The time has come. The deeds and actions of today will be remembered long after we are gone, but we must fight this fight with everything we have. I know that most of you are scared, and to be honest so am I, but every minute that we hold this fort saves lives. Every second that we delay the goblins could save a family member. It might be your father or your mother. Perhaps a brother or sister. You might save a girlfriend or lover. Who is saved, doesn't matter. What matters is that we are doing our job and sacrificing ourselves for Telur." He took a deep breath. "I honestly didn't think that we would make it this far. I salute the courage of every person here."

*Ding! Ding!*

"The goblins are coming!" Atock said.

Flare raised his voice to be heard over the sudden din of noise. "Remember. No sacrifice



goes unrewarded.” He raised his arm and saluted the assembly. “To your posts!” he shouted.

*Gods sometimes require a sacrifice*, a voice said.

Flare looked around before he realized it was the same voice that had warned him against following Colonel Holt’s orders.

“Who are you?” Flare asked. “What do you want?”

He waited several moments before deciding the voice would not answer him. *Well, if the gods want a sacrifice, then they’re going to get a sacrifice*, he thought.

Flare took up position in the middle of the semicircle of troops guarding the gates. Upon inspecting the gates this morning, he had decided that the goblins wouldn’t waste time trying to scale the walls. He watched the quick preparation with a numb detachment. Death was at hand and he knew it.

He moved to the center of the semicircle directly in front of the gates. Looking around, Flare couldn’t help but feel anguish at all the death the fort was about to see. Intense remorse rolled over him, and he had to blink back tears.

One of the soldiers on the western wall leaned over the inner rampart and shouted, “They’re almost here. It looks like they’re attacking the gates only.”

The soldiers were arranged in a defensive semicircle around the badly damaged gates. Spears had been half buried in the sand with the spear heads pointing upward toward the gates. The idea was that the goblins would have to sacrifice a large number of attackers to get through the spears. There were extra spears placed at even intervals around the circle, and there were some soldiers that were assigned simply to replacing broke spears. The soldiers who were proficient with the bow were placed to the rear, and their job would be to try and inflict as much damage as possible from behind the defenders’ main line.

Flare drew his sword and waited for the inevitable.

*Klang!* Was the only sound that betrayed the goblins attacking the gates. *Klang!* rang out again, and dust and rubble flew up from around the hinges. *Klang!* rang out a third time, and the gates seemed to hang there for just a moment, and then with a tremendous crash, the gates collapsed and the pathetic stone wall that the defenders had tried to build in front of the gates fell as well.

A huge wave of dust and sand rolled over the defenders, but dirt was the least of their problems. No sooner had the gates collapsed, than the goblins were through the entrance.

If not for the spears, the defenders would have been swept out of the courtyard before they even knew what was happening. The spears, at least initially, saved the defenders. Wall after wall of goblins rushed the spears. There was no hope for the goblins in the front to survive, but they didn’t even slow down. The goblins in the front of the charge threw themselves upon the spears. The weight of the dead goblins slowly pulled the spears downward, which allowed the goblins behind the first charge to attack the defenders. Barely moments into the fight, the defenders found themselves face to face with the attackers.

Flare dodged the clumsy swing of a goblin and slipped the tip of his sword between the goblin’s ribs. Before the first goblin had hit the ground, Flare was engaged with a second goblin.

There seemed to be no end to the goblins. The only thing that kept the defenders from being totally overrun was the narrowness of the breach in the wall. The hole, where the gates had been, only permitted so many goblins to come through at once and they were surrounded by the defenders. Even so, the goblins continued to inflict damage, with soldiers falling at an alarming

rate.

Flare didn't even notice as soldier after soldier fell beneath the charge of the goblins. He was too busy fighting for his life.

The fight continued for what seemed like hours at the excruciatingly fast pace. Flare had no idea how long the fighting had actually been going on, but death began to appeal to him as a release from the pain that his arms and body were feeling.

All of a sudden, a ferocious charge by the goblins broke through the right side of the human circle. Flare watched in horror as ten or so goblins ran through the lines and sprinted down the streets. He kept his head and counted the goblins. There were nine of them, and that little piece of information would help the defenders know when all the goblins had been tracked down. The hole in the defenders' line was quickly closed, but the damage had been done. With goblins free in the fort, the defenders would have to watch their backs and fight the attackers.

The goblin that Flare was fighting slipped in the loose sand, and that was all the opening he needed. A quick thrust through the throat, and the goblin fell to the ground quite dead.

The battle had momentarily moved away from him, and he rested his hands on his hips trying to catch his breath. He rested for just a moment before Murleen pushed her way through to him.

"Flare! There are goblins loose in the northern half of the fort. They must be caught quickly, or it won't matter if we can hold the wall tonight or not," Murleen said.

"I know," Flare said, still breathing deeply. "Take twenty soldiers and track them—"

"I can't!" Murleen interrupted. She turned her body more toward Flare, and he noticed the nasty cut on the outside of her knee.

"Murleen! Kara needs to look at that. Come on, let's find her," Flare said, taking Murleen by the arm and pulling her toward the courtyard.

Murleen jerked her arm away. "If we don't hold the wall, it won't matter. And if we manage to hold the wall by some miracle, then Kara can look at it tonight. I can't chase those goblins, but you can. I'll stay here and lead the defense while you track down those goblins."

"What?! I'm not leaving you," Flare said.

Murleen put her hand on his forearm, moving closer. The look on her face softened as she looked into his face. "I understand what you're trying to do, but you can't. Outside the bedroom, you must treat me like every other soldier."

Anger flared up and left him as quickly as it had come. Flare's eyes dropped to the ground. "I still don't like it."

Murleen's hand moved from his arm to his cheek. "Quickly, you must go." Barely audible, she added three words that made his head swim, "I love you." She paused for just a moment, and all too soon, she broke the contact. "Go, quickly."

Flare turned and quickly selected fifteen soldiers and ten townspeople. He gathered them together and addressed them a little ways away. "All right, I don't want you to die heroes. I want you to find the goblins and then shout for the rest of us. Three or four humans should be able to stop a goblin, much better than one human versus one goblin. Do you understand?"

They nodded, and Flare split the defenders into groups of two with at least one soldier in each group. He assigned one of the townspeople as his partner.

Flare's partner was a young man, barely into manhood. He had short brown hair, and his face was covered in freckles. He was carrying an axe, and he had a long knife in a sheath attached to his belt. He still had the thinness of youth and looked scared.

“What’s your name?” Flare asked.

“Ollel, sir,” the young man answered, his voice shaking.

“Ollel, call me Flare. If you see a goblin you let me know immediately, and you stay behind me. I am counting on you to guard my back and to warn the others,” Flare said, as calmly as possible.

Turning back to the other groups, Flare added, “Remember, shout if you see a goblin. And be careful.”

With one last worried look back at the ongoing battle, he led the groups in different directions into the northern end of the fort.

Murleen led the soldiers against the goblins at the gate. The fighting continued to be fierce and she fought furiously, directing soldiers to where they were most needed.

The fighting was taking its toll on the defenders. Soldiers continued to fall beneath the charge of the goblins. They fought on, without even being able to mourn the fallen soldiers.

Murleen soon noticed that the fighting was slacking off, and that scared her. There were still plenty of goblins, so they shouldn’t be withdrawing. *What are they up to?* she wondered.

No new goblins came through the fallen gates, and it didn’t take long to finish off the goblins that were left inside the walls. Murleen soon found herself in the middle of the defenders, with the moans of the injured the only sound to be heard.

Murleen, although confused by the sudden withdrawal, didn’t waste the opportunity. “Get the wounded back behind the lines!” she hollered at the soldiers around her. She was helping move the wounded back, when the shouts of the soldiers alerted her. She sprinted to the gates to see what was happening, saying a silent prayer as she ran.

Flare and Ollel moved quickly through the deserted road. So far they had not seen any goblins, and he was starting to worry. If the goblins avoided detection for any amount of time then they would have provided a serious distraction to the defenders.

They were moving through the street when a shout came from several streets over.

“Quickly! Follow me!” Flare said.

They sprinted through two alleys and emerged onto a narrow street where a battle was taking place. Two defenders had stumbled across two of the goblins.

One of the defenders was lying on the ground in a growing pool of blood. Flare barely even noticed that he was not a soldier.

The second defender had his back against the wall of a building, trying to hold off the goblins. He was holding his own, probably because he was a soldier.

The goblins had their backs to Flare, as they fought against the lone soldier. He drew his sword and sprinted at the nearest goblin. The goblin never saw him coming, and Flare ran him through with his sword.

He pulled his sword free just as the other goblin stunned the soldier with a blow to the face. The goblin then brought his scimitar down on the soldier’s head, instantly killing him.

Flare and the remaining goblin faced off.

He held his sword with a relaxed two-handed grip, straight away from him pointing toward the goblin. He slowly moved away from the wall.

With a vicious roar, the goblin charged, swinging a massive overhead swing.

Flare wisely didn’t try to block the swing; instead he just deflected it away from him.

Trying to take advantage of the goblin's momentary loss of balance, he tried to quickly slip his sword into the goblin's gut.

The goblin was too fast and slapped Flare's sword away with his scimitar.

Now, Flare was momentarily off balance, and the goblin pressed his advantage. His scimitar was too far away from Flare's body, so the goblin simply punched Flare in the face.

Flare was stunned by the powerful blow and fell to the ground. He lost his grip on his sword and scrambled to find it.

Looking up, Flare saw the goblin raise his scimitar over his head and start the swing that would end Flare's life.

With a shout, Ollel charged into the fight. Ferociously, he swung his ax. Once, twice, three times the goblin deflected blows from the young man. The boy simply didn't stand a chance against the monster. The goblin deflected a swing, then ran him through with the scimitar.

To his dying day, Flare would remember the look of surprise and pain that registered on Ollel's face.

Time seemed to slow to a miniscule pace. Flare watched as the goblin slowly raised his scimitar above his head. The goblin had a two-hand grip on the scimitar, as he prepared for a final blow. Only then did Flare notice the blood dripping from the scimitar. Blood that belonged to Ollel. Blood that would be on Flare's hands forever.

All the death and pressure that Flare had endured seemed to explode from within him. The blood seemed to be a catalyst for all the anger and pain that Flare had faced. He felt a tremendous force building up within him, and he felt like he was on the verge of exploding.

The hate and anger, bordering on the brink of madness, erupted from him in a primal blast.

The goblin was lifted off his feet and flung back into the stone wall behind him.

For a split second, Flare thought it was an illusion, but the sound of the goblin's bones snapping on impact convinced him that it was real.

He blinked his eyes and looked at the crumpled bloody mess that had been a goblin. *What happened?* Flare wondered. He slowly stood up, looking around for an explanation.

"I'm sorry, Ollel. You deserved a better fate than this," Flare said to the young man. Tears came to his eyes. "Thank you for saving my life."

Flare turned from the carnage, wiped his eyes, and began looking for the other defenders.

Murleen reached the courtyard before the gates and slid to a halt.

Scared defenders were running and stumbling away from the gates and into the fort. Giants were coming through the gates. They dwarfed both the gates and the goblins and humans around them.

Giants appear basically human except for their size. These giants were hill giants. Hill giants are normally between twelve-to-fourteen feet tall, and weigh between four hundred and six hundred pounds. To put it simply, they are ferocious fighters.

The leader was a monster. He was fifteen feet tall and had to weigh six hundred pounds. He was wearing armor that was made of thick leather, and he was armed with a massive club that had six-inch spikes protruding from the end. He wore an iron helmet, which was open in the front so his face was visible.

Murleen watched as the leader came through the gates. Fear settled in her stomach, as she frantically tried to think of something to do.

The giant stopped inside the gate and swung his club. The club slammed into a wounded soldier who had been trying to get away.

Murleen felt her stomach turn as she watched the young soldier die. *I've got to stop this!* she thought frantically.

"Are you all cowards?" the giant leader shouted at the fleeing soldiers. "Is there anybody with enough courage to fight me?"

Murleen, with sword in hand, stepped forward and quietly answered, "I will."

It took Flare a few minutes to locate another group of soldiers, and he joined with them. Together, they continued the search for more goblins.

They slowly worked their way back toward the western wall, looking and listening the whole way for any sign of the hiding goblins.

They saw and heard nothing.

Flare was once again becoming nervous, since they had not seen any sign of the goblins since his battle with the first two. Not for the first time, he wondered about the fight at the gates.

Moving through a side street, they heard the cling and clang of a battle. At first, he thought it was from the gates, but he then realized that it was northwest of his current position.

Together, Flare and the defenders rushed to where the battle was taking place.

They arrived at the battle, which was taking place in the shadow of the western wall, and he was both alarmed and relieved by the battle taking place before him. The goblins had banded together and were fighting the defenders in a pitched battle. Two goblins lay dead on the ground, but four more were still fighting. Unfortunately, the goblins were fighting quite well.

Six defenders were lying on the ground in their own blood. Flare couldn't quite see if they were alive or not, but as bad as it sounded, he was more worried about the soldiers who were still fighting. Nine defenders were fighting against the goblins, although to Flare's dismay, four of the nine defenders were townspeople.

The goblins had their backs to the western wall, daring the defenders to come within range of their scimitars. The goblins, seeing reinforcements approaching, decided it was time to take the offensive, and they charged the defenders.

The battle quickly turned into a disorganized melee.

Flare rushed toward the closest goblin. The goblin swung his scimitar at Flare, but Flare deflected it easily.

Flare then jabbed at the goblin, hoping the goblin hadn't recovered from the swing, and that he would catch him off guard. Instead, the goblin deflected Flare's blow, and then surprised him by stabbing Flare's left arm with a knife that the goblin had hidden in his left hand. The stab wound wasn't bad, as Flare had raised his left arm hoping to block the blow, but instead the knife had slid into his arm.

He jerked back, and at the same time lowered his sword. The goblin, sensing his advantage, jumped forward to try and end the fight.

Flare continued to back up, when suddenly the goblin dropped dead with a sword sticking out of his back.

Flare looked around, dazed. A soldier had saved him by running the goblin through. The soldier had come to his aid and stabbed the goblin in the back.

Almost immediately, another goblin ran the soldier through with a scimitar.

The soldier dropped to the ground dead. Flare hadn't even been able to thank him for

saving his life. Disgust settled on him at the thought of all the lives that were being thrown away.

The goblin started to withdraw his sword from the body of the soldier, but Flare jumped toward him and brought a massive swing down on the goblin's head, which exploded in a bloody mess.

Flare knelt down on the ground and was sick. After several moments, he felt a little better, and he looked up to see how the fight went.

The goblins were all dead, as were quite a few of the defenders. There were four defenders still alive, all of them soldiers, and several of them had also gotten sick.

"We killed two goblins before we got here," Flare said to the soldiers. "With the six we killed here, that leaves one more to find."

One of the soldiers spoke up, "But, sir, we killed one several streets over. If there are only nine, then they're all gone."

"Are you sure?" Flare asked, excitedly.

"Yes, sir. I helped kill him myself," the soldier answered.

"All right. I want all of you to check the soldiers and townspeople. If any of them are alive, then take them to Kara. I have to get back to the gates," Flare said. Wrapping his bloody left arm, he ran toward the battle at the gates.

The giant let out a long deep laugh. "Out of all these humans, the only one who is man enough to fight me is a woman?!" the giant said mockingly. "Tell me, woman, what is your name?"

"Murleen, and you will not enter this fort as long as I am alive," she answered with a defiance she didn't feel. Gripping her sword with both hands, she stepped forward.

"Well, little woman. The name of the chieftain that will end your life is Antol-delgath." The giant hefted his club and strode forward to meet Murleen.

The giant quickly raised the club over his head and brought it down in a powerful overhand swing. Murleen dove to the left, and rolling over, popped back onto her feet. The giant's club slammed into the dirt, and Murleen jumped forward trying to stab the giant. He jerked sideways away, but her sword still caught him on his leg above the knee. A thin line of blood appeared to be oozing through the cut. The giant whipped his club toward Murleen, but she had already backed up out of range.

"The man who gets first blood was a woman this time," Murleen said.

The giant only smiled at her. "You can have first blood, woman. I will have last blood." The giant readjusted his grip on the club and moved toward Murleen. This time he approached a little more cautiously. Suddenly, he drove toward her. He swung his club horizontally, and Murleen simply plunged to the ground and the club sailed over her head. Then, quickly rolling over, she thrust her sword straight up into the air, hoping to cut the giant again. He was not there, however. Seeing her move, the giant had jumped back.

She slowly got back to her feet, facing the giant. She was feeling better, since she was holding her own. She could tell that the giant was frustrated. *Well, let's keep him frustrated.*

The giant feinted to Murleen's left, then reversed himself and swung at her right side. Murleen had initially started to go right, but when the giant reversed, she quickly tried to go back to her left. The move was correct, but she slipped in the dirt and went down. She landed hard, and the sword flew out of her hand. She rolled over frantically looking for her sword, but the giant didn't give her the chance to find it. He swung an immense overhand swing and caught Murleen

on the back, halfway between her waist and her shoulders.

Even if the spikes hadn't impaled her, the force of the blow easily broke her back. She was dead even before the giant finished his swing.

The giant hefted his club back up and rested it back on his shoulders. He kicked Murleen's body, adding one final insult to the defeat.

Flare jogged back toward the gates, his arm aching slightly as he ran. He emerged from the northern street just in time to see the giant's swing and Murleen's death.

"No!" Flare screamed. Time seemed to stand still. The beating of his heart rang like major explosions in his ears. Everything in his sight receded except the body of Murleen lying in the dirt. Tears streamed down his face as the guilt of her death rushed over him.

Flare sunk to his knees in anguish.

The giant chieftain turned at Flare's shout. His stomach shook as he laughed from deep inside his belly. "First you send a woman to fight me, and now you send an elf? Is there not a man among you?" Turning the chieftain raised his club above his head; his troops responded with cheering. "Death to the humans. Victory is ours!" The remaining giants were gathered just inside the gates, watching their leader.

Tears ran down his face, but Flare didn't even notice. He could see only two things; the body of his lover lying broken in the dirt, and the monster that had taken her life.

Climbing to his feet, Flare drew his sword. He strode forward with the tears still on his face. He didn't even realize there were tears, nor would he have cared.

"You have killed the only woman that ever meant anything to me," he said quietly. He spoke so quietly, that the only one who clearly heard what was said was Antol-delgath.

The giant was clearly unimpressed. "Do you think you can kill me little elf? I think that the woman had a better chance than you." A hideous grin split his face.

Flare could feel nothing. Even death seemed insignificant. He could feel the beating of his own heart as he gripped his sword with both hands. A calm serenity descended on him. With something resembling joy he realized that he couldn't lose. Win the battle and he would avenge his lover. Lose the battle and he would join his lover, at least he hoped he would.

He moved toward the giant slowly circling to the right as he got closer. At the same time, the giant circled to Flare's left. They seemed to be judging each other's ability.

The giant lunged forward and swung his club in a ferocious horizontal swing.

Flare's elven reflexes were the only thing that saved him. He dropped to the ground, landing on his stomach. He immediately rolled over coming to his feet. He gripped his sword with both hands and swung it in a horizontal swing mimicking the giant's.

The giant was caught off guard and barely managed to deflect the sword with his club. The sword clanged against one of the metal spikes that protruded through the club's end.

Antol-delgath was enraged by Flare's near miss. He raised the club over his head and slammed it on the spot where Flare had been standing mere moments before, but Flare dodged to the right just before the club struck.

Landing hard on his right side, Flare rolled over, jumping to his feet. The giant was still lifting the hefty club, and Flare jabbed forward with his sword. The giant was unprepared, and Flare's jab cut his exposed left arm just below the elbow.

The giant bellowed in pain. The cut was deep and nasty. Already, a stream of deep red blood was running down his arm.

“First blood belongs to me,” Flare said.

“Doesn't matter,” the giant answered. “The woman had first blood also. You see what it got her.” The giant spat in the direction of Murleen’s body. “Care to join her?”

“Yes,” Flare answered softly, “but not today.”

The giant grunted and swung his club at Flare again. This time, however, the swing was much more controlled. He didn’t want to get off-balance again.

Flare jumped back and swung his sword at the club. He was trying to deflect it, just to make contact.

*Clang!* Flare's sword bounced off the spikes, and the club sailed past him.

The giant reversed his motion and swung his club in the opposite direction, hoping to catch Flare jabbing. Flare was not fooled, and backed up again out of the way of the club.

The giant, showing surprising quickness, raised the club over his head and jumping forward, brought the club down where Flare had been standing. The club made a tremendous sound as it impacted into the ground.

Flare dodged quickly to the left of the club, and before the swing was even complete he charged the giant, hoping to catch him off guard.

The giant was surprised, and Flare slammed his sword straight at the giant’s belly. The sword ricocheted off the giant’s armor and slid downward, slicing the outside part of his thigh.

Once again blood ran freely, but this time Flare did not get away unscathed.

Even as the giant screamed, he swung his club upward from the ground to his right. The club slammed into Flare, knocking him to the ground and sending his sword flying. Flare had been too close to the giant to get hit by the fat part of the club, but he was still knocked senseless.

Flare lay on the ground, trying to catch his breath. The giant was between him and the defenders, and Flare’s sword was on the far side of the giant.

The giant, although wounded, was mocking the defenders. “See! There is no one who can stand against Antol-delgath,” he shouted at the defenders, as he pounded himself on the chest.

The giant walked back over to Flare and said, “Say hello to the girl.” The giant then kicked Flare in the stomach.

Flare curled up in pain from the giant’s kick.

The giant seemed to be enjoying tormenting both Flare and the crowd. He turned back to the crowd and shouted something else at them. Flare didn’t hear him, because all he could hear was the thudding in his ears. The pain in his stomach was intense.

Flare looked frantically for his sword, but it was too far out of his reach. Looking toward the gates and the other giants, he spotted Murleen’s sword lying in the dirt. It was no more than four or five feet from him, but it was well out of reach.

Lying on the ground, panting, Flare didn’t have the energy to crawl toward the sword. He thought about giving up. It would end quickly if he just laid here. Soon, he would be reunited with Murleen, and this would all be behind him. He considered giving in, but dismissed the idea. He would die, but not without fighting.

He had to get that sword and quickly. Panting and with his stomach throbbing, he started crawling for the sword.

The giant had finished shouting at the defenders, and he was turning back toward him.

There was no way Flare would get to the sword in time. As he reached for the sword, he visualized the sword sliding across the sand to him. His skin prickled, and for just a moment time



seemed to slow down almost to a stop. He could hear not only his own labored breathing, but that of the giant and the other warriors. His senses were magnified beyond his ability to understand. He could smell the sweat of the warriors and hear their muffled whispers.

The thing that stood out to Flare was the sword. He could see it like he had never seen it before. From several feet away, he could see the tiniest speck of dirt sitting on the blade. He could see the lines in the leather-wrapped handle. He even could see a tiny crack in the hilt of the sword. All of this happened in a flash.

One minute, the sword was four feet from him, and there was no chance of him reaching it. Then, in his mind's eye, Flare saw the sword sliding across the ground to him. He wasn't sure if he actually saw the sword slide or if he just imagined it, but the next thing he felt was the cold leather of the handle as it slid into his right hand. He sat up facing the giant.

The giant turned from the defenders with an evil smile on his face. A smile that quickly disappeared when he saw Flare with a sword in his hand.

Flare acted quickly before the giant had a chance to recover. He swung the sword and hit the giant's thigh. It was the same spot where he had cut the giant before.

The giant howled in agony and hopped away. He stood on his left leg, while he held his hand over the cut on his right leg.

Flare crawled behind him and in one swift motion he sliced the hamstring in the giant's left leg. The giant collapsed onto his back.

A deathly quiet settled over the onlookers.

Flare staggered to his feet, looking down on the giant.

Sensing danger, the giant rolled over onto his stomach and tried to crawl away.

"For Murleen," Flare whispered. He took a step closer and he swung the sword with both hands, hitting the giant in the back of the neck. The swing completely decapitated the giant. The head rolled away, while the body poured blood and spasmed.

He stood for a moment looking at the giant. Thoughts of Murleen flowed through his mind. After several moments, Flare allowed himself to look at Murleen's body. The pain felt like a stab to his heart. The pain was quickly replaced with an anger that was so intense that he could think of nothing else.

He turned back to the crowd of invaders. The giants were nearest, but there were a large number of goblins behind them. They were all quiet, staring in shock at the death of their leader.

"For Murleen," Flare whispered.

Swinging Murleen's sword, Flare let out a heart-stopping scream and charged the attackers.

Giants aren't too bright, and they had just seen their 'invincible' leader killed. They simply turned and fled, trampling a lot of the goblins in the process.

The first attacker that Flare reached was a goblin. He didn't even slow down, running the goblin through with Murleen's sword as he pursued the giants through the gates.

Things quickly turned into a blur of slashing swords and bleeding monsters. He was completely consumed by the bloodlust, consumed by the hate. All that mattered was killing and hurting as many of the attackers as he could. Injury and pain did not matter. His body did not matter. He cared for nothing but finding another victim.

## Chapter 20

"Flare?" a voice called.

The sound broke through Flare's concentration. He was looking down at the body of a goblin. It looked like the goblin had been cut more than was necessary to kill him. He didn't even remember having killed the goblin.

"Flare?" the voice called again from behind him. It was Atock. "Are you injured?"

Flare looked down, and only then realized that he was covered in blood. "I don't think I'm hurt." He looked around at the carnage. "Atock, I don't remember the fight."

"It wasn't a fight, it was a slaughter. You don't remember anything?"

Flare just shook his head.

Atock looked concerned, but changed the subject instead. "We had better get back inside the fort and see to the gates. They won't attack again until tomorrow, I think."

Flare blinked in surprise. "Back to the fort," he repeated in confusion. Only then did he notice that they were outside the western wall with the dead and dying piled high.

Atock noticed Flare's confusion. "Some were killed by the giant's retreat, but the rest we killed. We followed you through the gates, but I have never seen such total abandon when fighting. I thought you were going to be killed several times, but when you were in danger, you simply attacked."

Flare heard something in Atock's voice that bothered him. Was that awe? He slowly walked, more like stumbled, back toward the fort.

The looks of the defenders scared Flare. They were looking at him with respect, doubt, and fear.

The body of Murleen was still lying on the ground. Flare started toward it.

"Flare, I'll take care of Murleen," Atock said.

"No! I'll handle it," Flare answered in a commanding tone.

He knelt down and scooped up his lover's lifeless corpse. He almost cried right then at the way her head lolled. He hugged her to his chest as he walked to the temple. *I failed you!* Tears welled up in his eyes. Callin's death had crushed him, but it did not even begin to compare. He slowly carried her to the temple, ignoring the stares of the soldiers and townspeople. He placed her body next to Callin's in the temple crypt, and then he spent the night beside her.

Aaron met Elona that night as he had promised. She seemed happy to see him, and he was equally pleased to see her. The night before he had been surprised to discover that he actually enjoyed her company and their conversation.

They sat talking and laughing in the moonlight, the fighting a distant memory for now. Perhaps that was all that it was, but it was enough.

After a while, Elona moved closer and kissed Aaron. He seemed surprised but quickly returned the kiss with as much enthusiasm.

Distracted as they were, they didn't notice Dale watching from the shadows of the street.

The next morning was overcast, and the weather seemed to match Flare's mood. It had been a long, sleepless night for him, but he expected the day would be much shorter than the previous night. Once again he didn't expect to live to see the sunset, and it seemed a comfort that

the pain would soon be over.

He arrived at the western gates and surveyed the damage. He had not really paid attention to the gates or walls the day before, and now it was almost with amusement that he observed the damage. The gates were battered and beaten down, having been propped back up by the defenders. The walls weren't much better – cracked and crumbling from the abuse of the past week.

The other Guardians had taken the initiative to gather the soldiers at the gates. The faces of the soldiers had changed so much in just a week; they had gone from innocent young kids to battle-weary veterans.

He scanned their faces, and saw their fear. He also saw something new in their faces. He saw their confidence in him. In some of their faces he saw hope. He managed a reassuring smile that he didn't really feel, hoping to encourage them.

The other Guardians approached him in a group.

"Flare, are you okay?" Kara asked him.

Flare managed to smile. "I'm as good as I can be right now."

A brief moment of awkward silence ensued, finally broken by Phillip. "We're ready. We got the soldiers arrayed around the western gate. I don't think they will try to scale the walls. They will probably just come right through the main gate. Don't you think?"

Flare nodded. "What about the eastern wall?"

"We just have a token force. It's not enough to defend the wall, just enough to give us warning if an attack comes from that direction." Phillip shrugged. "It was all we could do."

"You did good. We have done a much better job than could have been expected of us. No matter what happens today, we will be remembered with honor," Flare said.

"Well spoken," Derek said quietly.

"Atock and Phillip, would you please accompany me to the top of the wall. I want to see the size of the attacking force," Flare said.

The trio climbed the wall and waited for the attack to come. Not much was said, since nobody much felt like talking. They simply waited.

An hour after sunrise, the attackers came into view. If Flare hadn't been numb with emotion, he would have been dismayed. Trolls, goblins, giants, mercenaries, and other monsters slowly crossed the plain. They quickly covered the plain, making it look like a sea of invaders.

Flare, Atock, and Phillip left the wall. "Look! On top of the temple," Atock said, pointing to the center of the fort. "What is that?"

Flare looked to where Atock had pointed and saw a creature resembling a flying reptilian horse descending on top of the temple. On its back was a warrior. The warrior was wearing armor that was all black, but Flare knew who it was. "Prince Zalustus."

"I think he's tired of waiting. He wants the fort today," Atock said quietly.

"Damn, we can't have him behind us when the fight is going on," Flare said, looking where Zalustus had disappeared from view. "I'll go to the temple and try to stop him. You two go to the gates and lead the battle there."

Atock and Phillip studied Flare quietly. Finally, Atock sighed. "If this is goodbye, then I want you to know that I think you did an excellent job. It just wasn't meant to be. The gods were against us this time." He extended his hand to Flare.

Flare grasped Atock's extended arm and then grasped Phillip's arm as well. A deep

loneliness settled over him. "Take care," Flare said. The words almost choking him. "Regardless of what happens, I will see you soon." He turned and sprinted down the stairs, afraid that the emotion would burst through.

Flare reached the temple and drew his sword. He cautiously entered, opening the door just wide enough to slip quickly through. It was dark inside, but with his elven sight, he could still see. Pausing just inside the doorway, he scanned the foyer before quietly proceeding to the doors that led into the main chamber of the temple.

When he reached the interior doors, Flare paused briefly, listening for any sounds on the other side of the door. Ba-bump, ba-bump, ba-bump was all he heard, and he momentarily wished that his heart would beat quieter.

Satisfied that nothing was on the other side of the door, Flare used his left arm to slowly push the door open. Entering slowly, he quickly scanned the area for any sign of Zalustus.

Flare slowly moved down the aisle between the rows of pews. No sound penetrated the eerie silence except his breathing.

He paused and stood perfectly still. Letting the silence roll over him, he hoped that he would catch some sound that would tip off where Zalustus was hiding.

Flare continued down the aisle and passed the altar. He passed through the doorway in the corner behind the altar and reached the stairway. He had come this way the night before, but then he had taken the downward stairs toward the crypt. This time he would go upward toward the roof.

He paused at the stairs, looking into the darkness below. *We will be with you soon, Murleen.*

Taking a deep breath, he climbed the stairs. Even his elven eyes couldn't penetrate to the top. He reached down toward his left leg, and felt the reassuring coldness of Murleen's sword strapped to his leg.

Atock and Phillip reached the assembled soldiers at the gates. Trestus ran up to them as they approached. "Where's Flare?"

"Zalustus made it inside the fort. Flare went to stop him from attacking us from the rear," Phillip answered. "Listen, I'll take the center of the defense. Atock, you take the left, and Trestus, you take the right."

"Derek and Mikela are already setup in the center," Trestus answered.

"All right. You lead the defense in the center with Derek and Mikela. I'll take the right. Atock, you take the left."

Atock sprinted off without answering.

Flare reached the top of the stairs, and as quietly as possible, he pushed open the door to the roof. Prince Zalustus was standing on the far side of the roof facing him. He gave up on being quiet and shoved the door the rest of the way open.

"About time, Flare. I was beginning to think that maybe you wouldn't come," Zalustus said. The prince was in plate armor that was completely black. He was not wearing a helmet, and his sword was still in its sheath at his side.

Flare stepped out onto the roof, his sword ready. "Why did you wait so long? I would have thought that you would have entered the battle sooner."

Zalustus smiled. "I got tired of waiting. Which reminds me, I am really impressed with what you've done. I thought that the fort would have fallen after one or maybe two days. You have really surprised me."

Zalustus pointed out toward the gates. "The battle is coming soon. At last the fort will fall, and I will be the conqueror of Mul-Dune."

"And then what? Is Telur next? Do you think that you can actually take the city?"

"In time, but I'm not in a hurry. I will destroy this fort and I will eliminate you," Zalustus said, pointing toward Flare. "I told you before that one way or the other, you will die."

Flare moved closer to Zalustus. "Why do you want me dead so badly?"

"We're in competition, Flare. We are in a race, and you don't even know it." Zalustus smiled. "But don't worry, it won't be for long." Zalustus drew his sword, moving forward.

Wave after wave of attackers charged through the gates. The first ones through died immediately, either on the spears planted in the ground or by being shot by the archers. The dead attackers formed a barrier and slowed down the other attackers that came through the gates behind them.

However, the delay was only temporary as the attackers surged over the bodies of their former comrades.

"Charge," Phillip yelled. The defenders surged forward, engaging the attackers.

Right from the beginning, the fight was intense and gory. The defenders were ready to crumble, but again and again the defenders were rallied by Atock or Phillip, and they would push the attackers back.

But time and the sheer numbers were against them.

After repelling a particular nasty offensive by the attackers, Atock paused to catch his breath. The defenders were losing soldiers at an alarming rate, and he knew they couldn't continue for much longer. Just then, a soldier ran up to Atock out of breath. "The eastern gate has fallen, and the mercenaries are in the fort."

Zalustus lunged toward Flare, but Flare deflected his sword. He quickly stepped to his left and slashed at Zalustus's leg, just barely missing.

Zalustus then raised his sword over his head and brought it down on Flare's raised sword. Flare's arm felt like it was going to buckle under the pressure. He quickly kicked Zalustus away.

The two swordsmen sized each other up.

"Give up, Flare. You are beaten! There is no shame in being defeated," Zalustus said.

"What did you mean when you say we are in a race?" Flare asked.

"What are we, Flare? We are warriors of course, but what else? We are magicians, or we are on the way to being magicians, anyway."

Flare was confused by the answer, and started to speak, when Zalustus charged.

Zalustus swung, but Flare managed to partially deflect the blow. Flare then quickly jabbed at Zalustus, but his sword merely bounced off the plate armor. He quickly moved in closer to Zalustus, so that Zalustus couldn't use his sword.

Zalustus raised his left arm to punch Flare, but Flare kicked the knee joint of Zalustus's armor. He enjoyed the look of pain on Zalustus's face.

Flare was knocked away from Zalustus, as if by an invisible wall. He slid to one knee

just in front of the rail that ran along the edge of the roof. Flare looked around for what had hit him, but didn't see anything. Sorcery, perhaps?

Zalustus took the offense again and charged in close to Flare. Zalustus jammed his sword right at Flare's heart, and he just managed to deflect the blow. Zalustus reversed the motion of his sword, and it slid along Flare's left leg, leaving a nasty cut in its wake.

After deflecting the last blow, Flare's sword was pointing away from Zalustus. Ignoring the pain from the cut in his leg, Flare slammed his sword hilt into the Zalustus' face. The blunt end of the hilt smashed into his forehead, knocking him backward onto his butt.

Flare, sensing his advantage, bolted toward Zalustus. But Zalustus, still sitting on his butt, threw up both of his hands.

A brilliant flash erupted in front of Flare, momentarily blinding him.

Zalustus scrambled to his feet and backed away, then reversed his motion and rushed back. Flare, still disoriented from the flash, was caught by surprise and raised his sword. He was too late, and he felt Zalustus's sword slide through his stomach.

A terrible pain erupted inside Flare, and he leaned back against the stone rail.

Zalustus wrenched his sword back out, and Flare screamed in pain. Flare dropped his sword and reached down holding his insides.

Zalustus leaned over Flare and smiled. "I told you that I would win." Then Zalustus turned and shouted at the sky, "I win! At last I win!"

Flare could feel the numbness spreading over his body, and he knew that he was dying quickly. "I'm on my way, Murleen," he whispered. Reaching down with his left hand, he unlatched Murleen's sword. Flare looked at Zalustus, who was still celebrating, and looking away. *I'm only going to get one shot at this. Murleen, help me.* He lifted the sword, then saying a prayer beneath his breath, he staggered away from the rail toward Zalustus. Flare raised the sword, ignoring the pain he felt ripping through his stomach.

Zalustus sensed his danger and turned. Flare had already started the sword in motion, and Zalustus inadvertently turned right into it.

Flare jabbed the sword into Zalustus's face. Zalustus's right eye burst, and gore ran everywhere, and he screamed. His cheek had a gash running vertically, and his nose was split open. Zalustus spasmed and shoved Flare away from him.

Flare landed on his back and felt consciousness slipping away because of the pain. He could still hear Zalustus screaming, and Flare watched as Zalustus collapsed to his knees.

Flare heard another scream, but this one came from the flying creature. It swooped down out of the sky and grabbed Zalustus with a claw and carried him, still screaming, away to the west. His screams slowly receded from Flare's hearing.

Flare felt the blackness approaching. He closed his eyes and welcomed the release. As he slipped away, he heard a bugle blowing, and a large number of people shouting. He could barely make out what they were saying, but as he slid into darkness, he heard, "Telur! Telur! Telur! . . ."

## Chapter 21

Flare seemed to be floating on air. It was extremely bright, and seemed airy, like being surrounded by fog.

Voices could be heard, but he could not tell where they were coming from, and they were faint. He could not quite make out any of the words.

Flare did not know how long he had been here, but time didn't seem to matter. It was like floating on water, an enjoyable sensation. His senses seemed dulled and he felt almost intoxicated.

*Is this the abyss? Where am I?* Flare had envisioned many things about being dead, but never had he imagined it like this.

After an indeterminable amount of time, he noticed a dark spot floating in front of him. It slowly grew larger, and he began to see shapes.

As the spot grew bigger, he saw a person lying on a bed in a rather nice room.

With a start, he recognized the person. *Is that me?* he thought incredulously. Only then did he recognize the room as his own in fort Mul-dune.

The spot was still growing, and it was starting to resemble a tunnel more than a spot. Flare felt a tug pulling him toward the tunnel. Another tug, and another, as he slid toward the tunnel. Then, with a sudden jerk, he flew into the tunnel, and he knew no more.

Flare opened his eyes. His first thought was that the light was too bright, it hurt his eyes. Immediately after that, his second thought was that he wasn't sure if it was the light that hurt his eyes, because everything else hurt as well.

He was lying in bed. It was the bedroom of Colonel Holt, the same room that Flare had claimed as his own. Although he knew where he was, he was confused and disoriented. How had he gotten here?

Kara was sitting in the chair beside the bed. She looked exhausted, and she had a nasty bruise on her left shoulder just below her neck. She smiled at him. "Flare, I am so happy to see you awake. How are you feeling?"

"Terrible," Flare said, trying to push himself up. "What happened at the gates?"

Kara jumped up. "Don't move!" she exclaimed. Then she continued in a calmer voice, "Flare, you don't need to be moving. Just lie still."

Flare was somewhat taken back by the urgency in her voice. He slowly relaxed back in the bed. "What's the matter?"

She sat down on the bed next to him. "Flare, do you remember what happened? Do you remember the fight on top of the temple?"

Kara's words caused his mental fog to clear a little bit. With a rush the events of the fight came back to him. "What happened? I was stabbed in the gut . . . I thought that I was dead for sure. Do I have you to thank for being alive?"

She shook her head. "I have seen people wounded like that before, but I have never seen anybody survive it. I don't think that the high priest himself could have done anything for you," she paused, "except maybe pray for your soul." A shadow crossed her face. "Flare, you should be dead, and yet the wound is already closing up. The internal damage seems to be already healed or very close to it. I have never seen anything like it, neither has the archbishop."

“Archbishop? What archbishop?” Flare asked, confused.

“The battle at the gates was almost over. Most of us, the defenders I mean, were scattered or dead. The mercenaries from the eastern wall had joined in the fight. They had taken the eastern gate and trapped us between the two groups of attackers. I was fighting in the courtyard near the western gate when I heard the chants of ‘Telur’ coming from the east.” Her eyes got a distant look as she spoke. “You should have seen it, Flare. An army poured through the eastern gate, an army of Telurian soldiers. Heather reached General Andatell and returned with his army.”

Flare got goose skin as she relayed her tale, and his eyes got misty thinking of the soldiers who didn't get to see the hoped for army.

Kara paused for a moment. “Flare, I know that the goblins would have slaughtered us if they had won, but I will have nightmares from the way our army slaughtered them. The loss of life was horrible.” A tortured look crossed her face.

“Kara, how many defenders did we lose? Which of the other Guardians survived?” Flare asked quietly, needing the answer but terrified of what he might hear.

“The other Guardians will be okay. Aaron’s leg was broken by a giant’s hammer, but it will heal in time. Trestus was stabbed high on the shoulder, but that also will heal. The rest of us have minor injuries.” She stopped talking and then, as if just remembering something, she added, “Oh, Enstorion woke up and he should be fine.”

“And what about the rest of the defenders?” Flare asked, relieved to hear about Enstorion and that none of the other Guardians had died.

Kara got up and slowly walked toward the end of the bed. “Flare, I am not entirely sure of the numbers, but I think that some sixty of the soldiers survived relatively unhurt. Another twenty or thirty of the soldiers survived the battle, but I think their survival is temporary. They were maimed or severely hurt, and I think that their injuries will be too much. If they do survive, I don’t know what kind of life they would lead.”

A soul-ripping remorse settled on Flare. “I failed them. My god, I have failed them.” His eyes teared up, memories of Murleen flowing over him.

Kara turned on him with such ferocity that it startled him. “You stop that right now. You led these men better than could have possibly been expected of you. You helped these men to hold this fort under impossible odds for a lot longer than we should have. Stop with the poor me attitude.”

Her voice softened and she sat down on the bed next to him, placing her hand on his shoulder. “Think of the sixty or so soldiers who did survive, and think of all the lives that would have been lost if the goblins had gotten through the fort. You have saved countless lives, and you have nothing to feel sorry about.”

She watched him for a few moments. “Flare, a wonderful blessing has been bestowed on us. The lives that were lost were the sacrifice that the gods required for this blessing. Don’t ruin the memory of those soldiers by pitying them, rejoice in their memory.”

*The lives that were lost were the sacrifice that the gods required for this blessing!* Those words troubled him; they reminded him of the words he heard about the gods demanding a sacrifice.

Suddenly, the door opened, and in walked General Andatell. He looked every bit the battle-hardened general. His hair was shoulder length and rather unkempt. His smile put Flare at ease. He had a leather-hard face with a scar that ran from his left eye to his chin.



“Hello, Sergeant. How are you feeling?” Andatell asked.

How did he feel? He should have been dead, but he was healing quickly. He felt queasy to his stomach at the thought of admitting refusing to follow a direct order. He swallowed and said, “Better, sir. I should be ready to return to duty soon.” He surprised himself with how good he actually sounded.

Andatell chuckled. “Well, let’s not rush it.”

“Yes sir. Uh, General, can I speak with you in private for a moment?”

Andatell seemed a little surprised, but nevertheless he nodded toward the door.

Kara was also taken aback, but she glanced from Flare to General Andatell, and then left.

“All right, Sergeant, what’s this about?” Andatell asked, just as soon as the door closed.

Flare took a deep breath. *I don’t have to do this, maybe nobody will ever know*, but he dismissed that thought. “Sir, it is with deep regret that I must inform you that I refused a direct order from Colonel Holt.” A look of surprise crossed Andatell’s face, but Flare continued. “We arrived several days early, and when the goblins appeared, the colonel ordered me to turn my troops over to him. He was marching out to fight them, but I refused. I still had two days before the day I was ordered to turn the troops over to Colonel Holt. I used that to justify my refusal.”

Andatell watched Flare for several moments, as if studying him. The look on Andatell’s face had changed from surprise to something else. What was it? It almost looked like amusement, but that couldn’t be it, not when a soldier admitted to disobeying a superior officer. Andatell took his time in responding, and the waiting was unimaginable.

Finally, Andatell spoke. “Sergeant, while I understand that you may feel guilty about refusing a command, I think that you must not understand what you have done here. You have saved an untold number of lives by refusing that foolish command.” He paused, sitting down in the chair next to the bed.

A faint glimmer of hope rose in Flare at Andatell’s words. He tried to not get his hopes up too far.

Andatell smiled and continued, “I would not recommend that you make a habit of refusing to follow an order, but it is the responsibility of each soldier to judge an order, and not just follow blindly. Most of the time, a soldier does not know everything that the officer knows. In this case, you refused to follow a stupid order and saved the lives of many innocents.” Andatell placed his hand on Flare’s shoulder. “Besides, you’re a hero now. I don’t think that I could do anything to you, even if I wanted to.”

Flare was stunned. He had expected several possible different responses to his admission of rebellion, but praise had not crossed his mind.

Andatell stood to his feet, and moved to the door. He stopped and looked back at Flare, his face turning grim. Or was that mirth in his eyes? “Now that I think about it, I guess there is something that I can do to punish you.” Andatell paused as if considering the punishment. “Yes, I think that it will be a fitting punishment for you.”

Flare was confused by Andatell’s abrupt about face. The punishment couldn’t be too bad considering his earlier statements, but what did he have in mind?

A broad smile broke across Andatell’s face. “A general is granted certain liberties, and one of those is the ability to promote a soldier on the field of battle, and that is exactly what I have decided to do.” Andatell reached for the doorknob. “I must be going now. I have to check on the status of the repair to the wall. You get your rest,” Andatell paused and smiled at him, as he stressed his last word, “Lieutenant.”

*Lieutenant? I disobeyed an order, and I get a promotion?* Waves of relief rolled over him as he realized that he would not be punished, but instead would be rewarded. *I guess I need to disobey orders a little more often.* Flare chuckled to himself.

In spite of the excitement of Andatell's visit, Flare's mending body required healing. He soon found himself slipping back into sleep and released himself willingly.

Flare spent several weeks recovering his strength. His fellow Guardians visited him often, and brought him news of the rebuilding of the fort's defenses.

All the Guardians were troubled by the events that had befallen them at the fort, but only Trestus seemed truly haunted. He seemed quieter than usual, and Flare's concern about Trestus grew each time he saw him.

Enstorion visited only once. A brief visit where the elven magician sat coolly regarding Flare. His gaze starting to make Flare uncomfortable. "So, Enstorion, how are you feeling?"

"Better," he adjusted the way that he was sitting, crossing his long legs and leaning back in the chair. "I'm tired a lot, but that will pass with time." He nodded toward Flare. "Your stomach's almost healed up. How did you manage that?"

Flare shook his head, his brow wrinkling at the same time. "I don't know." He had told the same to the other Guardians when asked this question. Some of them, led by Kara, pronounced it a miracle and said he should be thankful. He was thankful, but he desperately wanted a clearer explanation.

Enstorion didn't stay long, but at one point, he had nodded at Flare. "Some pretty amazing things happened over the past couple of weeks, and I don't just mean your healing. Any ideas on how so many fortuitous things happened?"

Shaking his head, Flare studied the elf, and Enstorion left shortly thereafter. But there had been a gleam in his eyes that gave Flare pause. Could he know or suspect something? Of all of them, Enstorion alone might keep his secret, but then again, Enstorion might also be the first to sell him out.

After ten days, Flare was finally allowed to leave the room, albeit over the very loud objections of Kara. There was some pain and soreness from his injuries, but he refused to show any sign of soreness as Kara insisted on going with him. If she even suspected that he was still hurting, she would have ended any and all of his excursions.

He limped through the streets of the fort toward the makeshift gate. It was a bright sunny day, and the light hurt his eyes. The signs of the battle were still very evident. The streets and even some of the buildings were torn up, even though a hasty attempt had been made to patch the battle scars.

Other soldiers and merchants walked the streets. Some nodded at Flare, but most ignored him or watched him with guarded looks.

"Kara, why do they look at me that way?" he asked.

"Well, a lot of them are in shock from what happened here. I mean the tradespeople expected to die. And then miraculously they are saved by the arrival of the army. Then they look at you, and you should be dead, but here you are, alive and well." She shrugged her shoulders. "They just think that you should be dead."

He didn't respond, but kept slowly walking toward the western gate. When he reached the gate, he almost didn't recognize it. Hundreds of soldiers swarmed over the remains of the gate

and wall. An amazing amount of work had already been done to clear away the rubble, and now the soldiers were shoring up the walls. The area in front of the gate, where the final battle had taken place, had been completely cleared of any sign of battle. *That doesn't make any sense*, Flare thought. *It looks like they are closing off the entrance.*

Seeing the confused look on his face, Kara spoke, "There wasn't any way to make a makeshift gate quickly, so General Andatell ordered the entrance to be temporarily sealed. Once everything has been secured, I expect that the craftsmen will build a new gate. They are only leaving a small passage wide enough for one rider on a horse to get through."

Flare watched as the damage that been inflicted so quickly was slowly repaired.

Over the next week, Flare continued to survey the fort by getting out and walking the streets. At first, even a short trip would wear him out, but as time went by his strength slowly returned. The soldiers and merchants also got used to seeing him around the fort, and he noticed that they regarded him less and less with scared looks.

Scouting patrols, sent out to search for the invaders, found numerous bodies. The invaders had fled, and General Andatell's troops had pursued them and massacred those attackers who were too slow. The bodies of the attackers had been heaped into great piles and then burnt. The fires had burned nonstop since the battle, and they still burned.

The hardest trip Flare had taken was to the graveyard on the outside of the eastern wall. New graves were everywhere, as soldiers and townspeople alike were buried with honor. He wept at the massive number of dead. He could not help but feel responsible. He went to the graveyard once, wept bitterly, and then promised himself that he would not go back. The dead were to be remembered with fondness and their sacrifices praised. He had to stop blaming himself, he knew, but it was easy to say and harder to do.

"Flare, have you seen the progress on the wall?" Atock asked at dinner.

About half of the Guardians were sitting at a table against the wall. Trestus was absent, but that was becoming the norm, as he seemed to prefer to be by himself lately. Aaron was there. His leg had been set by Kara, and he could now walk with the aid of a crutch, but it still pained him and he had it resting, propped up on a chair.

"Yes. It's coming along quite nicely," Flare said, taking another bite of bread. "Have any of the scouts found any more goblins or whatever?"

Enton was in the process of raising his cup of ale to his mouth, but he paused with it halfway raised. "Just the bodies of those that were injured in the battle. They haven't found anymore in the woods," he answered. "Of course, the troops don't go too far away from the fort. Besides the goblins, there are a lot of dangerous things in the wilderness."

Flare wondered at the complete disappearance of the attackers. "Are there any signs of how the invaders just disappeared? I mean, they just can't vanish."

Aaron glanced over at Flare. "Well, maybe they can," he said. "I mean they proved that they have some powerful magicians on their side."

Something about Aaron's answer disturbed him. "Maybe. But why would you use magic to transport the whole army to outside the fort. If you can transport a whole army like that, just transport them to the east of us, and you can march all the way to Telur."

"Unless they were more interested in taking the fort," Atock said. His comment cast a bothersome air over the dinner table.

Heather swallowed a bite of venison. "Actually, there are quite a few tracks leading away from the fort." She paused and wiped some meat juice from her chin. "With the arrival of the army, the attackers fled in their separate directions. It looks like whatever kept the peace between the different groups collapsed, and they started fighting as they fled."

"Besides," Mikela added, "magicians can't transport whole armies. It's just not possible."

Flare's eyes narrowed. "What of Zalustus, or any of the other humans who were with him?"

Heather shook her head. "We haven't seen the first sign of their escape. There were some signs near the attackers' camp, but after the rout at the gates, they seemed to have vanished. It's almost as if they all flew away."

Heather's words cast a pall over the group. Her mention of flying reminded them of the way Zalustus had escaped. The group ate in silence, each absorbed in his or her own thoughts.

Flare was asleep in his room when a knock on the door drew him from his slumber. A young man stuck his head in, but Flare didn't recognize him. "Sir, General Andatell has summoned you and the other Guardians to appear before him as soon as possible."

Flare pushed himself up from the bed. Sunlight was peaking from around the edges of the curtains that covered the window. He frowned at that. He seemed to have adjusted to sleeping late during his recovery, but that would have to change, and change in a hurry. It was rather difficult to sleep late and be in the army.

Pushing those thoughts from his mind, he moved toward his wardrobe. A soldier didn't keep a general waiting, but they also didn't answer a general's summons by showing up in a nightshirt.

He met the rest of the Guardians at General Andatell's makeshift office. None of the Guardians had any idea why they were being summoned, but they were all arrayed in the best uniform they had. Although given the ordeal they had endured, none of the Guardians looked very sharp.

Flare briefly inspected his fellow Guardians, and then turned to Andatell's secretary.

"We are reporting as ordered," he said to the young man sitting at the desk. The secretary looked like he couldn't have been more than sixteen. *How many soldiers just like him died during the siege?*

"Wait here and I will see if the general is ready to see you," the young man said, getting up and entering the office. He was gone just a moment before he returned and opened the door. "This way please."

Flare entered first, followed by the rest of the Guardians in the single file.

General Andatell was seated behind a desk, sifting through papers. He looked up as the Guardians filed into the room.

The Guardians lined up at attention facing the general.

Andatell stood up and walked around the end of the desk. He stopped and leaned against the corner. "At ease."

The Guardians relaxed only slightly, as they were all a little nervous.

Andatell paused a moment, then he said a little more forcefully, "I said at ease, soldiers."

Flare took the not-so-subtle hint, relaxed his stance, and turned his face toward the general.

“It’s time for you to return to Telur. The king himself has summoned you.”

There were several audible gulps from the Guardians. Flare felt his stomach getting a little queasy at being summoned before the king. His thoughts ran wild briefly, before his attention returned to the general.

Andatell was smiling at the nervousness being displayed by Flare and his fellow Guardians. “Relax,” he said in a calm manner. “The king is summoning you to reward you for your service to the kingdom. You are heroes, and will be treated as such upon your return.” He spoke quietly, hoping to put the soldiers at ease. He paused for another moment, and then spoke directly to Flare. “Flare, are you ready to make the return trip?”

“Yes, sir. I feel fine,” he answered quickly. He hoped that he hid his fear from the general. He was returning to Telur as a hero. That would not sit well with some of the nobility there. He hoped that his hero status was not short lived.

“Excellent. I am sending Captain Mondell in command of the trip. Also, Bishop Ferrell wishes to travel with you. Are there any questions?” A moment of silence was the only response. The general looked around. “Good. You leave in the morning. Get packed and ready to go. Dismissed.”

*The archbishop is going with us?* Flare thought as the soldiers filed out of the general's office. He did not like the archbishop traveling with them at all. He was sure that the church would not approve of his learning magic, even the tiny amount that he knew. He would have to watch himself around the bishop.

## Chapter 22

The next morning dawned cool, but it wouldn't last long. The early summer sun would warm things up quickly, even at the altitude of the fort. Flare and the Guardians were gathered outside the eastern gate, along with the troops that would be escorting them back to Telur.

Captain Aleeus Mondell was to be in charge and Flare had only just met the man, but he seemed easy enough to follow. Unlike some officers, Captain Mondell had fought in wars before and knew how to lead. Mondell was dark with black hair and tan skin. His complexion allowed his battle scar on the right side of his neck to stand out. It had healed well, but the lightness of the scar clashed with the dark skin around it.

Captain Mondell had introduced himself to the assembled Guardians and then excused himself. Flare could tell from his tone that he would not be ordering them extensively on the way back to Telur. It seemed that Mondell, while in charge, was more of an escort.

Flare finished strapping his packs to his horse – not that he had much to carry with him. His sword was strapped to his back, and Murleen's sword was rolled up in his blankets. He had decided to keep it as a reminder of her.

His eyes fell on a small piece of black metal about one inch long pinned to his sleeve. It amazed him to see the insignia of Lieutenant on his collar and sleeves. How had this happened? He shook his head and smiled. *I just wanted to be treated the same as everyone else.* Slim chance of that happening now. Some seemed to consider him a hero, while others thought that he had to be some kind of devil to still be alive.

He dismissed those thoughts and looked around while he leaned against his horse. Most of the men were strapping the last few items to their horses in preparation for leaving. Scanning the crowd of people he noticed, once again, the archbishop. The man made him uneasy. Flare had not met him yet, but the church had quite negative views of anyone who carried a sword and practiced magic. He would have to watch himself around the bishop.

He glanced away and surprise almost caused him to lose his grip on the reigns. A man was walking toward Captain Mondell, one of the last men that Flare wanted to see. Tossing his reigns to a young kid who was standing nearby, he walked toward Captain Mondell's horse with a knot growing in his stomach. Dale Stonewood beat him there.

"Captain, I require your assistance," Dale said. Mondell looked down from where he sat on a brown gelding. Dale had a light yellow vest over a white ruffled shirt and he wore a wide-brimmed hat with a pink feather in the band. Needless to say, the clothes made him stand out amongst the more rugged clothes of the soldiers.

Mondell's forehead wrinkled as he looked down on the man. "Do I know you?"

Dale shook his head, the smile on his face never faltering. "No, but I will still require your assistance."

Mondell straightened a little at Dale's tone. It seemed almost like he was giving the captain an order. "Who are you and what do you want?" Mondell's tone was gruff.

"My name is Dale Stonewood, and I am a member of the Telurian Harlot's guild." He took the cap off of his head with his left hand and bowed low. "At your service."

"You mean you're a harlot?" Mondell asked, smiling.

The smile slipped from Dale's face. "Uh, no. I manage the girls. If you know what I mean?"

Mondell cleared his throat, "Listen, if you have a problem with one of the soldiers then take it up with the fort's chain of command. They will handle the matter."

Mondell started to turn his horse away, but Dale spoke quickly. "Sir, one of these men is stealing my property."

Flare sighed deeply. He wasn't sure what was coming, but whatever it was, he expected the hammer to fall hard.

Mondell regarded the man for several moments, then said, "That's an awful dangerous charge to be making. Do you have any proof?"

The smile was back on Dale's face. "Of course. There is a soldier named Aaron Imes, and he is stealing one of my indentured girls."

"What?" Flare exclaimed loudly. "The man's touched in the head."

Dale turned toward Flare, his grin growing larger. "Well, look who joined us. If it isn't the sergeant that tried to put me out of business."

"It's lieutenant now," Flare said.

Dale wrinkled his nose in disgust. "They actually promoted you. Must be running low on candidates."

Mondell moved his horse closer. "Mr. Stonewood, you will keep a civil tongue, or I will have yours removed."

Dale smirked and opened his mouth to say something, but he noticed the look on the captain's face and he snapped his mouth shut.

"What do you know of this?" Mondell asked Flare.

"Nothing, sir."

Mondell looked from Flare to Dale, his face an unreadable mask. After a moment, he nodded to Flare, "Go find Imes and see what this is all about."

Several minutes later, the Guardians were gathered in a small circle near the wall of the fort. A somewhat dejected-looking Aaron stood in the middle of the circle.

"I was not stealing, and how can you steal a person?"

"She's indentured to him. That means that he, in effect, owns her," Phillip snapped back.

"How can you sell someone's life for one hundred gold pieces?" Aaron snapped back at Phillip. Phillip only shifted his feet and dropped his eyes.

"Are you really bringing her with us?" Kara asked. "Is it really love, or is it just physical?"

Aaron shook his head. "No, we haven't even . . ." He trailed off, looking like he didn't want to discuss that topic after all. "Listen, I don't know if it's love, but I can't leave her in a life like that. She wants out, and I want to help her."

"Where is she?" Flare asked, his tone sounding rougher than he had intended.

Aaron locked gazes with Flare and held it, the anger in his eyes painfully obvious. "We can't send her back to him."

"Where is she?" Flare repeated again, this time his tone went flat, and several of the other Guardians caught the sound of his voice and moved closer.

Aaron dropped his eyes. "She's traveling in the supply caravan, riding in one of the wagons."

Atock nodded over Flare's shoulder. "I don't know what you're going to do, but you had better decide quickly."

Flare glanced quickly over his shoulder to see Captain Mondell and Dale walking toward them. Turning back, Flare nodded toward Enton. "Enton, go to the supply wagons and find the girl. Bring her here as quickly as possible."

Enton nodded and started off at a trot.

Aaron grabbed Flare's arm. "Flare, you can't do this."

Flare did not respond, but his eyes dropped to Aaron's hand on his arm.

Surprise overtook Aaron's face and he immediately let go of Flare's arm. Flare turned his back on Aaron, ignoring the muttered apologies.

"Well, have you found her?" Dale demanded as he marched up.

Flare pointedly ignored the man and focused his attention on Mondell, who was regarding the group with a cool gaze.

A smile touched Mondell's face as Dale blushed in anger at being ignored. "Flare, have you found her?"

Flare opened his mouth to answer, but at that moment he noticed Enton and the girl walking toward them. "Sir, here she comes now." As he spoke, he motioned behind Mondell.

A smile broke out on Dale's face at the sight of the girl.

Disgust welled up in Flare. The man was a pig, but the law was on his side. There was no way that he wanted to send anyone to be the man's slave. He sighed – there has to be a way.

Enton and Elona reached the group just then. The girl kept her eyes downward, but it was still painfully obvious that she had been crying.

"You see, my good captain, I told you that this man is a thief." Dale motioned toward Aaron as he spoke. "I insist that he be arrested."

"Sir," Flare opened his mouth to protest, but he was cut off.

"Captain Mondell, the man was caught in the act of stealing my property and I insist that he be arrested. I can prove that the girl is my slave," Dale said.

"No, she's not," Flare said, blinking as he thought about four little words that Aaron said. *One hundred gold pieces.*

Dale completely misunderstood. "Of course she is, and I can prove it."

Mondell raised an eyebrow and nodded for Flare to speak.

"Sir, the girl is an indentured servant. She is not a slave."

Dale grunted, "I assure you that there is no difference as far as the law is concerned. It takes one hundred gold pieces to buy her freedom, and I know that she does not have it."

Aaron stepped forward angrily. "She doesn't have it because you keep all her earnings. You'll never allow her to buy her freedom."

Dale smiled at Aaron, enraging him further. Phillip, sensing the mood of the two men, stepped in between them.

"Are you making a point? I assure you that it is legal." Dale seemed to be enjoying himself.

Mondell sighed, "He's right. I'm afraid that it is perfectly legal."

Dale made to move toward Elona, but Flare stopped him. "Wait!"

Reluctantly, Dale stopped and turned back, he was still smiling. "Yes?"

Now it was Flare's turn to smile. "When I said that it wasn't stealing, I meant it. Aaron did not intend to take the girl without first paying her bond price."

Dale's mouth dropped. "That ridiculous. I do not wish to sell her."

Captain Mondell smiled back at Flare before he answered Dale. "As you pointed out, she



is an indentured servant, not a slave. It makes no difference what you want, Master Stonewood, as long as she is agreeable.”

Flare turned away from the suddenly confused Dale and spoke to the group of Guardians. “Dig deep,” was all he said as he pulled out all the money he had. He handed the twelve gold pieces to Aaron. Aaron took the money, but seemed confused as to what to do with it. After several moments, the other Guardians began pulling their money purses out and digging through them. Most were gracious when they handed their money to Aaron, but Atock lightly smacked him on the back of his head as he handed his money over.

Aaron quickly counted the money. “Seventy-two gold pieces,” Aaron said quietly. He looked a bit panicky and he turned to Flare for help. “I can't come up short. I can't fail now.”

Dale smiled and stepped forward. “But you have failed. You are twenty-eight gold pieces short.” He feigned pity as he spoke, “Too bad. Perhaps I will think of that when I'm alone with her tonight.”

Aaron made as to strike the man, but Flare and Atock caught him first, pulling him away from Dale, who was now chuckling.

Phillip calmly stepped forward and pulled out a bulging purse; it was the purse that only a nobleman would have. Opening the purse he counted out twenty eight gold pieces. As he counted out the coins, he dropped them in the dirt at Dale's feet.

Despite the drama of Dale Stonewood's visit, the company was ready to move out less than half an hour after Dale stomped away, angrily counting his money. He had left shooting some pretty hateful looks at the Guardians, but the worst he saved for Flare.

In return, Flare smiled at him, silently hoping that he never saw the man again.

Mondell had ordered them to their horses, and Aaron had hurriedly led Elona back toward the wagons, while the rest of the Guardians returned to their horses.

Despite seemingly ready to leave, the company of soldiers waited in the early morning summer sun. Some men sat on their horses, but they were mostly the young soldiers. The more experienced soldiers either stood beside their horse or lounged in the shade, as they knew once they got on their horses they would be on them for quite a while.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, although in truth it had only been a half an hour or so, a command rang out from the front of the company to move forward.

Men everywhere jumped up and rushed to their horses, mounting quickly so as not to cause the company to wait.

Shouts rang out behind the men, as the townsfolk had gathered on the eastern wall began cheering the departing soldiers. They knew without a doubt they would have been dead, except for the soldiers.

Flare looked back at the fort and sighed. A chill swept over him and he shook his head. *I was angry for being sent here, because I thought that I would miss the fighting,* he thought to himself, shaking his head at the irony. Guilt and depression seemed to roll over him, *So many soldiers died there. My friends and my lover.* A lump formed in his throat, and feelings of failure threatened to engulf him, but Atock and Kara chose that moment to ride up beside him.

“Are you ready, Flare?” Kara asked.

Flare cleared his throat before he spoke, “I thought I was, but I can't get her face out of my mind,” he said, his eyes suddenly misty. “She's all I can think of . . .” His voice cracked, and a moment of uncomfortable silence ensued.

Flare again cleared his throat and turned from the fort. "All right. Let's get moving." With that, he started riding away from the fort, and this time he didn't look back.

Flare rode carefully on his horse, trying very hard not to bounce too roughly. His wounds were mostly healed and he felt fine, but he was still afraid of hurting himself. He expected to be extremely sore by the end of the day. Captain Mondell kept a slow pace, knowing that he was escorting healing soldiers and a civilian priest. They maintained a constant leisurely gait, and Flare found his spirits lifting. The sun on his face, the smell of the woods, and the feel of the softly blowing wind banished the depression he had been feeling and helped raise his spirits.

Riding on the rough stone road was enjoyable in the early summer sun, and Flare welcomed the smell of the forest. The fir trees were not what he had grown up with, but they suited him just fine, for now. Birds flew overhead, and more chirped from limbs in nearby trees. Not surprisingly, birds were the only wildlife they saw. A company of mounted soldiers and supply wagons makes a lot of noise, and the only animals that watched the men pass, watched them from well-concealed hiding places.

They rode through the day, making numerous stops. Flare hurt some from riding the horse for so long, but he didn't complain. It felt good to be doing something again.

They stopped briefly for a cold lunch around noon. The Guardians sat together and ate their food. The ride was raising the spirits of all the Guardians, not just Flare. They also seemed to be in a good mood, even Trestus. They ate and laughed together for the first time in what seemed like forever.

The grin on Trestus's face almost caused Flare to choke up again, but instead he turned away and looked directly into Kara's eyes. She too seemed moved by Trestus's laughter, but she also hid it.

Aaron moved gingerly, his leg was healed, but still sore. Enstorion also walked gingerly after dismounting from his horse. He tried not to give any indication of his soreness to his fellow Guardians, but still they noticed. It was kind of hard not to notice with the way he reached out his hands and slowly lowered himself to the ground. Several of them had to hide smiles at the look of relief on his face when his butt finally reached the ground.

They rode almost until dusk, and then Captain Mondell ordered a halt. Mondell had picked a good campsite, and judging from the look of the ground, it had been used many times before. The campsite was a small field just to the right of the road, with a stream that ran a few hundred yards back into the trees. Not that there were many trees, they had been well picked over for firewood, and stumps were all around from where trees had been chopped down.

Flare was quite stiff and sore, but he helped set up camp. The camp came together quickly, as the soldiers were well practiced at pitching the tents and building the campfires. The Guardians set up their own tents in a circle off to the side of the main company, and Flare was amazed at how things had changed. On the trip to the fort, the tents would have been up in moments, but now it took a little longer.

Flare was sore and stiff, and judging by the way Aaron was moving he was about ready to fall over. Enstorion was nowhere in sight, but no one begrudged him.

Finally, the tents were up and Heather was building a small fire in between the tents. She had dug a small hole and lined the outside with small stones. Flare smiled, Heather didn't want the fire to get out of control. There wasn't any reason for her to be so concerned here, as the trees

were thin and not close to the camp, but still she took her precautions.

Flare sighed as he moved forward to help with dinner. He had apparently gotten accustomed to having others cook his meals, and that was another thing that he would have to get unaccustomed to.

Watching Flare wobble forward to help with dinner, Aaron felt guilty as he slipped away from camp. He wanted to check on Elona. He had been assured that she would be fine traveling with the supply wagons, but he still wanted to see for himself.

He had seen her briefly at lunch, and she had still been flushed with excitement at being free of Stonewood. He smiled at the memory of her joyous look.

He wound his way through the encampment, back toward the road. The supply wagons were pulled just off of the road – the drivers were afraid to take them any farther for fear of getting stuck in the soft sand.

Aaron walked in among the tents and campfires of the other soldiers, and was surprised to see several of them nod in greeting to him. Usually, the veteran soldiers ignored the younger soldiers, at least until they had a chance to prove themselves. Did they think that the Guardians had already proven themselves? He smiled at the thought.

He rounded one of the supply wagons and stopped in his tracks. Elona stood next to another wagon, talking and laughing with one of the wagon drivers. She was doing nothing wrong, but Aaron still felt a knot growing in his stomach.

He shook his head. He had no claim on Elona, and he wasn't sure if he wanted to have a claim. Still, he didn't like her laughing with the wagon driver. Steeling himself, he squared his shoulders and walked over to the pair.

Elona, still giggling, spotted him first, and rushed to him with a smile on her face. The driver lost his smile quickly at the appearance of Aaron, and he seemed to be measuring him for a fight.

“Oh Aaron, I'm so glad you're here. I was afraid I wouldn't see you tonight.”

Aaron smiled down at her. “Why would you ever think that?” Elona wrapped her arms around him.

“Don't worry. We'll watch her real close.” The driver wore a rather unpleasant smile.

“Well, now I feel at ease,” Aaron said with a glare for the man. If anything, the smile on the man's face got even nastier.

Elona looked back over her shoulder, “This is Eli. He drives one of the supply wagons, and he has some of the funniest stories you ever heard.”

Aaron smiled at her, amazed that the girl couldn't sense the lewdness that the man exuded. Eli stepped closer, and Aaron was sure that he would have put his arm around Elona, except for the fact that she was still hugging Aaron.

“Eli and I were going to dinner. Would you like to join us?” Elona asked, still smiling at Aaron. Eli did not appear to like the suggestion at all.

Aaron ignored the man and instead he focused on Elona. “I'm sorry, but I must eat with my squad.” The smile returned to Eli's face and he took a step closer. “Elona, why don't you have dinner with us?” Aaron asked.

“Oh can I?” she asked, her face lighting at the thought. “They won't mind?”

“Not at all.” Aaron was pleased to notice that Eli's smile was completely gone.

“Wait!” Eli said, “I thought that we were going to eat together.” He took a step closer to

Elona, and Aaron tensed.

Elona didn't even look at the man; instead she kept her eyes on Aaron. "Perhaps tomorrow night, Eli."

Aaron smiled at her as he led them back through the camp. He didn't notice the venomous look from Eli that followed them.

Later that evening after dinner, Flare and the Guardians were sitting around the campfire when Archbishop Ferrell walked over to join them. The bishop was a broad shouldered man nearing his middle years. Streaks of gray lined his temples and streaked his goatee. He was fair, and had the look of a man not used to long stints in the outdoors.

"Hello. Do you mind if I join you?" the bishop asked. Without waiting for an answer, he moved toward an open spot on a log. The bishop was wearing a long, brown cloak that hid most of his other clothes from view. As he walked, polished black boots peaked out from under the cloak.

"Not at all, Bishop Ferrell. Please sit down," Phillip answered, much to Flare's displeasure. Flare was still not comfortable with the bishop's presence, fearful as he was about being discovered practicing magic.

"Thank you. Have we met before? You look familiar to me," the bishop said to Phillip.

"Yes sir, we have met once before. My father is the Duke of Atwell, and you attended a gathering at our family estate several years ago. My name is Phillip," Phillip replied, his words seemed to trip over each other as he spoke.

"Ah yes. Your father is a good man, and a loyal servant of King Darion. I am sure that he is pleased with the fact that his son is now a hero of the people." The bishop smiled at Phillip before addressing the rest of the Guardians. "You are all heroes, returning home to a hero's welcome. You should all be proud of yourselves." Another pause, this one longer than the last.

The bishop surveyed each Guardian in turn, finishing with Flare last. Flare met his gaze without flinching or looking away, and he was actually a little pleased with himself for holding the gaze. The man's eyes seemed to bore into him.

"You, Flaranthlas, are especially returning as a hero. I have found it incredible how you held the defenders together for so long against such overwhelming odds. You must be very proud of your accomplishments."

"Proud?" Flare responded. "I am proud that the attackers did not get through, but I cannot be happy with so many young men losing their lives." *And one beautiful young woman.* He quickly forced that thought down.

The bishop observed Flare for several moments, as if he had not expected the answer. When the bishop spoke, his tone seemed to have changed, perhaps a little softer.

"Well, you are right. Many soldiers died at the fort, but they made a wonderful sacrifice. They sacrificed their lives to save thousands of innocents. I know that is difficult for you to understand, but you did a wonderful job here."

Flare nodded his head. "Thank you, sir. It just doesn't feel like it sometimes."

The bishop stretched his legs out in front of him. "Well, if it makes you feel better, their souls are with the lord Adel. That is, assuming that they were a member of the church."

"You will forgive me if I don't exactly agree with you on that," Flare answered, not even considering his words. Utter silence ensued, and he looked up from the fire. The looks of shock were clearly evident on several of the Guardian's faces.

“Flare, how can you . . .,” Phillip started to say when Bishop Ferrell interrupted him.

“Let him finish, Phillip.”

“I was just saying that not everybody believes the same way. Some of the soldiers who died here may not believe in your religious beliefs,” Flare replied, starting to feel a little defensive about the way some of the Guardians had responded to his comments.

“Yes, unfortunately there are some that the church still have not reached. But each person must make a choice as to what they believe. Don't you agree, Flare?”

“I agree that each person should believe the way that they want to believe. For example, I don't pray to your god Adel at all. The elvish religion believes that we should pray to Silverti.”

The bishop leaned back and regarded Flare for a moment or two. “Flare, the church believes that Adel is the ultimate source of good in the world. The church believes that Adel is in a constant struggle against the gods of evil, of which Silverti is one. When Adel made man, he made him so that there was both evil and goodness in him, and man must choose which path he will follow. Do you not agree?”

“I agree that Adel made man with both good and evil, but the ancient scriptures tell us that Adel did not make the world.” Flare could not tell if the bishop was angry with the way this conversation was going, or if he was amused that a mere soldier had chosen to contradict him.

“All right, Flare, tell me what you believe.”

“You want me to tell you what I was taught about the formation of the world and the races?” Flare asked to see if he understood what the bishop was asking.

“Yes, just tell me what the elves believe,” the bishop replied, smiling as he spoke.

The other Guardians turned their faces to Flare, and all of a sudden, he felt uncomfortable. He also didn't like the smile on the bishop's face. It took several moments for Flare to realize the bishop was talking to him as he would a child. “Well, elves are taught that in the beginning, god the father made the world. He populated it with many spectacular things, and for a time he was happy to enjoy these things by himself. After a time, however, he got lonely. He wanted to share these things with someone else. So he made the other gods. One of the first gods he made was Silverti. Adel was also one of the first. These new gods were like his children, and he treated them as such. He instructed each of them to create life, and create life they did.”

He paused for a moment to make sure that he kept the story in the correct order that he had been taught. His eyes were on the fire as he spoke, “At first, they created plant life and then came animals. Silverti was not happy with this, and she created the elves. The elves were the first race created that could think and reason. She gave the elves a soul and put them in the forests that she loved so much. She made the elves long-lived, and gave them great wisdom.

“God the father praised Silverti for her creation of the elves, and this made the other gods jealous. They each strove to make a race of beings of their own. Thal made the goblins. He gave them great strength, and he made them capable of reproducing at a fast rate. Thal did not give them much intelligence, and he gave them his hatred of the elves.” Flare paused, before continuing, “Adel, saw the shortcomings of both species, and he tried to create a species that would have the benefits of both. He created man and gave him intelligence and wisdom, although not to the extent that Silverti gave to the elves. He also gave man strength, making him stronger than the elves but not as strong as the goblins. One other thing that he did was that he made them both good and evil. Elves, for the most part, are essence of goodness. Goblins, for the most part, are the essence of evil. Adel made humans so that they could choose. And of course, the other gods made the remaining species of life, such as giants, dwarves, and so on.”

“For a short time, there was peace in the world, but that did not last long. The goblins and the elves believe in things that are so different, that it was inevitable that fighting should break out. God the father was disgusted with the death and cruelty in the world and withdrew leaving his children in charge.” As he finished speaking, Flare raised his eyes to meet those of the bishop.

Silence engulfed the small group for several moments. Finally, the bishop spoke, “Do you actually believe all those things?”

“Well, I was not there, but that is what I was taught from my childhood,” Flare answered with just a touch of sarcasm.

“Ridiculous. To think that Adel was a god-child, and that other gods were as good or better than Adel. That whole story is rubbish,” the bishop answered, and Flare could tell that he was getting worked up.

“Perhaps, but may I ask you a question?” Flare asked, not sure if he should proceed with this conversation or not.

“What?”

“If Adel is the way to mercy and salvation, why then do people have to be a member of the church to get salvation. It seems to me that Adel provides salvation to people.”

The bishop bounded to his feet, his face seeming to turn a touch purple. “Enough! I warn you, Flare, you are bordering on blasphemy. If you continue to spread these lies, then I will be forced to take this matter to the church hierarchy for action. I would suggest that you keep these ideas to yourself.” The bishop then turned and marched away from their fire.

Once again silence engulfed the small group of soldiers.

For a moment, Flare worried about what kind of trouble the bishop might cause for him. But those feelings quickly passed. After the battles that the Guardians had been through, what could the church do to him?

“Flare! How could you say those things to the bishop?” Phillip demanded angrily, rising to his feet.

“Phillip, he asked for what I believed, and I told him. I did not say that my version was the only possible way that things could have happened.” Flare stood, spreading his hands in front of him. “In fact, I admitted that I was not there at the time of creation, and therefore I don't know exactly how things were created. He is the one that believes he has all the answers. Don't get angry with me.”

“Flare, he can cause a lot of trouble for you,” Trestus said quietly. He didn't seem to be taking sides, just warning of possible trouble. “If the church decides to pursue it, they might could get you exiled or worse. They have a tremendous amount of influence.”

The words almost made Flare laugh, in fact he found himself snickering at Trestus' words. “Exile me! Well, it wouldn't be the first time. Now would it?”

Phillip did not respond, but doubt was evident in his eyes. He did not partake in the rest of the conversation, but instead sat off by himself.

The next day the company started early. They broke camp shortly after sunrise, but Captain Mondell kept them to a leisurely pace.

Flare was sore from riding the day before, the muscles in his legs and shoulders ached from the long ride. Aaron even groaned as he climbed back onto his horse. Neither man knew how they were going to be able to ride the whole day, but they both knew to keep quiet. If Kara

heard of either man complaining of hurting, she would have them riding in the supply wagon before they knew what happened.

Aaron caught Kara watching the two of them, and he motioned for Flare to fall back toward the rear of the company.

Flare slowed his horse down to match Aaron's speed and let others pass him by. "Aaron, are you okay?"

Aaron smiled. "Yeah. I kept catching Kara watching us. She looked like she was trying to find an excuse to send us to the wagons." Nudging his horse to speed up, he matched speeds with the rest of the company of soldiers. They didn't even notice the two Guardians.

Flare rose up in his stirrups, looking over the heads of the soldiers, and then settled back down in the saddle. "I can't see Kara now, so we should have a few moments of peace."

"Knowing Kara, it won't be long before she comes looking for us."

Flare smiled. "Actually, I thought that you wanted to talk. I noticed Elona at dinner last night. She looks like a new person."

The smile slipped from Aaron's face. "I wanted to thank you for that." Looking toward Flare, he said, "I don't know what I would have done if she had been sent back with Stonewood."

"So what's going on with you two?" Flare asked. "I'm just curious, that's all, you don't have to answer if you don't want to."

Aaron looked forward again, and for a moment Flare thought he wasn't going to answer. After a moment or two of silence, he said, "I'm not sure. I couldn't stand the thought of her staying with Stonewood, but I'm not sure that I want her to stay with me. You know?" Flare grunted something non-committal and Aaron continued, "I mean last night I found her talking to a wagon driver. At first, I was jealous," he paused to scratch his chin, "but then I felt," he paused, searching for the right word, "relieved."

Flare sighed. "Just because you wanted to protect her doesn't mean that you want to love her. Is that right?" Flare asked.

"Yeah, but I still don't like the guy I saw her talking to. He had the look of a guy who was up to no good."

Flare laughed and Aaron eyed him questioningly, "Come on, Aaron. If there is any girl that should be able to judge a man, it's Elona. She's had some experience at that sort of thing."

The trip continued without the fireworks of the first night reoccurring, partially because the archbishop kept his distance from the Guardians. None of the other Guardians brought up the topic of religion, and Flare knew better than to bring it up himself.

He enjoyed the ride back to Telur. The weather was warm, and the soldiers rode slowly. The slow leisurely ride overloaded Flare's senses. The chirping of the birds and the calls of the other animals. The smells of the forest, and the occasional animal that Flare spotted reminded him of the joys of the woods. In a way, he found himself getting homesick for his elven homeland, but he quickly pushed those thoughts away. There were a couple of days where Callin and Murleen didn't enter his thoughts until at least noon. At first he felt guilty, but he knew that it was just part of healing.

Due to the slow pace, the trip from Fort Mul-dune took five weeks, whereas the trip to Fort Mul-dune had only taken twenty-five days. As they neared the city, Flare began once again to get nervous. *How will I be treated? Will this win the hearts of the people, or will this change*

*anything?* he kept wondering. And as they neared the city, another thought began to bother him,  
*Will I be blamed for the deaths of the soldiers that were under my command?*

Flare wrestled with these thoughts and concerns, right up until they rode through the city gates.



## Chapter 23

Captain Mondell had sent scouts ahead to notify the King of the approach of the soldiers. When the soldiers arrived, they were expected.

The soldiers broke camp that morning, knowing they would sleep that night in Telur. With the exception of Flare, all of the Guardians were looking forward to a hot meal and sleeping in a nice bed. Flare was still nervous about how he would be received. Would the people understand what had happened at the fort and cheer them as heroes, or would they blame the deaths of the soldiers on him?

All the Guardians were packing up gear and Flare was bent over, rolling up a bedroll, when he was surprised by a voice from behind him, "Uh, no, you won't be wearing those clothes." Straightening up, he turned to see who had spoken. The bedroll dropped from his hands at the sight of Captain Mondell standing in the middle of the Guardian's camp. Since the first day that they had set out on the march, Mondell had not visited them. Not intentionally avoiding them, he was the captain, and he maintained his distance from the soldiers, but that had just changed for some reason.

Mondell motioned to the clothes that Flare had on, and also to the clothes that the other Guardians were wearing. "You're returning as heroes, so wear something a little more appropriate, huh?" He grimaced and shook his head. "That hair makes you look like you've been fur trapping in the mountains for six months, but I guess it's too late to do anything about it now."

Flare glanced down at his clothes. They looked fine to him, just an ordinary traveling uniform. All the Guardians were wearing the same thing, except the magicians and Kara, of course, and the same rules really didn't apply to those three. And his hair? It was getting a little long, but it was just now slightly past his collar. He hadn't had much time to cut it when he was killing goblins, but he didn't think that he should tell that to the Captain.

"Uh, sir, this is all we have. Our dress uniforms are packed in the wagons."

Mondell smiled. "Flare, as an officer you will need to start planning ahead. Being prepared." Mondell half-turned and made a motion, and for the first time, Flare noticed the two soldiers standing behind him holding a trunk between them.

After breaking camp, the soldiers rode slowly toward the city. Throughout the morning, Flare noticed that the pace seemed to pick up. Smiling, he wrote it off to the excitement of the soldiers.

Atock rubbed the sweat from his forehead as he moved his horse up to Flare's left. "If we don't get there soon, I am going to die from the heat." He seemed to growl as he spoke.

Flare too was suffering in the summer heat. It hadn't been this hot in the mountains near Mul-Dune. But they were now squarely in the plains in the middle of the summer and in their dress uniforms! Flare grimaced at the uniform he had on; it looked like something he should wear to a ball. The black knee high boots were comfortable enough, but the black pants and black jacket soaked up the sun. He was sure that the grey shirt was covered in sweat stains, and it wasn't even mid-morning yet.

Derek moved closer, although still on the other side of Atock. "Yeah, if we don't get there before noon, people are going to start getting sick." He kept his voice down as he spoke. "And why are we in dress uniforms? I feel ridiculous!"

Flare smiled a mirthless smile at them. *I can't let them see that I agree with them.* "I tell you what. You two have my permission to ride to the front and inform Captain Mondell of your opinions. Although, I am sure that he won't be as patient with you two, as I am." With that, he nudged his horse faster, leaving the two men watching his back.

Derek waited until Flare was out of earshot before he spoke, and even then he spoke quietly. "What's the matter with him? Why is he so touchy?" He waited for an answer, but when none seemed forthcoming, he glanced at Atock.

Atock had a thoughtful look on his face, watching Flare. "I think that he agrees with us," he said after a moment. "But he's a lieutenant now and I think that he is trying to set an example."

Derek snorted. "An example. What for?"

Atock glanced over at Derek. "You forget that my father is a king and he too has to set an example. He has to do things for the people's sake, even if he doesn't want to."

"I can take orders just as well as any soldier," Derek protested.

Atock smiled. "Then do so, and maybe we should complain a little less while we do it."

Derek's only answer was a frown and an inaudible curse.

Finally, they neared the city, and Flare was the first to make out the people lining the walls. His elven sight was a blessing, and it wasn't long before he could pick out that people lined up at the base of the walls too. He began to reconsider his distaste for the dress uniform.

Captain Mondell called a halt about a mile from the gates. In a column of that many men, it took a few moments for the whole column to stop, but the soldiers accomplished it with only a small amount of cursing and grumbling. Mondell turned his horse and rode back from the front of the troops and stopped in front of the Guardians.

"All right. I do believe that those people are here to see you. Flare, I want you to lead us in, and I want the rest of your squad to follow you."

"Sir?" Flare asked confused, "what's going on?"

"These people are here to cheer their new heroes, and I am not one of them." He motioned toward the front of the company, "I want you to ride in front, with your squad right behind you. I will follow them and lead the soldiers."

Flare blinked in confusion.

Mondell continued, "We are entering the city through Cetila's gate; it's in the merchants section. It won't be difficult because the streets will have guards and soldiers to keep the people back, so all you have to do is ride slowly down the street. The guards will lead the way for you right to the palace, and there will be someone else at the palace to direct you." Mondell smiled at the anxiety so plainly evident on Flare's face. He spoke again this time a little quieter, "It's simple. Nothing to worry about. Surely, it can't be as bad as fighting goblins."

Taking a deep breath, Flare nodded to Mondell and moved toward the front of the troops. The rest of the Guardians arranged themselves behind him, and then he gave the command to move forward.

The people noticed the soldiers riding toward them almost immediately. They had been sitting on the grass or playing games. Merchants strolled through the crowd selling everything from pastries to toys for the kids. However, when the soldiers rode down the road toward the gates, the townspeople hopped to their feet in excitement.

Flare nervously led the way toward the gates. *Are all these people here to welcome us?*

he thought in wonder. The anxiety sprang to life again at the sheer number of people in those crowds. He resisted the urge to kick his horse into a gallop.

The crowd began shouting and clapping their hands. They called out the names of the Guardians. Cries of victory and Telur could also be heard rolling down over them. Flare was extremely surprised and moved that so many of the people called his name.

Flare slowly led the soldiers through the crowd of people. The people moved out of the road to let the soldiers pass, sometimes pulling young children out of the way of the horses.

As Flare rode through the people, some of them reached up and touched him. They patted his leg, or touched him on the lower part of his back.

More than one young woman touched Flare and spoke to him. Some of the ladies shouted where they lived, and others asked him to meet them. Some even said things that made him blush furiously. Still others simply said, "Thank you."

As they neared the gates, the guards made a show of opening the gates and stepping to the side to allow the soldiers to pass. The guards saluted as the Guardians slowly passed them. The smiles on the faces of the people and the festive mood began to calm Flare down, hope sprang up in him. This was a hero's welcome.

He had thought that the crowd outside the gates had been large, but inside there was an enormous amount of people. So many people were waiting, that soldiers and guards had been stationed there to keep them out of the road, but even so they were having a hard time.

Flare was not sure where he was supposed to go, but the soldiers and the people only allowed for one choice, so they followed the path created by the soldiers.

He continued to ride slowly, taking in all the commotion that was going on around him. The spectators could not touch Flare the way the crowds outside the gates had been able to, but they were prepared. The spectators threw flowers at the Guardians, and some women through bits of clothes that seemed almost an invitation. The road quickly became covered with flowers.

Banners hung from the buildings along the street. The banners proclaimed the Guardians as heroes and likened them to heroes from ages past. Many actually had the names of the Guardian's written on them. He was amazed at the sight of his name hanging from so many buildings.

They rode for some time, and the crowds actually increased as the Guardians neared the center of the city. People leaned out windows and from balconies to get a sight of the newest heroes. Soon, the tops of the buildings were also full of crowds. The Guardians were directed to an area that was on the palace grounds, where a huge stage had been erected on a wide lawn of the palace. The wooden stage had the flag of Telur draped across the front.

The crowds were gathered around an open area in front of the stage. On the stage, Flare could see people sitting down. He guessed that there were twenty-to-thirty people on the stage.

Flare rode his horse into the open area immediately in front of the stage. He dismounted his horse, along with the other Guardians. Captain Mondell and the other soldiers had disappeared somewhere along the ride in from the gates. Stable boys stepped forward and led the Guardians' horses away for them, the whole time smiling.

Flare looked first at his fellow Guardians, and then up to the stage. There was only one person standing on the stage, and Flare blinked when he recognized King Darion. He bowed to the king, who stepped up to a small podium that Flare had not noticed before.

"Guardians, welcome!" The king shouted loudly, so that the crowd could hear. Their response was an overwhelming cheer that hurt Flare's ears.

It took several moments before the crowd quieted down.

“On behalf of myself and the people of Telur, let me express to you the overwhelming admiration of the feat you performed at Fort Mul-Dune.” Once again, the crowd roared its approval, and King Darion seemed all too happy to let them continue.

Various chants broke out in the crowd, the chants were started by small groups and there seemed to be chants for all the different Guardians at one time or another. The cheering and the chants soon quieted down.

Flare was amazed at the reaction of the crowd. He had hoped for a good reception, but he had never dared to envision such a welcome. The looks on his friends' faces showed that they too were awed.

“We owe you a debt that can never be repaid,” King Darion continued. “You have saved countless lives that would have been lost if the armies had broken through the fort's defenses. Possibly, you have saved the very city of Telur itself. For if the armies had broken through, there was nothing to stand in their way. Your bravery and courage in the face of staggering odds have made you heroes of Telur.”

Once again King Darion had to pause, as the crowds voiced their approval of their new heroes.

Flare felt his eyes get misty and he started to get a little choked up as the crowd poured out their support for him and his squad. He glanced at the other Guardians, and saw that they were as overcome with emotions as he was. Trestus even had tears running down his face.

“Today, I have ordered that your names and the names of your fallen comrades be added to the list that is recorded on the wall of heroes. It will, for all time, list you as heroes to be remembered. I also have decided that you will each receive a reward. I am appointing each of you into the Order of the Golden Dagger, the highest reward that I have to offer you.”

Atock leaned over to Flare and whispered, “What is the Order of the Golden Dagger?”

“I don't know, but it sounds impressive, doesn't it?” Flare whispered back, fighting a smile.

“Do you think that it will include more money?” Atock asked, grinning.

Before Flare could retort, Phillip nudged them to be quiet.

“Tomorrow night, you will be my special guests at a dinner banquet, where I will present you with your reward.” King Darion paused yet again, as the crowd cheered their support. “I have proclaimed today as a holiday. Today will be a day of feasting, games, and fun. People of Telur, join me in welcoming home our heroes!”

The Guardians spent the rest of the day enjoying some of the best food they had enjoyed in weeks. It was a worn-out group of soldiers that retired to the special rooms prepared for them late in the evening.

After spending several weeks riding a horse and sleeping on the ground, Flare thought that the bed he slept in was the greatest thing he had ever felt. He was quite embarrassed when he woke up and saw the sun almost to midday, but he quickly dressed and went in search of his fellow Guardians. He found them in the dining hall. They were just finishing up their food, when he sat down.

“Well, look who decided to join us,” Phillip said, smiling. “I was beginning to wonder if you hadn't found some young serving girl to keep you in bed this morning.”

“Phillip, leave Flare alone,” Kara interjected. “His body is still healing, and I don't

imagine that the trip helped in the least. I personally didn't think that his health was ready for the trip to begin with, but I was overruled."

"If he did have a serving girl in his bed this morning, then perhaps that is exactly what he was doing, nursing," Enton said, grinning.

Kara flushed a bright red and scowled at Enton, as the rest of the squad broke out into laughter.

Flare tried to ignore Kara. She almost seemed to be clucking like a mother hen. Instead, he focused his attention on the plate of food, and he suddenly seemed to be ravenous.

He was nearly through eating, when Atock asked, "What is the Order of the Golden Dagger?"

Phillip seemed taken aback by the question. "You mean that you have never heard of the Order of the Golden Dagger?" He laughed briefly. "You have been selected for our highest military honor, and you don't even know it." He shook his head. "The Order of the Golden Dagger is a military award that is reserved for a select few. I don't think that anybody has received it in my lifetime. I never thought I would receive it, but then again, I didn't think that my name would be on the wall of heroes either."

"So I will repeat my question from last night. This reward gives us more money?" Atock asked.

Several of the Guardians laughed, but Phillip didn't think it was funny. His face darkened, and he opened his mouth to respond, but he was interrupted by a young page running up to the table, effectively ending the discussion.

"Excuse me, sirs, but I was instructed to relay a message to you," the young boy said, somewhat out of breath.

The thought crossed Flare's mind that some of the soldiers who had been under his command at the fort were barely older than this young boy. Visions of the dead soldiers floated through his mind, but he quickly pushed those thoughts aside. For just a second, it bothered him that it was so easy to push them away. "What's the message?" he asked.

"You are expected at the royal tailor's quarters in half an hour. You are to be fitted for a dress uniform for the banquet tonight."

Flare rose from the table, pushing back his chair and picking up the plate and glass that he had used. "Fine. I'm on my way now."

"Yes, sir. One more thing, sir. The king has requested you to see him personally an hour before the banquet tonight. You are expected at the king's study."

He was somewhat taken back. "The king wants to see me by myself?"

"Yes, sir," the page answered before he turned and disappeared.

Several of the Guardians raised their eyebrows at that, but several others seemed relieved that Flare was the only one to visit the king.

After being fitted for his dress uniform, Flare had spent the rest of the day nervously waiting to see the king. *He probably just wants to congratulate me again*, he thought, but somehow that just didn't seem right. He was as nervous as he could be, and his stomach was starting to hurt him. *I survived the goblins, but my nerves are going to kill me.*

At the appointed hour, Flare was in the anteroom waiting to see the king. A guard was stationed outside the door to the king's study, and he watched everybody closely. Unlike most guard duties, this was not one to be taken lightly.

Flare announced himself to the king's secretary, a beautiful young lady with long brown hair and a gorgeous smile. She directed him to have a seat in one of the overstuffed chairs.

Sitting there, he would have expected to be overcome with nerves, but they didn't seem to be bothering him that much. Perhaps, the pretty secretary that his eyes kept being drawn to was the reason. A couple of times, his looks met hers and she smiled back at him, seeming to warm him down to his toes. Although that caused feelings of guilt as well, here he was, smiling at a pretty girl so soon after Murleen's death.

About twenty minutes later, the door opened and a small group of nobles left the study. The guard snapped to attention as the nobles walked by, and even Flare came to attention. The nobles didn't even notice him as they walked passed, and Flare didn't mind one bit.

After the nobles were gone, the king's secretary got up and went into the study. Flare was interested to see that she was as pretty standing as she was sitting. She returned quickly and summoned him, "The king will see you now."

Flare entered the study and took in the surroundings. The study had not changed at all since he had first come here with Henotairin so long ago.

King Darion was sitting down at his desk, apparently going over some papers. He maintained an appropriate military stance while he waited on the king. The king quickly put away the papers and rose to greet him.

"Hello, Flare," the king said and walked around the desk. Then noticing how Flare was standing at attention, he said, "Enough of that. Relax. This is an informal meeting between you and me."

Flare relaxed his stance somewhat, but he was still nervous, and standing at attention kept his mind off his weak knees.

"How are you feeling? Are your injuries healed?" the king asked.

"I'm feeling fine, sir," Flare replied. Then he added with a smile, "Although I still don't think that I will be ready to return to duty for several weeks."

The king returned the good-natured smile. "Well, I don't think that you will be going back to service quite yet. I think that we might give you several months to completely heal, especially given the nature of your injuries."

*Surely he didn't call me here to discuss my injuries,* Flare thought. Things were going really good, but he patiently waited for the hammer to fall.

As if reading Flare's thoughts, King Darion spoke, "Flare, have a seat and let's discuss the reason that I summoned you."

King Darion sat down on a chair that was along the wall to Flare's left. Flare sat at a respectful distance from the king on a less than comfortable couch.

"Flare, the reason that I summoned you here is that I wanted to discuss with you an announcement that I will be making at the banquet tonight."

Flare's heart beat faster at the king's words. *More recognition besides the promotion that General Andatell gave me?* he thought.

The king took a deep breath before continuing, "Flare, this isn't easy to say, but this is something that you need to know. At the banquet tonight, I will announce the name of your father."

The king's words hit Flare like a slap across the face. For a moment, he could only sit there with his mouth hanging open and stare at the king. After a stunned moment, Flare bounded to his feet. "You knew his name all this time! How could you protect such a man?" he demanded

angrily.

The king also stood up. He raised his hands in a soothing manner. "Calm down, and let me explain. Flare, you were told what your grandfather wanted to believe. I was there, and the story that became publicly known is not the truth. Things are not always as they seem. Your mother was not raped, but instead she fell in love with a young human. She followed her heart's desire, and you are the result of that love, and your grandfather could not accept it."

The king paused a moment, as if the story was bringing up an old pain. "He was unhappy with your mother and her apparent interest in human men. He ordered her not to speak with the human delegation any more. After that, she told your father that they could no longer be with each other." He paused again, as if not liking the rest of the story, "She told your father the story that she planned to tell King Feilolas. Needless to say, your father did not agree, but he honored her wishes. That is how that story was spread. But it's not the truth. You must remember that I was there, Flare."

*Things are not always as they seem.* Something about what the king's statement bothered him, but he couldn't quite figure it out. Things seemed to be happening awful fast, and he seemed a little dizzy.

"If you were there and you know these things, then surely others also know them. Why haven't I heard rumors like this before?" Flare asked. Something was gnawing at the back of his mind. The king's words had reminded him of something, but he couldn't think of what. Were those the same words his mother had used when he left Solistine?

"Nobody else alive in this city know of the things that I speak. The only other person who knew was my father," the king said, returning to his seat behind the desk. "My father was livid when I returned from the elven city."

His anger disappeared and was replaced by something new; fear. Flare was afraid that he was starting to understand. "Why was your father mad at you?" he asked quietly, already fearing the answer.

"Flare, your mother and I were young when we fell in love . . ."

The king's words were a blow to Flare, and he seemed to cringe away from them. All the emotions of a lifetime threatened to overwhelm him. In a strange sort of way, Flare seemed detached from the scene. He heard the king speaking, but the words sounded unusual, like he was in a tunnel and cotton was stuck in his ears. He could feel his heart pounding, and he was afraid that he might be sick.

The king continued, "We didn't know what we were doing, and we foolishly thought that King Feilolas would allow us to marry." The king continued to talk, but he no longer seemed to be aware of Flare's presence. Instead, he appeared to be remembering the events for the first time in a long time.

He stared without seeing at a spot on the floor. "King Feilolas was so angry when Aliston suggested to him that a human might make a good husband that he slapped her. She broke off our relationship and asked me to leave."

King Darion's eyes had that far away look to them and his voice seemed sad. "I did as she asked, and it wasn't for months that the news reached us in Telur that she was pregnant, the father a human rapist." He seemed to spit the word "rapist", making it sound like a curse.

King Darion took a deep breath and drew himself back to the present.

It seemed to Flare that the bad memories had shaken King Darion. He seemed more reflective and less in control than usual.

With an effort, King Darion forced himself to focus on the matters at hand. “Flare, I never meant to hurt anyone, your mother least of all. We were young and foolish, and we made a mistake. But that mistake was blown way out of proportion. Your mother sacrificed a lot for me and for countless young elves and humans who would have died in the war between our two kingdoms.”

A new thought occurred to Flare, a thought that made him nervous. “If you announce that you are my father, then you are placing my mother in danger! You cannot do that!”

“Flare! Calm down,” the king said in a soothing manner. “I have no intention of putting your mother at risk. I cannot openly admit to being your father without starting a war with the elves. But what I can do is reward you for your actions and I can try to right the 'wrong' that was done to your mother by adopting you as my own son. The people will believe that I am doing this to correct the supposed wrong. They will not know that I am actually your father. I can claim you without endangering your mother, or causing a war between the humans and the elves.”

The king leaned back and crossed his arms across his chest. He smiled rather smugly. “See, I have thought it through. What do you think?”

Flare walked over to stand in front of the king. He locked gazes . . . his *father* . . . and said, “It's shameful. A king cannot publicly claim his own son. It's disgraceful that a man would let his son spend thirty years thinking that he had no father.”

The smugness fell away from King Darion's face. “I'm sorry, Flare. This is the best that I can do.” He stretched out his hands, imploring. “This will save lives. There will be no war, but at the same time, I can claim you as a son.”

Flare turned away and started toward the door. “Then this will have to do,” he managed to say as he left the room, trying desperately hard not to show the pain he felt.



## Chapter 24

Flare waited with the rest of the Guardians for the banquet to begin. The Guardians, wearing their newly tailored dress uniforms, stood in line in front of a make shift stage that was set at one end of a large ballroom. The dress uniforms were black pants with a gold stripe down the side, black boots, a gray shirt, and a black jacket with gold piping. Despite his dislike of dress uniforms, he had to admit these were comfortable. The tailors had done an excellent job.

The Guardians stood facing away from the stage toward the spectators. The banquet was scheduled to start shortly, and some people were starting to filter in. Flare wasn't nervous; instead, he felt numbed. He dreaded the king's announcement as well as the people's reaction. His knees seemed weak, and he steeled them in place.

Several of the other Guardians noticed that he was distracted, but remained quiet. Nobles and high-ranking military officials entered the ballroom in reverse order of importance. The lesser officials entered and found their assigned tables in the back of the room. The more important nobles and officials were announced before they entered, and they were then escorted to their assigned tables. When Duke Angaria was escorted to the front of the room, he shot a look of pure poison in the direction of Flare, but it went completely unnoticed.

Shortly after the room was full, one of the guards blew a short note on a horn. A different guard stepped forward and said, "All hail King Darion!"

King Darion was led into the ballroom by a soldier carrying the Telurian flag. The king walked behind the soldier to the stage, where the soldier put the flag in its holder. The king then faced the crowd.

As planned, Flare gave the order, "Guardians, about face." As one, the Guardians turned around to face the stage.

King Darion took a deep breath before speaking, "We are meeting here tonight to celebrate and reward Telur's newest heroes. These soldiers before me are the newest members to Telur's Order of the Golden Dagger. This reward dates back thousands of years and is one of the highest rewards that I can bestow on you." The king paused, smiling. "Currently, there are only three living members, but tonight that number will be increased quite a bit."

"Before I begin, however, I want to take a minute to remember those Guardians who did not survive the battle. Guardian Callin Obiah and Guardian Murleen Plurin. They will be awarded the Golden Dagger posthumously, and their sacrifices will be remembered a thousand years from now."

The king paused briefly to let the assembly consider his words. "We remember our honored dead, but we do not dwell in the past. Tonight we are here to celebrate the living. Tonight we are here to honor our newest heroes." At the king's words, a cheer went up from the crowd. The king smiled again, "As I call your name, come forward to receive your reward."

"Aaron Imes, son of Michael Imes."

At the calling of his name, Aaron marched up to stand in front of and facing King Darion.

"Your father Michael was a Guardian who died as a hero. He would be proud of the way that you handled yourself." The king pinned a small battle medal to commemorate the battle of Fort Mul-Dune. He then attached a small golden dagger to Aaron's jacket. The dagger looked impressive against the black uniform. Once the dagger was attached, King Darion looked him

over, and then dismissed him. The crowd roared as he returned, smiling, to his place in front of the dais.

“Mikela Shaltin of the Doe-Rushkin academy.” Mikela advanced to stand in front of the king. “Guardian, you have honored your academy with your dedication and perseverance.” Mikela waited patiently as the awards were pinned on her uniform. As she returned to her position, the crowd cheered its approval as loudly for her as it had for Aaron.

“Enton Dale of the Yurkut tribe.”

Enton marched up to stand in front of the king. His nervousness caused him to be somewhat stiff in his movements. He walked slowly, seemingly afraid that he was about to trip over his own feet.

“Guardian, your tribe are loyal subjects who have served Telur with honor, but your service has distinguished you even among them.” He towered over the king, as the king pinned the awards on his uniform. Once again, the crowd shouted its approval.

“Trestus Obiah.”

Trestus moved to stand in front of the king.

“Guardian, you have served with honor, and the sacrifice you have made is unimaginable. I salute you.” The crowd was silent at the king pinned the awards on to Trestus' uniform. As silent as the crowd had been, they were even louder cheering for Trestus as he returned to his position, as he walked, several tears ran down his cheeks.

“Phillip Connell of the noble house Atwell.”

Phillip marched to stand in front of the king, clearly feeling comfortable in front of the crowd.

“Guardian, you have honored your noble family and pleased your king.” The crowd didn't wait until the awards were pinned on Phillip's uniform before they started cheering. Their cheers were even louder for Phillip than they had been for any other. Perhaps because he was a noble, one of their own?

“Enstorion.”

Of all the Guardians that were being honored tonight, Enstorion was the one that very little was known about. It appeared that even the king didn't know enough to name his family.

“In the thick of the battle, without a thought for your own safety, you risked your life to save your comrades and Fort Mul-dune.” The cheering was somewhat subdued, since the crowds didn't know much about the strange elven mage.

“Derek Aldanon of the merchant house Danan.”

Derek marched to stand in front of the king.

“Guardian, you have honored the merchant house Danan and all Telur.” The crowd cheered for Derek as he returned to his post.

Flare got more nervous as the Guardians received their awards. Each Guardian that received their award brought his turn that much closer.

“Prince Del-Atock A'bamani of Entucca.”

Atock moved in front of the king.

“Your people are known for their fierceness, and you are no exception. Your father King Del-Otin should be proud of your accomplishments.” The cheering was deafening as Atock returned to his post.

“Heather Elt of the druid monastery of Garath Al-Denari.”

Heather proceeded to stand in front of the king.

“Of the many deeds of Valor that were performed at the battle of Fort Mul-dune, yours will be remembered as the deed that raised the alarm and brought in reinforcements. Every survivor of the battle owes their life to you.” The crowd roared its approval as she returned to her original position.

“Kara Elba, priestess of Adel.”

Kara advanced to stand in front of the king.

“Your order should be honored at the selfless service you gave to your fellow soldiers. Many of them owe their lives to you.” The crowd cheered loudly as she returned to her place in line.

Flare's nerves flared up as he waited for the king to call out his name. He felt sick to his stomach, but he steeled himself for the inevitable.

“Prince Flaranthlas of the elven kingdom of Solistine,” the king announced.

Flare marched up and stood in front of the king. He hoped that nobody noticed his shakiness as he walked. He had noticed his fellow Guardians walking either shakily or stiff as they approached the stage, so he assumed that they also noticed his wobbling. He came to a stop in front of the king.

“Flare, you led the defense of Fort Mul-dune. You overcame overwhelming odds and saved countless lives. General Andatell has already partially rewarded you by promoting you on the field of battle to Lieutenant. It was a move that I completely approve of, but of course I get to make you a member of the Order of the Golden Dagger.”

Flare was feeling worse, and he hoped that he would not get sick. Getting sick in the middle of an award ceremony would only humiliate him.

The king pinned the awards on him before continuing, “Flare, please turn around and face the crowd with me.”

Flare turned around and faced the crowd and his fellow Guardians as they cheered. He focused on Trestus, instead of looking into the faces of the nobles. Some of the nobles were cheering for him, but Flare didn't trust them – too many of them were like Duke Angaria.

The king stepped down beside him and put his arm around Flare's shoulders. The king held up his hand to silence the crowd before continuing, “Prince Flaranthlas is a Telurian hero, and I want to show him the appreciation of the Telurian people.”

Flare took a deep breath. Hoping against hope that the king had changed his mind; he did not want the king to continue with his plan.

“Many of you are aware of the wrong done by Flare's human father. Tonight, I wish to in some small way to try and correct the wrong. I have decided that I will personally adopt Flare as one of my own sons.”

A gasp of surprise erupted from the crowd, followed quickly by scattered mutterings. Flare could see the surprise on the faces of his friends, but he would not look at the nobles.

King Darion held up his hand for silence. “I have given this a lot of thought, and I have decided that I will take responsibility for Flare. He will be my youngest son, with all the rights and responsibilities that entails. As you know, I have four sons of my own blood. Flare will follow them in line of succession to the throne. He will be fifth in line to the throne of Telur.”

Silence followed the king's announcement. Flare finally raised his eyes off the other Guardians. Duke Angaria's look of hatred and despise had been replaced with a look of pure amazement. That look of amazement almost made it worth it. Apparently, Angaria had not known about this until just now.

Kara stood talking to Mikela and Heather, just to one side of the main banquet table. All of the Guardians were tired of accepting congratulations, but it had been exceptionally difficult for these three. The nobles had seemed gracious, but the men seemed to look down on them, as if women shouldn't be fighting. Or perhaps, it was the fact that these women were more decorated than any of the nobles in the room.

For all the men looking down their noses at them, the ladies were far worse. Some had ignored them, even when introduced. Others had glanced at them and then raising their chins, turned and walked the other way.

Kara and Mikela were reserved and trying hard to ignore the nobility, but Heather was furious. She had seemed on the verge of slapping several of the ladies, but Kara had quickly intervened and pulled her to a different group of people. Mikela had joined them, and she and Kara kept a close eye on Heather.

"Fools!" Heather hissed. "If not for us they might be dead now, but do they thank us? No! They treat us like peasants!" She folded her arms across her chest. "I should have let the goblins have them, and good riddance!"

Kara smiled reassuringly and placed a hand on Heather's shoulder. "If you had, then the rest of us would be dead too." It was a simple statement and totally true, but it did seem to dull the other woman's anger, at least a little bit.

Mikela nodded over toward a rather large group of women. A group that had Phillip at its center. "Well, they sure seem to like him." She said raising a glass of wine to her lips.

Heather snorted. "Of course they do! He's one of their own, part of their little inbred group." Mikela nearly choked on the wine and even Kara smiled.

Heather shook her head. "I feel sorry for Flare. I have a feeling that he will be spending a lot of time with these miserable people."

Mikela, who had recovered from coughing on the wine, shot Heather a nasty look. Had Heather timed her words for when she was drinking the wine? "It doesn't much seem like a reward. Does it?"

Kara glanced back and forth between the two women. "Perhaps it's even worse than you know." The two women turned their gazes squarely on her, and she shrugged under their scrutiny. "It's probably nothing, but have either of you heard of the Kelcer prophecy?" Heather and Mikela looked at each other before shaking their heads. "It's an old prophecy, written by a madman, but the church believes in it." She looked toward the stage, the stage where Flare had just been 'adopted' by King Darion. "I guess the king doesn't believe in it though."

"What's that got to do with Flare?" Mikela asked. The church wasn't one of her favorite things, but she kept that to herself. It wasn't safe to openly talk bad about the church, and it was even worse when a magician did it.

All three women glanced at Derek as he joined them, "It's probably nothing. It's just an old prophecy about how a half-elf descended from both royal lines will restore the Dragon Order." Kara said, answering Mikela's question.

"Oh, you must be talking about Kelcer." Derek said.

"You've heard of it?" Heather asked surprised. The looks on the faces of the other two women reflected their amazement as well.

Derek snorted. "Regardless of whatever you may believe, I do read now and then." He paused a moment, and trying to not look too embarrassed he added, "And besides, my mother is a

big supporter of the church.”

Mikela ignored Derek. “Kara, you don't believe that about Flare. Do you? I mean him restoring the Dragon Order.”

“Of course not!” Kara answered quickly and loudly. Then she lowered her voice, “But there are plenty who will, both in the church and outside it. That's the problem.”

Derek let out a low whistle. “There's nothing worse than a zealot who thinks he's right.”

Kara cocked an eyebrow. “By zealot, are you referring to the church?”

Derek gulped and quickly said in a stumbling voice, “Of course not. I was merely referring to those who would falsely accuse Flare of such things.” His eyes looked beyond them, “Oh, It looks like Aaron would like to speak with me.”

Mikela hid her smile in the glass of wine, while Derek hastily made his escape from Kara.

Flare stood in a small group of nobles. He had been introduced to each of them in turn, but he couldn't remember any of their names for anything. The problem was that as soon as one noble was introduced to him, two more stepped up beside the first. Their names were all running together, and he finally just quit listening. Now, he just smiled and pretended to listen. Besides, it was fairly easy to fool the nobles. All it took was to call them “my lord” or “my lady”, and they never knew he couldn't remember their name.

Some of the nobles seemed to fall all over themselves to be introduced to him, while the rest had left the room as soon as it was safe for them to go. Regardless of which type he was speaking to, they all seemed to look down their noses at him, treating him like they would a child. The women were just as bad, and seemed to enjoy batting their eyelashes at him. Those young women would only invite more trouble, but then again Enton always said that all women invited trouble one way or another. Flare stayed as long he thought he should, actually a little less, and then found an excuse to leave.

Excusing himself as soon as he thought it was appropriate, he retreated to his room to lie down, hoping to find some quiet. Shortly after he entered the room, a knock came at the door. Wearily, he climbed from the bed and opened the door partway to see who was there. It was Enton and Atock. Opening the door all the way, he let them in.

“Flare, are you okay?” Enton asked.

“I'm fine. I was just dreading the king's speech,” he said, sitting down on the bed.

Atock was not surprised. “So you knew before the ceremony?”

“Yes, he told me shortly before. I was dreading the announcement, though. I know that most of the nobility would rather see me gone. Especially now.” Flare lay back on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

A brief moment of silence followed, just long enough for Atock and Enton to share worried glances. Finally, Enton spoke up, “So what now, Flare?”

“I'm not sure. King Darion spoke to me after the award ceremony, and he wants me to come see him tomorrow morning.” He put his hands over his head. “I'm not sure what to expect, but I think things just got a whole lot worse for me.”

The man hurried through the streets of Telur. He wore a long cloak with the hood pulled up to hide his face. He had made this same trip many times before, but this was the first time he ever rushed, completely ignoring the people on the streets. Not that many people were out. Most

people were still celebrating the heroes from Mul-Dune. The inns and pubs were packed to overflowing. Several times, the man realized he was almost running, and forced himself to slow down.

He finally reached his destination and entered the side door. He quickly climbed the stairs and entered the small room at the top. He pulled up surprised. Five chairs were in the room, and they were already filled, four more cloaked figures stood along the wall. Never before had there been more than five people at this meeting.

"Come in. Close the door," a voice said. He couldn't tell who had spoken, but he did as he had been bidden.

He closed the door and moved to the center of the room.

It was as if his arrival was a signal, and voices burst out.

"How could we have been so wrong?"

"He's now the heir to both thrones. Telur's and Solistine."

"He must be the one that Kelcer spoke of."

The figure in the middle chair raised his hand for silence. It took several moments, but finally the voices quieted down.

"Panicking will not help." The cloaked figure lowered his hand again. His voice was deep and familiar. "We all agreed that he could not be the one. So, how could we be so wrong?"

The man, who had been the last to enter the room, answered, "I do not think we were. I still believe that Flaranthlas is a forerunner of the one."

"How can that be?" the deep voice asked. "He's now the heir to two thrones, just as Kelcer prophesied."

The man nodded. "Yes, he is. But, he was born under the sign of the tree, not the prince. Kelcer was quite specific that the one would be born under the sign of the prince. It's one of the few things that he left no room for interpretation."

"Could we be wrong about when he was born?" the deep voice asked.

"No," an older woman's voice answered. "Our spies in Solistine have confirmed his birth. There is no way that we can be wrong."

"So what do we do?" the deep voice asked.

The man in the middle of the room answered, "The only thing we can do is wait and see. I am sure that another will follow. Flaranthlas cannot be the one."

After a moment, the man in the middle chair nodded. "As you say. I hope you're right."

Zalustus groggily opened his eyes. Actually, he realized, he could only see out of his left eye. His right eye was bandaged, as was most of his face. He turned his head, looking around the small room. Only then did he realize that he was not alone. Two other men sat in chairs watching him. He recognized both of them. Anton, his father's councilor, was to his right. Zalustus's father King Zarum, sat to his left.

"Nice of you to join us," Zarum said, although there wasn't a trace of happiness about him.

"Father?" Zalustus croaked. His throat was awfully dry.

Zarum leaned closer to Zalustus's bed. "I am disappointed in you, boy." The words sent a chill down Zalustus's spine. "I sent you to conquer Mul-Dune, but you failed miserably. And almost got yourself killed in the process."

"I'm sorry, Father. I'm not sure how we lost the fort. It simply doesn't make sense."

“Flaranthlas might could be called the conqueror of Mul-Dune. That is a title that I sent you to claim.”

Zalustus lowered his eyes, “I'm sorry, Father. I will do better. I promise.”

“Better? I don't know how to fix this. Kelcer said the one who restored the Dragon Order would be the conqueror of Mul-Dune. Now, he's the conqueror of Mul-Dune. He's the heir to both thrones. We are way behind.”

“Perhaps,” Anton said. It was the first time he had spoken since Zalustus had awakened. “But there are many pieces to Kelcer and Flaranthlas could fulfill every one of them. But as long as Zalustus can kill him before the restoration of the Dragon Order, then we win.”

Zarum sighed. “I have doubts.”

Anton leaned forward in his chair. “I don't. It seems obvious to me that because both Flaranthlas and Zalustus were critically injured that the gods intervened to save them. They cannot both fail. There is still time for Zalustus to win.”

Zarum nodded. “So what now?”

Anton smiled, “Isn't it obvious? Flaranthlas must go for Ossendar next. He must claim the sword of Osturlius.”

THE END