

PORTALS *of* INFINITY

Book Three: Of Temples and Trials

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One

(Riverhead – Hillshire)

I crouched down low, turned, and signaled to Sergeant Chaucer who was following behind me. He then turned and signaled to the rest of his men further back. We were up in the hills about a two-day ride from Riverhead, some bandits had set up a camp here and from what I'd seen so far they weren't just some small band. Duke Lias was of the belief that they were being funded by the Atolians to the south and had decided to mount a rather large expedition to wipe them out.

As Aryanna still had not recruited a new champion, Fel had loaned me to her for this little adventure. I wasn't exactly crazy about it; I couldn't go in my champion form, as it would lead to too many questions and cause too many problems. Though I suspect the duke specifically ordering Captain Bersheres to make me a part of the forces and to follow any orders I gave probably already was doing some of that.

Thankfully, only the captain knew about that. Everyone here thought I was just along to help and I was more than happy to encourage that belief. But I'd still gotten some sidelong glances from Sergeant Chaucer, and as he was now my brother-in-law after finally marrying Darlene's sister, dodging questions from him would be a lot more problematic. Especially after the captain telling him to follow *my* orders, when we set off on this little reconnaissance-in-force.

I motioned for Chaucer to join me as I readied my bow. He got his own out and I pointed to the two sentries. He nodded and we both nocked arrows, then I took the one on the right as he took the one on the left.

"Show off," I grumbled at him. He'd taken his sentry through the eye. I'd gone for the safer target of the heart.

"Never seen a bandit camp with dual sentries before," he whispered.

"That's because they're really not bandits," I whispered back.

"That was what I meant, Will," he replied while smiling at me, "an'na suspect we'll be seein' a few more before we make the camp."

I nodded and we both continued on slower from this point. He signaled his men to stay here while we scouted ahead.

"I notice the captain seems to be rather interested in yer opinions a lot of late," Sergeant Chaucer said softly as we slowly moved through the trees and

the brush well off the trail.

“Really? I hadn’t noticed,” I lied.

“Course, yer being here doing this, well that’s kinda out of the usual as well I’d say. Wouldn’t ye?”

I stopped for a moment and checked our area, I didn’t see anybody, and then turned to look at Chaucer. What the hell did I tell him? That the king told the duke to send me? I’m sure that would go over well. Yeah, when we first met some three plus years ago, I’d just been a normal guy. Well, as normal as anyone who has the ability to travel the portals that link the all the different realities together, can be.

Of course, I’d already attracted the attention of the local goddess. Not that I’d known about that until almost a year later, when I’d been hired by a god to lead his army and save his people. Not exactly willingly hired on of course, but the perks were nice so I wasn’t complaining.

“The duke wanted Aryanna’s champion sent here to help with this. She is, however, unavailable. So they asked me if I’d help.”

“You’re hardly a champion, Will, why would they be asking you?”

I sighed. This really wasn’t the place for a conversation like this, but he was a good friend and I couldn’t afford to lose his trust right now.

“You know I follow a different god than your goddess, and that they’re allies, right?”

He nodded to that.

“Well when I first came here, I was looking to settle down and raise a family. Well, my god had certain other ideas. I have certain skills now, which come from him, and all those times I’m not here? I’m off doing what he tells me to.

“The church doesn’t think these are bandits, the duke doesn’t think these are bandits, hell, I bet the king even knows about this and thinks the same thing. So I got loaned out.”

I looked at him, it wasn’t exactly the truth, but it wasn’t really all that far from it.

“Ye know, Will, this is hardly the time and place to be telling of such tales.” Sergeant Chaucer said, looking at me sideways.

“You asked,” I grumbled at him. “Darlene’s already figured it out; I thought maybe you might have had a few suspicions yourself.”

“If yer so important, why are you here?”

“Because I love Darlene, so I spend what time I can here.” I motioned

ahead, "I think they're up just past that big oak."

He nodded a bit warily and we both moved forward again, without talking.

Sure enough, there were another two sentries there; however these two weren't paying as much attention as the first two. We took out both of them with our bows rather easily.

We crawled up the last hundred yards and then looked over the small ridgeline into the camp. I figured there were about a hundred men in there; they seemed to be pretty well set up.

"Okay, you go get the men, have them infiltrate up the hills with their bows like we all discussed. Remember that the captain will bring the cavalry in as soon as he hears fighting," I told him softly.

"And what will ye be doin'?" Sergeant Chaucer asked looking at me with a strange expression.

"What I was told to. Now go, and be quick."

He looked at the camp, and then looked at me, "Yer wife will kill me, if I bring you home dead."

"Then don't. Now go," and I used a cantrip to put a little force into my words.

He went.

As soon as he was out of sight, I loosened the straps on the armor I was wearing and then shifted into my champion form. It didn't cover quite as much, now that I was almost a foot taller than before, but the gaps were the least of my worries.

Moving around the camp slowly I looked for the command tent. I figured I had about fifteen minutes before Sergeant Chaucer made it up here with his men, and I wanted to do what I had to before they got here. The sun would be rising soon, things were already starting to get lighter outside, and that wouldn't be to my advantage either.

It probably took me another five minutes to find the right tent; fortunately, there weren't a lot of people about. Most were still asleep, so drawing my swords, I just trotted down the hillside and into the camp.

The moment I set foot across the small line of rocks laid carefully out around the command tent I felt it. The ground here had been sanctified by priests, and not Aryanna's either. There were clerics here as both the king and the duke had suspected. Without a champion here to cancel that out, that

would have made this fight ten times more difficult. Whoever sent these people probably knew that Aryanna was without a champion right now, and that Duke Lias didn't have a thousand men to send.

Someone inside the tent screamed suddenly, I guess I had tripped some sort of a ward, and everything slowed down for me as I cut an opening in the side of the tent with one of my swords and jumped inside.

I attacked the two men nearest me immediately. One was a guard; the other was either a priest or a senior acolyte. Both were looking at the priestess by the altar who had screamed, apparently caught off guard by it, so neither one saw me as I ran them through with my swords.

The priestess pointed at me and screamed 'Attack him!' Everyone else in the room did just that.

I killed another two guards as they were drawing their swords, then I dodged left and started to slaughter the acolytes. There were at least a dozen of them, maybe more, and they just threw themselves at me, men and women both, trying to tie me up, or slow me down I guess, to make it easier for the guards to kill me. I'd never seen fanatics like this before and it bothered me that they would so easily throw their lives away.

I felt something stab me in the side then and had to step back. Turning to face my new assailant I realized that one of the guards I had killed was back up on his feet. The priestess was chanting loudly, and I realized that I must not have killed him, so she was using a healing spell to get him back in the fight.

That was going to make things a *lot* more difficult. At least no one here was moving at the enhanced speed that I was, so there weren't any other champions here, just me. I paused briefly to use one of my own spells to heal the wound in my side, as I looked down around my feet and saw that several of the acolytes were starting to move again.

I swore under my breath. It was like a bad zombie movie from back home! I took off two of their heads before they could get up and reassessed my strategy. There were ten people in the room, between me and the priestess who was standing at some kind of an altar. I realized I needed to go for the priestess. I also got worried that there just might be a second or third priest around here as well.

But at least the acolytes on the floor around me had all stopped twitching.

Charging the line I took the heads off two of them almost immediately. I

laid into them heavily then using my speed and strength advantages, and severely wounded several more until I lost a sword in one who I had run through with it when they grabbed it and turned to the side tearing it from my grasp.

Changing tactics again, I resorted to the claws on my right hand while hacking at the ones on my left with my remaining sword. I grabbed one by the head who got too close and threw him at the priestess, who was taken completely by surprise as the body hit her. Several of the people I was fighting then collapsed as the spells keeping them alive stopped. I quickly ran around the altar and cleaved her head from her body, then grabbed the sword of the guard I had thrown there.

There were about five remaining and they charged me then, so I kicked over the altar, sending lamps, candles, and braziers flying as I waded into them fast. Without the priestess' spells keeping them healthy and whole, they didn't last long. As soon as I had killed them I started searching the tent. It had multiple rooms and I knew there had to be another cleric here somewhere.

Sure enough, there was, and I saw him run out the back of the tent just as I entered the section he was in. Swearing, I struck down the two guards who stopped to try and protect him, then chased after him...

...into complete chaos.

The enemy's forces were all awake, and they were all fighting. Most weren't wearing much in the way of armor; a few however were wearing the full set. The captain's men had charged into camp on horseback at the sounds of the combat I had started, and were now laying into the enemy fighters with a vengeance. I could see Sergeant Chaucer's men taking up stations in the hillsides with their bows and starting to look for targets.

Swearing again, I shifted back and immediately tripped myself up as my now rather loose armor shifted and slid down around my legs. Even sped up as I was it took me a good minute or two to tighten the straps back down, especially as I still had to dodge quite a few blows as the enemy's men started to realize I didn't belong there.

By the time I'd gotten back up and into the fight I could see where the other cleric was holed up. He had a ring of twenty or thirty men around him and was keeping them healed as they fought. But at least he wasn't on sanctified ground anymore, so his power wasn't limitless.

Wading into the fray, I attacked as hard as I could. The sooner he ran

dry, the sooner we could end this thing, and the less people on our side would die.

It took a while, longer than I would have expected, but eventually we wore them down. A man who lost a limb couldn't fight as well, even if healed. A man who lost his head couldn't fight at all. Then the cleric faltered, obviously getting tired, and when he faltered a second time and his concentration was distracted, an arrow suddenly took him in the back of the head, followed quickly by two more.

Five minutes after he went down, the fight ended.

Finding a place to sit down, I healed a few of my worst wounds and then looked around. They brought up the two clerics we'd brought with us, and they started to heal our people. I could see there were quite a few dead of our own forces. This hadn't been as easy as I'd hoped.

Then again, I wasn't Aryanna's champion, so I couldn't use my abilities to inspire our forces or demoralize theirs while we fought.

"Will! What in the name of the goddess were you thinking?" Sergeant Chaucer yelled as he stopped in front of me.

"Nice shooting there, Jon," I said using his first name and motioning to the dead priest on the ground.

"Don't ye be trying to change the subject on me! You daft or something?"

I sighed and looked up at him, "I'm tired, and I hurt. Save it for later, okay?"

He grumbled at me and I stood up slowly. I still had more than a few good cuts and minor wounds. Outside of my champion form my healing was very limited and I had used up all of what I had already.

"Let me get you to a healer," he said looking me up and down.

"It's not as bad as it looks," I said, wincing a little as I took a step. "Go tell the clerics that when the worst of the wounded are healed to have one meet me over there at that burning tent." I motioned towards the former command tent.

"Why?"

"They were building a temple here. We need to fix that."

Sergeant Chaucer gave me a surprised look, but went over to talk to the clerics as I hobbled over to the tent. There had been an oil lamp and a few candles on the altar, and I guess when I kicked the altar over one of them had started the fire.

I stood there and watched for a while until the senior cleric came over to me.

“Ach, that nae be good.” He said looking at the tent which was now burning rather merrily.

“So what do we do about it?” I asked.

“Was the altar made out of stone, or wood?” he asked.

I thought about it a moment. “Wood.”

“Not much to worry about then. As soon as it’s destroyed by the fire the sanctification will start to fade. They weren’t here long enough for anything permanent to be set up.”

He reached over and touched me then, and the worst of my wounds healed, leaving me with only a few cuts and scratches.

“You didn’t need to waste that on me,” I told him.

“People will be asking less questions now that they’ve seen me heal ye. I know what ye are, William. I must admit that I am impressed by my goddesses’ allies.”

I nodded and went to find my horse. Hopefully, someone had brought it up; I really didn’t feel like walking anymore.

“So, Will, are ye going to tell me just what in the devil’s own name you were doing up there?”

I leaned back in my chair. We were sitting around a table sharing a few beers in the back of the White Swann.

My Inn.

When I’d left my home back in New York to come here, I’d figured I’d become a trader, make some gold, then spend the rest of my life in comfort as I explored this new realm I’d discovered. I’d bought the inn because I was worried about the mother of my child and I thought it would make a nice place to come home to.

Just another of the many strange things that had happened to me in the last few years.

“A priest on sanctified ground has unlimited power, they can channel all of the spells that their god has taught them rather easily. Anyone trying to go in there and kill them probably would have died. Priests have some very nasty spells they can use on people, not to mention they can heal wounds about as fast as you can cause them.”

“And yer immune to this?”

“I told you, Jon, I have certain skills and powers that my god granted to me. It wasn’t easy, but I was able to sneak in there and kill one of them and drive the other one out.”

“I’m finding this all sort of hard to believe.”

I sighed, “Go ask the head priest down at the temple tomorrow. Or go now if you’re all that worried about it.”

“So, what do ye’ think they were doing?”

I shrugged, “I’m not really up on the local politics, I’m not even sure who they are or what country they were from.”

“Oh they were Atolian’s all right, recognized the armor and the crest on the tabard that their priest was wearin’.”

“Think they’re planning a war?” I asked concerned, I didn’t want to have to worry about my wife Darlene’s safety, nor the safety of my children here.

“Not so sure they were doing the will of the Atolian King up there, William. Thinking more they might just be trying to spread their religion here.”

“Oh?” I said, surprised.

“While Hillshire only worships Aryanna, I’ve heard it said that there is more than one faith in Atolian lands.”

“Huh, didn’t know that.”

We chatted some more, and eventually he went off to find his wife Sarah, Darlene’s sister. Now that Sarah wasn’t working the floor anymore, she was working with Darlene learning how to run the inn.

I had to laugh, Sergeant Chaucer really didn’t want much to do with running the inn; his father had owned it after all. After I bought into it I set Darlene up to help run it, and now she’d enlisted her sister Sarah, and so he was dragged back to it regardless.

I went and helped Darlene close up for the night and took her off to bed. I’d be leaving soon to head back to Saladin and my god, Feliogustus. Apparently, he had quite a lot of work for me to do.

Two

(Saladin – Hiland City)

It was late at night, and I was in bed with Rachel. She'd canceled her afternoon session with her advisors when I had walked into the castle, and dragged me off to our private quarters. Not that I minded; it had been almost four months since I'd seen her last and I missed her as much as she had missed me.

"So, how long are you back for?" Rachel asked as she nuzzled up under my chin. I stroked the short fur of her side as I curled my tail around her. Being a felinoid was strange, especially with how natural it felt. I suspected Fel had something to do with that when I had become his champion. He had admitted that he'd 'made a few changes' after all.

"From what Fel told me when I gated into the temple, I gather that's up to you."

Rachel gave a happy little growl at that. "Ooooh, have I got plans for you!"

"I was under the impression he didn't expect me to spend the rest of my days in bed," I teased, "not that I would mind...."

I got whacked on the side of the head by her tail. "Of course you wouldn't, but as much as I'd like to keep my husband chained to my bed where he belongs... Hey!" She squeaked as I pinched her butt with a claw, "Respect your queen, knave!"

"Oh, I'll respect *her* in the morning, but right now I have an uppity wife to deal with!"

"Oh, I'll show you uppity!" she mock growled and tore into me with a will.

We tussled for quite a while and she striped me with her claws more than a few times, I didn't bother to count. Rachel could be a volatile woman at times. As the queen she didn't get many opportunities to just unleash her anger and frustrations. As she couldn't really hurt me, well permanently at least, I'd let her vent on me.

Plus, the makeup sex was always wonderful afterwards.

"Are we done?" I asked her when she ran down and I pinned her to the bed beneath me.

"You are too good to me," she purred and relaxed.

“So what’s got you all wound up this time?”

“The simple fact that I have to send you out almost immediately after getting you back here. That’s what,” Rachel grumbled.

“Oh?” I lowered myself down and gave her a kiss, cuddling her.

“You’re getting blood on the blankets, hon.”

“Wouldn’t want the servants to think I ran your life now, would we?” I purred.

Rachel laughed, “Let everyone see you cut up like that and they’ll be terrified of me.”

“It just shows everyone how much I love you, dear,” I smiled still purring. “So, what do you need me to do?”

“Well,” Rachel said rolling onto her side and pushing her back against my chest, “I want to bring the three nearest city-states under control.”

“Attacking those might put your neighbors up in arms, hon,” I snickered.

She hit me with an elbow, “I didn’t say conquer, I said *brought*. Not everything needs a direct application of force you know.”

“Umm-hmm,” I said and started to groom the top of her head, letting some of my feline instincts have their way.

“I’m sending you with a delegation to discuss matters of trade, mutual protection, and to drop a few hints that joining my kingdom would be very beneficial to their leaders.”

“And if they don’t want to?” I asked curious.

“And if they don’t want to I’ll just have to stripe you a few more times,” she giggled. “Don’t go threatening them with claws and fang; we’re doing this to *help* them after all. They’re not stupid; as we expand, we’ll be taking over the lands around them one day. Better to join us and become a lord in my court, than find us sitting out side your walls one day dictating terms.”

“Well isn’t that a threat?” I asked curious.

“It’s what will happen in due time, it’s inevitable. I know it, they know it. I don’t have to make this offer to them, they know that too.”

“So why give them an out?”

“Because they’ll be better subjects if they join willingly, also it will be a lot cheaper to buy them off than to send in my army.”

I nodded at that and rolled her over to face me.

“You make it sound like it will be easy,” I said and moved my grooming attentions down to her throat making her rumble rather contentedly. I’d learned just how much Rachel appreciated all these little signs of love and

affection. Then again, so did Darlene. But I enjoyed giving them; I did love them after all.

“Oh, they’ll balk a little at first, they’ll posture and maybe complain, but eventually they’ll come around,” she purred, putting her arms around my neck and running her fingers through the thicker mane-like hair on my head.

“I’m sending you to Kethel first,” she purred louder, as I worked a little lower. “I suspect they’ll almost fall over themselves to join. Tradeson after that, then up to Stongshold.”

I grumbled when she mentioned Stongshold; that place was a fortress.

“Too bad,” she purred. “Now, how about showing me some of that love and devotion my big nasty champion has for his queen?”

I gave her a lusty growl and spent some time doing just that.

The next morning came and Rachel’s tail was definitely dragging. She frowned at me more than once, because mine wasn’t. This close to my god’s center of power I could go days without sleep, and had in the past.

“Want me to keep you company today?” I asked over breakfast. I had gotten up early and spent an hour playing with our son and now I was helping the nanny feed him.

“You look way too smug for a male with that many slices in his fur,” Rachel said with a slight grumble. But I could see she was smiling all the same.

“Course I am, *I* married the most loving, beautiful, intelligent, wonderful female on the continent, nay, the world!” I gave her a toothy grin when I finished and even the nanny giggled.

Rachel smirked “My councilors are in for a rough time of it today, aren’t they?”

“Oh I’m sure they’ll soon realize that each of these little love marks are from my mate working out the frustrations that they themselves are no doubt responsible for.”

Rachel laughed at that. “I’d feel sorry for them, but damn if they don’t deserve it!”

“Well what good is having your own personal arm twister if he’s not out there twisting arms?”

“Yes, definitely. Let’s go twist.”

We finished breakfast and walked out of the living quarters and down the

hall to the council chambers. The Hilander Castle wasn't really much of a castle by the standards I had learned as a kid growing up. Overall, it was fairly understated. Not to say it was small, the living quarters were probably three times the size of the house I grew up in, there were guards both inside and out, and there were some fortifications, but not the type you'd want to stand off an army with; more just to keep it secure. There were valuable things here, and the king or queen and their family lived here.

Also, the council chambers and the great hall were here. The council chambers were just that, where the council met with the ruler to engage in the day-to-day business of running the kingdom. It was where the lords and other peerage could bring their problems for a hearing with their queen. The great hall was, as the name implied, a great big hall. It was for audiences, and state events. All of the kingdom's bureaucrats worked in a separate building on the other side of the grounds.

Apparently, the ruling family liked to keep them at arms length, not that I blamed them personally.

There had been six councilors on the council when I first came to Hilander and saved Rachel's life and her kingdom. With the addition of the former Mulander kingdom to hers, they had added three more members to take on the extra work of running the now much larger kingdom. The number of nobles had increased as well.

I looked around the room as we entered, we were walking arm in arm. I always showed Rachel lots of affection in public, I also deferred to her when she was acting as queen; at least on anything official.

Ramert was sitting near the head of the table now. He'd moved up quite a bit in status in the last two years, now that he had two sons and a daughter who could inherit his title. Wreth hadn't changed much; he'd never been more than a minor cog on the council and seemed content to stay that way, just looking for whatever benefits he could get without taking any risks. Diamant hadn't moved up, but he hadn't moved down either, so with the addition of the three new members and the increase in the size of the kingdom his influence had grown some just by the act of staying where he was.

As I looked at each of those three Ramert smiled, Wreth trembled, and Diamant discretely looked away. They all knew I had my eye on them since our last little incident, but only Ramert knew he had nothing to fear.

Looking around the table, I then looked at the rest of the people seated

there. I knew all of them as well, some better than the rest, a few not very well at all.

Holse, who was the commander of the queen's army, smiled at me and I smiled back.

Narasamman, the high priestess for Feliogustus from the temple also smiled, and then winked.

Next was one I had only learned of last night while talking with Rachel. Drea, the tanner's son who I had run across after we had taken over the Mulander city of Rivervail, was now on the council. Apparently, he really did have a way with people that compared to his way with the suhzen. He was not only the leading merchant in Rivervail, the former Mulander city, but he was the mayor now as well. For all that he was a rather plain looking young man, he was rather charismatic. He smiled and nodded happily when I looked at him.

Reese, the mayor of the Hilander city was next; she was probably the oldest person in the room, and probably the wisest. She was also Rachel's aunt, and visited quite often.

Next came Sorin, who was in charge of the port we had gained with the capture of Rivervail, and our small but growing merchant navy.

Last of all was Shellia, she was our foreign affairs advisor I guess you would say. Now that Rachel's kingdom had ready access to quite a few other kingdoms, she had decided we needed one.

They all stood as we entered the room, and waited until Rachel had taken her seat at the head of the table, before sitting back down. I took a seat on her right after she sat. I didn't really have much standing here, as I was Feliogustus's agent and took my orders either from him or from Rachel. When we had married, she'd made it clear that I would not be joining the nobility.

However, I was not afraid to punch any single one of them in the face and break an arm or two if they pissed Rachel off or I didn't like their attitude, and they all knew that too. The best part of it all was that they couldn't do a thing about it either. I only answered to my god or to Rachel, and I didn't always listen to either one of them.

Rachel turned to the scribe seated on her left, "Where are we today, Telran?"

"Well, your highness, we were discussing the matter of the budget Mister Sorin had submitted, before you adjourned us yesterday."

Rachel looked around the table and I could see she was not happy. I smiled and looked around the table and I think the others started to notice that obviously their queen had been very frustrated last night. The only pair of ears that didn't go down where Ramert's, the rest all look suitably worried.

"Yes, budgets. Let's talk about *all of your* budgets why don't we?" Rachel said with a slight growl slowly looking around the table.

I couldn't help but smile wider; my little wife could be such a ruthless and bloodthirsty minx. Just another of the many reasons why I loved her. Several of the councilors glanced at me and seeing my smile, they wilted further in their chairs.

"A good many of you seem to think that I am made of money these days because of the slight windfall we have received over the last year."

"If I may your highness," Diamant interrupted, "I would hardly call the increase in our revenues 'slight'."

"Have you taken into account our increased expenses? Or how our food reserves are dangerously depleted after the many years of war with the Mulanders? Food reserves that now have twice as many mouths to account for? Or perhaps our medical stores? We used up nearly all of those as well. And seed stocks, we barely were able to plant all of the farms owned by the crown, and let's not even mention the state of my livestock!" Rachel said staring at him.

"Well, yes, but those will be built back up with time...."

"Time that we do *not* have," she said, putting a hand on my arm as I gave a very soft growl.

"There are those of you who think we should expand the Army, which we are still rebuilding," She looked at Holse who had the good grace to look embarrassed. "Or that we should build a large merchant fleet and even a Navy," She looked at Sorin who opened his mouth but shut it quickly when I gave another soft growl.

"Others of you want to expand our cities, build new defenses, granaries, mills; all of you have plans for the new monies in my treasury. Well the first thing you need to learn is that it is *my* treasury. It belongs to the crown, and you need to stop thinking of it as your own, to stop thinking of what *you* can do with it, what *you* can get out of it. Am I clear?"

They all looked a bit embarrassed. Well Narasamman and Ramert didn't: Narasamman didn't because the church paid its own way, and Ramert because Rachel had told me last night that he was not at all afraid to spend

his own funds, and had been.

“I said, *is that clear?*” Rachel said again, this time with a growl of her own.

“Yes Your Highness!” They all quickly replied, looking even more embarrassed and perhaps a little surprised. Rachel didn’t crack the whip often, but when she did, she cracked it hard.

“All of *my* funds are going to be spent rebuilding our stores and supplies. Once we have achieved that task, we will lay in some additional supplies as well, in case any of our neighbors should perhaps need some help in the coming years.”

Diament opened his muzzle to say something but Rachel raised her hand and he quickly shut it.

“We are looking to expand our kingdom; there are two methods we can use to do this. The first is by bribery, the second by conquest. Well we’ve had enough of conquest for a while; we will try bribery now and see what we can buy. Furthermore, we are now exposed to a great many other kingdoms that the Mulanders had protected us from simply by being between them and us.

“Whether that exposure will bring us good or bad, threats or friendship, war or trade, we do not know. We do not have the monies to prepare for all of these things, so we shall hold our monies in reserve, so that we may deal with the circumstances that present themselves.

“The one project which I will fund, and fund fully, is the construction of a better road joining our two major cities, and a garrison on that road between them. A small town has already started to grow there to serve those that travel, and we wish to encourage that.”

She looked at all of them, “Questions?”

“Your Majesty, what about our merchant ships? We need more to increase our trade!” Sorin said.

“Let the merchants build them, you may allow them the use of my shipyard if they ask. If they need guards aboard talk to Holse and work something out, we will provide guards on any ships that need them, as long as they are willing to pay for them. Shellia?” She asked turning to look at the foreign affairs councilor.

“Your Highness, what about our trade delegations? Our embassies?”

“The trade delegations to Holden and Marland will continue, but we will only send out one official delegation this year, to Holden. A very small delegation.

“This brings us to the matters of Tradeson, Stronshold, and Kethel, which I have discussed with several of you over the past months. We will be sending a delegation out to each of them, in turn, starting with Kethel. It is our plan to bring all of them into a closer relationship, a more beneficial relationship, with the crown and the kingdom.”

“Who will be leading this delegation?” Shellia asked.

“Who do you think?” Rachel purred and turned to look at me.

I smiled back and purred at her as well.

“Him?” Shellia protested, “But he’s the one who killed the Mulanders’s king! He led the takeover of their city!”

“Yes, he is, isn’t he?” Rachel said looking back at the others with a smile, “So any offers I make through him will be taken seriously.”

“Assuming they don’t try to kill him outright,” Shellia continued, “They’ll have to see his presence as a threat! What other reason could he have to be there?”

“If I may, Your Highness?” Narasamman interjected, as Rachel started staring at Shellia, who apparently hadn’t noticed she was getting herself in trouble.

Rachel nodded and Narasamman continued.

“I am sending a delegation of priests and priestesses to each of these cities as well. Feliogustus has commanded me to build a temple in each of these places to minister to those rather numerous followers of his that live there, so that their needs are no longer ignored. It is only fitting that William, his champion, should accompany them and act as their protector if necessary.”

“Feliogustus commanded you?” Shellia asked softly in a rather small voice.

Narasamman nodded.

“I withdraw my objections,” Shellia said, and looked down at her hands.

Rachel nodded, “Now that we have all of that out of the way, let us move on to new business.”

I watched and listened as Rachel went around the table, asking each councilor about the state of their affairs, the current status of each project, what problems and needs they had, and any comments or questions they needed to address. From this point on it was like any department meeting I’d ever been to as an engineer, back when I’d been an engineer.

About the only thing that made this meeting different was that Rachel,

the 'boss', was in fact the supreme ruler of the land, and we were talking about issues that could effect the lives and welfare of everyone in the kingdom. Of course, the smug little looks that Narasamman was shooting me across the table every once in a while were different, but then she always had designs on me. However, those issues were just a bit more personal.

When the meeting finally broke up, it was time for lunch. There was some personal politicking after that, as some of the councilors requested private meetings to discuss things with Rachel. Some were things they didn't want to bring up before the other council members, some were things that the other members had no interest in, and a few were just councilors trying to get a favor or two.

Even Diamant came and met with Rachel while I was there. He looked a little uncomfortable when he first came into the room to talk with her, but that only lasted a moment. Diamant was definitely not a coward, and to be honest I still kind of liked him, I didn't think he was really a bad guy, just a bit misguided at times. Of course, if he ever plotted against Rachel again I'd probably kill him, instead of just breaking his legs, like I'd been ordered.

I listed to Diamant and what he wanted from Rachel; he apparently had come up with an idea to build a dam on the river, where it went through a small vale about a mile or so outside of town.

"Your Majesty, it would be a good hedge against the dry seasons," Diamant was saying to her as he was showing her the plans. I got up and walked around and sat down at the table, and started to look at the drawings.

Diamant gave me an annoyed look, but I ignored it.

"Yes Councilor, I'm sure it would be, but right now I'm more concerned with our building back up our reserves and our treasury."

I slowly flipped over the map pages, and looked at the diagrams, someone had put some time into this.

I put a hand on Rachel's arm and she looked at me.

"Excuse me Your Highness," I said smiling and she gave me a look.

"Your 'Highness' is it now?"

"Well I'm talking to the queen and not my wife, wouldn't want to take unfair advantage of my influence," I said giving her a wink.

She sighed, but smiled, "Okay, William, what?"

I turned to Diamant, "Who drew these?"

He almost looked affronted at the question, "Why I did. I've spent years studying masonry and stonework. Not that I expect someone like you to

understand what I've done there." He added a little curtly at the end.

"No," I said looking up at him, "I understand it quite well and its rather good work. I must say I'm impressed. I would make the run up to the dam here longer and at a shallower angle than you have, the weight of the water will help push the footing down and you'll have less forward pressure on the structure."

He looked rather shocked at me, as if I'd grown another head.

"You know about dams?" Rachel asked.

I nodded, "Some. Before I was called here to become our god's champion, I had a different career." I turned and looked back at Diamant, "Where were you thinking of irrigating after this is complete?"

Diamant looked shocked at first, then a little guilty. "Well, ummm."

"If the queen is going to help build it, then she deserves to be in on *all* the rewards, wouldn't you think?" I said trying not to growl.

Diamant's ears went flat and he took the sheet with the view of the area on it, and flattened it out on the table. "To the east here, there's a long sloping expanse of open land, it's just grassland, it doesn't get enough rain to grow anything."

"Tradeson is off in that direction," Rachel said. "But it is mostly unclaimed land."

"Well, I was planning on claiming it," Diamant said giving me a nasty look.

I smiled at him and shook my head, "I admire your genius Councilor, I really do, but remember our little conversation about supporting our queen?" I said and smiled as he flinched.

I turned back to Rachel, who had obviously noticed Diamant's flinch, but didn't say anything. "Your Highness, I think the councilor has a good idea here, I think it might be wise to secure the lands to the east as well. The increased food yield should let the project pay for itself, and the hedge against a drought makes sense."

"I'm worried about my treasury, William; this project does not look cheap."

I shrugged and looked at Diamant, "Just how much is in your treasury?"

He sighed, "Less than half of what the dam would cost, not to mention the irrigation canals."

"Well, ask Ramert, he seems to be looking for places to spend his money."

“I can think of a few others who might be interested as well,” Rachel said pondering it. “That would cut the cost to me rather significantly.”

“I had been hoping not to have to share this,” Diamant grumbled.

“Better a half a loaf than no loaf at all, Councilor,” Rachel told him. “And you really do *not* want to know what would have happened when you started to use this reservoir to build a huge farm without having let the crown know about it, in advance.” She growled at him as she said the last.

Diamant’s ears went all the way down and his tail flattened to the floor as his eyes got wide. I could see that for a moment he was terrified of Rachel. I found that interesting, after all, *I* had broken both his legs and he wasn’t terrified of me.

“Now go, and let me consider the proposal. You’re dismissed.”

He got up bowing and retreated rather hastily.

“Thank you love,” She said leaning over and giving me a kiss and a nuzzle. “You are a man of many talents.”

I purred, “Just a few. Diamant’s problem is that he’s just too smart for his own good at times.”

“He’s just greedy, that’s all. His father was worse until he had a little ‘hunting’ accident.”

“Hunting accident?” I asked ears perked, “Do I want to know?”

“My father ‘accidentally’ put an arrow through his father’s head while they were out hunting. Told everyone it was an accident, that one of his men bumped his arm while he was letting the arrow fly.”

“Oh? So what really happened?”

“Diamant’s father had used his council influence to corner the market on food stores, and after a harsh winter was using those stores to profit rather heavily. So my father killed him. Of course in order to mourn the passing of such a great man, and to make sure he was well remembered, my father ordered that all of the food stocks Diamant’s family had accrued be given away to the poor for free.”

“Wow, harsh.” I said surprised.

“And here you thought *you* were the nasty one,” Rachel purred and getting out of her chair walked over and sat in my lap. “I’m a queen, William, ruthlessness comes with the territory. So I take it you were the reason for Diamant’s accident after our wedding?”

“Obviously,” I said and put my arms around her.

“I had thought so, but it’s always nice to be sure. Guess I’ll have to start

paying closer attention to that one.”

Three

(Saladin - Kethel)

Kethel was a good three-day journey on foot. We had a few of the ox drawn carts with us, so as trips go, it looked like a fairly easy one. The road there was used a lot more than the one to the former Mulander capitol of Rivervail had been, because of the better terms and the trading that went on. But it was still really little more than a wide path through the woods.

The group going was myself, a dozen soldiers from the army with a lieutenant (though they called the rank 'Fourth' here, I had no idea why) commanding, and a dozen people from the temple. Most of them were to help build the new temple Fel wanted them to make, two of them were priests for the temple.

But one extra one was the high priestess, and she had attached herself to my arm as soon as we left the city gates.

"Finally, I get you all to myself!" She purred.

I sighed. I liked her, I really did, otherwise I wouldn't have had a daughter with her. But I was still trying very hard to cut my womanizing ways back to just my two wives. I'd first met Narasamman when I'd killed the previous high priest for having gone astray. To say she was attractive was an understatement, and back when I'd first become a champion I was an easy mark for a beautiful woman.

But Rachel tolerated it, by her family's standards I guess I was rather 'chaste' for a male, and Fel had encouraged it. But I was still stuck with the morals I'd grown up with and at times, I felt guilty for having more than one woman in my life.

"What, bored of me already?" She teased.

I smiled down at her and I put my arm around her as we walked and gave her a hug, "I'm not sure that's possible. So are you coming on this trip just to get me alone for a few weeks? Or did Fel send you?"

"*Feliogustus*," she said, making a point of pronouncing his full name, quite a few of the priests and priestesses I had noticed were rather scandalized that I had a nickname for our God, "wants the new temple up as quickly as possible."

"Oh?" I said as we walked along in front of the carts, "Did he say why?"

"No, he did not."

I nodded, "Could you ask him for me?"

"What, right now?" She gave me a surprised look."

"Well you can talk to him all the time as his high priestess, right?"

"Yes, and he's told me that I'm not to relay any messages for you because he has better things to do than play twenty questions with his overly curious champion."

"He said that?" I asked surprised.

"Just now in fact," she said and grinned while flicking an ear. "I get the impression he was laughing."

"When it comes to me, I think Fel is *always* laughing," I smiled.

"Probably why I like him so much. You people, none of you really, have any idea of just how *good* you've got it. Fel, err *Feliogustus*, is a pretty wonderful god. I've met quite a few so far, and most are just not anywhere near as nice as he is."

"You're trying to flatter him, aren't you?" Narasamman said looking at me out of the corner of her eyes.

I laughed, "Fel knows pretty much every thought that goes through my head, can't really flatter someone who can do that. Heh, I don't know if it's even possible really to flatter a god.

"So tell me, how does this whole building a temple thing work anyway?"

"Well it starts off with a member of the clergy blessing the site, then we outline the grounds and place the wards," she started explaining the process to me.

I had to admit it was interesting. There was a rather involved process to the whole thing, a series of steps that had to be gone through in the proper order. As each step was completed, the temple gained power that could be utilized by its priests and priestesses, and which allowed for the next step to take place.

There were even things I could do in one! That surprised me, though I guess it shouldn't have.

"So I have an aura when I'm in a temple of Fel's?" I asked her much later. It was getting near time to set up camp for the night; she'd been teaching me about temples all day.

"Yes, when in one of Feliogustus' temples, you have an aura that is visible to all who are within, showing that you are the embodiment of Feliogustus' power, and his justice. Your words will carry throughout the assembled if you wish, and those who hear them will be inspired."

I nodded. It made sense.

“So how many temples does he have now?”

“You’d have to ask him that yourself,” Narasamman told me softly, “He has decided some time ago to only let those who can not talk of it, know.”

I nodded again. After what I’d done to the god of the Mulanders, I could understand that.

“Well what about the ones that pretty much everyone knows about? I know there is one in Rivervail, I sort of founded that one,” I said with a cough as she laughed. “And there is the one in the Capitol.”

“The town that is growing up between the two cities has one.” Narasamman told me. “Also there are two smaller ones out from the city a ways, to serve the followers who work some of the farms further out, who can not make it into the temple for the regular mass. Of course they’re much smaller churches than the temples are.”

I nodded, “So it seems that the primary difference between a church and a temple is that Fel can materialize an image of himself in a temple, but not in a church?”

“It’s more involved than that. There are several levels of temples, only in the highest can he manifest a vision, but basically, yes. In even the smallest of temples Feliogustus can manifest some aspect, even if it is only a mental voice. In a church, there is only the presence, there is no ability to communicate, or act. That is the primary difference.”

“Huh, so more rules,” I said thinking about it to myself. Some of what she told me fell into place with what I’d seen back in Hillshire last month. I could now see why Fel wanted me here for this.

“Rules?” Narasamman asked curious looking up at me.

“Eh? Oh, nothing,” I said and purred at her. “Let’s help them get camp set up, I’m hungry.”

“Oh I’m hungry too,” she said with a little predatory growl, as she looked me up and down.

I laughed and shook my head, “I’m sure you are.”

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As we approached Kethel I looked over the area with a critical eye. Most of the farms on the outskirts did not have a standing farmhouse. Most of them appeared to have been burned down or torn down. Also, the farms were all

rather small, though there was quite a bit of unfarmed land between them. There were few people working these farms and they all seemed to be very wary.

As we drew in closer, there were no signs of any buildings on any of the farms, even though these farms were bigger and more successful, with a lot more people working them.

The city itself was rather small, but it had a wall around all of it, and the wall did look like it had been repaired in several places over the years.

"I'm surprised that the Mulanders never wiped it out," one of the men, Tuls was his name, commented.

"If they had wiped it out, then they couldn't come back in a few years and harvest more slaves," Fourth Kinna said and then spit on the ground. "The Mulanders were scum, could never leave people be, always needing more slaves."

"What did they do with all of them, that they were always needing so many?" Tuls asked.

"Sold them off to the markets in Barassa, on the coast."

I turned to the Fourth, "I suspect that Barassa and us are not going to be good friends anytime soon."

He laughed, "No, I think that's a fair assumption."

I looked around some more as we approached the city. People were watching us, but the carts were marked both with Rachel's flag and with Fel's flag, so no one seemed worried or overly hostile that I could tell.

When we finally made the city gate we were challenged by the guards. Their response however was a bit unexpected.

"Wait," the head guard said looking up at me, I stood a good head taller than most of the people I had come across. "You're Feliogustus's champion? Will? Will the Godslayer?"

I blinked, my ears going up in surprise and turned to look at the Fourth and Narasamman.

"That is what they call you," she said, and had the good graces to look embarrassed, curling her tail around her legs.

Fourth Kinna laughed and several of the others of our party snickered, "You didn't know?"

I shook my head, a bit at a loss for words.

"Harris," the head guard said, turning to one of his men. "Go fetch Lord Bryan, tell him we've got the Godslayer at the west gate!" He turned back to

me and stuck out his hand, "Iffin, I may be the first to welcome you to Kethel, I would appreciate the honor!"

I smiled and touched palms, then drew myself up and cast a cantrip to make sure I was looking my best.

"You could have warned me," I whispered to Narasamman.

She shrugged, "We all thought you knew."

"Does *everybody* call me that now?"

"Oh no," she said shaking her head, "just the ones who've heard of you."

I grumbled but put on a big smile and looked around; people were starting to surround us. Apparently word had spread rather fast. I was amazed that so many people wanted to thank me, or touch hands, and the smiles from some of the women were making it clear just what kinds of 'thanks' they were thinking.

I pulled Narasamman a little closer; I could only imagine just how much trouble I could get myself in there.

The guard came running back fairly soon with a rather well dressed male in tow. Everyone parted to let him by and he came right up to me and looked me in the eye.

"William the Godslayer? Champion of Feliogustus? The remover of the scourge of the Mulanders and their foul god from our fair lands?"

I nodded, "Yes. Lord Bryan, I presume?"

He smiled and stuck out his hand and I touched palms with him.

"And what brings you to our fair city, William?"

"Well, Queen Rachel asked me to come to visit, and ask if you would perhaps be willing to join your city to her kingdom, to all become her subjects and to live under the protection of her crown."

"Hmm," he said, making a show of it, "Well, let me think a moment."

"If you turn him down we'll toss your tail out on the street!" Someone yelled from the crowd.

"Ach! I see, well unless I wish to end up homeless and cast out of my own city, I guess, William, I will have to say yes!"

Everyone cheered; I could feel the fur on my tail standing straight out.

"Everyone! I declare the rest of this day to be a holiday! Let us all celebrate! Come! To the square!" Lord Bryan called out.

Everyone started to head off in through the gates and we just followed the crowd.

"Well, that was easy," I said still a bit shocked.

“Don’t get used to it, the others won’t be,” Narasamman warned me.

“A hunch?” I asked curious.

“Oh no, Feliogustus just told me,” and she laughed while I scowled.

As we walked through the streets to the town square, I got a good look around at the town. A lot of the buildings had damage and the repairs looked rather makeshift, temporary, but they looked like they had been that way for some time.

Lord Bryan noticed my looking at several of these repairs.

“The wall comes first,” he said pointing to damage on the city wall, and from this side I could see there were a lot of repairs to it. “It’s the only thing that kept them from coming in here and taking all of us. The few times they did manage to breach it, we made them pay for entering the town, but sadly we were never able to make them pay heavily enough that they stopped coming.”

He looked around and I could see for a moment an expression of pain and sadness cross his face, and his ears sagged briefly before he smiled again. “But thanks to you, thanks to Queen Rachel’s army, thanks to Feliogustus; we will have a chance to rebuild and grow. Already people are starting to fix the things they never could afford to fix before,” and he pointed to a couple of buildings a bit farther from the wall, that I could see work being done on.

“I had no idea that things were so bad,” I said taking it all in.

“How could you? You had your own people to worry about. When my grandfather founded this town, he thought he could stand alone and do it all. I know my father felt that way, and even I felt that way too for a while. But when the slavers came, we realized that we were no more than a small town. No matter how much of a defense we put up, they just came back with more the next time.

“It was only going to be a matter of time until they just enslaved or killed us all, really.”

I nodded. I’d never felt bad for what I did to the Mulanders; oh, I’d had a few regrets about some of what I’d unleashed at times, but seeing this, it was hard to have any sympathy at all anymore. They had thrived by destroying towns, people’s lives, yeah; it was hard to feel sorry for them.

“But enough of the sad history,” he said as we came up to a table that someone had already placed a tapped keg on. “Let us celebrate the future!” and with that he grabbed a mug and filling it with ale he handed it to me. Filling a second one himself, we tapped mugs, “To the future!” he called out

and everyone cheered as we drank.

The party was fun, no one got too drunk, well at least not that I saw, and everyone was happy and seemed to want to thank me. In some cases a few of the women dropped rather blatant hints about wanting to thank me rather personally, but Narasamman was there by my side the entire night, so my fears of letting myself be seduced were easily laid to rest. Narasamman really had no interest in sharing me with anyone at all, and I was suddenly rather happy with that situation.

When things started to wind down for the evening, Lord Bryan offered Narasamman and me a room in his house to stay in. He allowed the rest of our party to camp in the square until they could find something better, as the one small inn the town had didn't have enough rooms for all of them.

"To be completely honest, Will," Lord Bryan told me as he showed us to our room at his house, "you saved us. We had been discussing abandoning the city and moving farther north, but after you won the war, well the discussions turned to approaching your queen about some sort of alliance. We realize now that we're better off being part of the kingdom, so better to bow to the inevitable than to wait for it to catch up with us."

"Wise." Narasamman said with a nod.

"Well, we figured we'd also get better terms that way as well," he laughed.

"Which makes it wiser still," she said smiling back at him. Then grabbing my arm she started to pull me into the room.

"Good night, Lord Bryan, and thank you for the room," I said.

"Good night to the both of you as well," he said smiling back and closed the door.

I looked around; I was in the bar with Fel, who was sitting across the table from me as usual when I had my dream world meetings with him.

"So, what do you think?" Fel asked smiling.

"*Godslayer*?" I grumbled, "Really, Fel?"

He laughed, "I didn't pick it, they did. Last thing I want them doing is reminding all the other gods and goddesses about what you did."

I nodded, "Narasamman isn't going easy on me either. She seems to think I'm her husband or something."

"Well the high priestess or priest of the religion isn't allowed to get

married. They're *supposed* to focus all of their attention on *me* after all," Fel said taking a drink of the beer on the table.

"And because I'm the champion, I'm 'safe'," I said gaining a little understanding.

"Well that and the fems really do drool over you, Will," Fel chuckled. "To be honest I'm surprised you took Stephanie's advice to heart so much. Most champions are more than happy to accept all those female's favors."

I shrugged, "I grew up in a traditional family; well, traditional for where I was. Having more than one woman still makes me feel guilty at times, especially when I love them both so much."

Fel nodded.

"So other than overseeing the building of these temples, why else am I here?"

"Well, I did want you to have a better understanding of just how they were built, but this really is a fairly standard task for a champion. There will be places in the future I'll want to put a temple and the locals may not like the idea."

I thought about what had happened back outside of Riverhead and nodded.

"Exactly," Fel said reading my mind. "Though doing something like that isn't really my style. It also isn't very smart strategically."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"You build a place like that, you know it is going to be destroyed, the local god *has* to respond."

"But won't that make your enemy weak someplace else?"

"It can, however, it makes you weak as well. There is a backlash when a temple is destroyed. How long it lasts, and how bad it is, all depends on the situation, but it isn't something you really want to experience, especially not against an experienced goddess like Aryanna."

I nodded. "Oh, how come you can't talk to me? I see you can talk to Narasamman, even when she's not in the temple. Also, Aryanna can, so why can't you?"

Fel smiled, "Rules. A god can't talk directly to their champion, or normally anyone else's. We can only talk to you in your dreams like this, or if you're in a temple, where we have the ability to talk, mentally or physically.

"As for Narasamman, she's my high priestess and we can always talk

directly to our high priest or priestess, as long as they haven't lost faith."

"Well how come Aryanna can speak to me?"

"Because she was speaking to you before you were a champion, so that gives her a bit of wiggle room in regards to the rules."

I thought about that and nodded.

"Has she found a new champion yet?"

Fel shook his head, "She's not in a rush, she's fine with her situation as it is right now."

I nodded again. "Well until next time," I said and returned to my dreams.

Four

(Saladin – Kethel)

The next day I went with Lord Bryan to meet the council to discuss the agreement. Rachel had provided me with several copies of the document and I handed them out when I got there.

The council was rather large surprisingly; there were fourteen people on it. Lord Bryan introduced all of them to me, and told me what they did. Half of them were concerned with the maintaining of the Town's wall, the inner defenses, and their small military force. The rest were leading townspeople, all of whom seemed to be involved with farming, baking, building, and one who was in charge of the Town's wells. I realized quickly that everyone on the council was primarily concerned with preparing for sieges and defending the town. There wasn't a single politician on it.

"I vote we accept the agreement and move on to old business," one of the older Councilors said as soon as we all got settled.

"But we haven't read it yet, Clem," Lord Bryan said.

"So? What's the point? We're going to accept it anyway, and I doubt he's allowed to make any changes to it anyway." He said pointing at me.

They all looked at me and I shrugged. "Queen Rachel dictated the terms and I'm not one to argue with her."

"Isn't she also yer wife?" Someone else called out.

"When was the last time *you* won an argument with your wife?" I asked smiling, "I'd rather argue with mine even *less!*"

They all got a laugh out of that.

“Let’s just read it, and then vote, okay?” Lord Bryan asked looking around the room.

They all looked back at him and then nodded and read the copies I had provided. As there were only five copies, it took a while for everyone to read through it.

When everyone was done, Lord Bryan rapped on the table with knuckles.

“Okay, any discussion?” He asked.

“I think this is rather generous overall,” a woman at the far end of the table said. “I say we vote.”

I watched as the others nodded and agreed.

“All in favor?” Lord Bryan asked.

The room filled with ‘Ayes’.

“Against?”

No one said anything.

“Okay, I have the official copy here. I will sign and ask for all of you to put your names below mine, to show that the entire council has agreed.”

I watched as they did just that, and twenty minutes later, I had the document back in a document case and left them to go deal with the rest of the town’s business, as I went in search of Narasamman and the rest of the group.

It didn’t take me long to catch up with her, she was with two others, the head builders, and they were walking through town looking for a building site.

“Not a lot of open space in town, is there?” I asked as I came up to them.

“None really at all. They’ve really got a lot stuck in here close together,” Kevi, the head builder said.

“Well they went through a lot of sieges, so you’d sort of expect every square foot to be used up.”

“Well once the army establishes a garrison out here, a lot of these people will move back out to their farms, so that will open up more space.”

“We don’t have the time for that,” Narasamman said. “Feliogustus wants this temple started immediately.” She turned towards me, “How are you doing with the treaty? They break for lunch already?”

“Oh no, they signed it. I’m done.” I told her.

“What?! Already?” She looked a little panicked.

“Don’t worry; I’m not leaving until the temple gets started.”

She gave a big sigh, "That's a relief!"

"Let's go back to the town square," I said looking at all of them, "I have an idea."

Kevi gave me a look, but shrugged and didn't say anything.

When we finally got there, I looked around it, and then looked at the three of them. "I say we build it here."

"What?" Narasamman looked shocked, "Here?"

"It's the perfect location," I said holding my arms out and motioning at the surrounding buildings. "Everyone important lives here, there's lots of space, and a great pub right across the street."

"But this is the town's square!" She said looking at me shocked.

Kevi looked around the square then back at me, "While I agree the spot is perfect, I don't think they'll let us build here."

"Why not?" I asked.

"It's the last open space in town; I'd be surprised if they wanted to lose it."

"Well I'll go ask them and see."

"Wait, you'll what?" Narasamman said shocked.

"Go ask. The council's in session and they're just over there." And I walked off towards the hall next to Lord Bryan's place with Narasamman and Kevi hurrying to catch up.

When I walked into the room, they were all still there, discussing something about the town's expansion.

Lord Bryan looked up, "Yes Will? Can I help you?"

"Actually yes, I was wondering if we could just build the new temple to Feliogustus in the town square, seeing as the town is going to be expanding, we thought its larger space would be appropriate."

Lord Bryan looked shocked and the others all started to talk loudly for a few minutes. No one seemed very fond of the idea. When Lord Bryan finally got them settled down, he turned back to me.

"That really is a most unusual request, William."

I nodded, "I know, but it will be months before all of the families moving back out to their farms are gone and those extra buildings can be pulled down. Then when the army gets here they'll probably want to build a garrison next to the city, which will mean moving the city walls anyway, and that will give you the chance to build a much larger and nicer town square after all."

“But that could take months!” One of them said.

“Even when it’s done it won’t take up more than a third of the square,” Kevi said stepping forward. “As it is, for the first few years it won’t be even a quarter of the current area.”

“Still, ye be asking a lot,” the one I recalled as Clem said.

I looked up and shrugged, “Yes, it is a lot, and I know it. But you know, Feliogustus brought me here, to serve him and the Hilanders; to help them win their war. If it hadn’t been for him, the Mulanders would still be preying on your families, your friends, your neighbors, your children.

“I think it would be a nice way to say ‘thank you’ to your god and it would be a very impressive gift to him, if you were to do this one small thing.”

I looked at them all, scanning the group slowly, “You don’t have to do this of course, I’m just asking it as a favor. If you say no, no one’s going to be mad or upset. I just thought it might be a little something special you might want to do, to give thanks.”

“And this from the man who claims he doesn’t win arguments with his wife,” I heard Clem mutter.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I was sure that I heard Fel laughing.

“Well, William, you have certainly given us something to think about,” Lord Bryan said softly as the rest just sat there looking at each other rather confused.

I nodded, “We’ll let you discuss it, in private.” I turned to Narasamman and Kevi, “Let’s go.”

As we walked back to the square, I could hear Narasamman snickering rather loudly. “You are the master of guilt, do you know that?” She said trying not to laugh as we walked.

“What, you think they’ll go for it?” Kevi said surprised.

“What kind of a fool turns down a request for a favor, from a god, Kevi?” Narasamman said, starting to laugh out loud, “And telling them to talk about it ‘in PRIVATE!’” She started to laugh even harder then.

“What’s so funny about that?” Kevi asked looking at me.

“Feliogustus is omniscient.” I replied.

“What’s that mean?”

“It means that he’s going to hear every word they say whether they like it or not!” Narasamman said between laughs. “And they *know* it!”

“So does this mean they’ll go for it?” Kevi asked ears perked.

“You can bet on it,” I said smiling. “Now, how about some lunch?”

Lord Bryan caught up with us just as we left the pub.

“They said yes, didn’t they?” Narasamman asked him.

“You, Sir, play dirty,” he sighed looking rather exasperated.

“I would have thought that to be obvious,” I said smiling back at him, “what with being called a god slayer and all that.”

“The worst part was everyone having to take the time to explain why they thought this was a good idea and why they were behind it.”

“Saving face?” I asked curious.

“More like kissing butt. It’s bad luck to insult a god, especially when he’s *your* god and his champion is in town. I’m going to miss the old square,” he sighed, “but I’m not stupid enough to say no. If Feliogustus needs it, then I have to let him have it. You’re right, we owe him.”

I nodded. “Thank you.”

Narasamman smiled at him, “Yes, I thank you and Feliogustus thanks you as well.”

He nodded to us again and left us heading back to the council hall.

“So,” I asked turning to Narasamman and Kevi, “what do we do next?”

“Now I get my two surveyors and we start marking out the area.”

“I can get us started by consecrating the grounds,” Narasamman said looking around. “Guess I should round up my acolytes and priests. With a place this big, this will take a few hours.”

I nodded, “Guess for now I’ll just watch.”

They both walked off then and I just sat on the tailgate of one of the carts we had brought with us. Both came back with the people they were looking for a few minutes later and unloaded equipment and went about their work.

Narasamman’s actions were interesting at first; I’d never seen anybody consecrate anything before, especially not a priestess. Apparently, she could only do so much ground at a time, and as I watched her move a third time and start to do all of it all over again, I realized she was probably going to be doing this until after the sun had set.

Kevi’s actions I understood a little better, I’d been exposed to surveying in college, though I’d never done any myself a friend had so I had a pretty good idea of what they were doing. He and his surveyors moved with a speed and accuracy that told me they had done this a lot. They drove stakes, marked with something that looked like paint, drew other lines and marks with chalk.

I guess to some it probably looked like magic.

I had seen the plans of the temple they wanted to build; it would start out as a simple affair, and then grow over time. Watching them mark out the different boundaries and place markers was interesting. I started to get a sense of just how it would look as I saw the outlines for the foundation, statue locations, and other parts of the site.

Kevi worked until it was too dark to continue, then took his workers off to have dinner.

Narasamman didn't stop until she was finished, which ended with her standing in the center of the town square, and doing one final ritual that seemed to take a good half hour. When she finished I could see her tail was drooping and she looked completely exhausted.

"Wow, I had no idea that was so draining," I said and helped her and the others put their things away.

"All magic, spiritual or other, takes energy from the caster. This was a lot of land to cover."

"Well you didn't have to cover the whole square," I teased.

"Yes I did," she grumbled and shot me a look.

"Oh," I said and tried to look embarrassed, I knew Fel well enough to know he'd want all of it covered.

"Don't worry, tomorrow you get to help."

I smiled, "Fine. Now, let's go get some dinner and if you behave I'll give you a massage."

"If *I* behave?" she laughed and gave me a swat on the rump.

"Better," I purred and taking her arm steered her towards the pub.

"For a male that doesn't want to attract females you sure do seem to take a lot of interest in this one," she purred.

I tried not to blush as my tail curled in embarrassment, "It's not that I don't like females," I said and gave her a squeeze, "it's just that I was encouraged to limit my carousing."

"Well thank Feliogustus for limits," she purred.

"So what do we have to do tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow we set the wards."

"Those two foot stone pillars?"

She nodded, "They get buried at the cardinal points and sub-points that Kevi marked today."

"What are those for?"

“They set the boundaries of the temple, what is holy ground, what isn’t. Without those, we can’t set the altar.”

I nodded and thought about that. “So those were made back in the main temple?”

Narasamman shook her head, “No, right now they’re just matched pieces of cut stone. You can use anything to make a ward. Stone just last longer so I had those made. I’ll bless and set them tomorrow while you’re digging holes,” she grinned at me as she finished.

I gave her a pinch on the butt, but rather than squeak she leaned into me a little harder.

“So how long until all of this is finished?”

“A year, probably two. A proper building needs to be constructed and that always takes time. But once we set the wards, you and I will set the altar while Kevi and the others build the first structure. He’s assured me that he can have that done in two weeks, after which I think they won’t be needing us anymore and we can head back home and you can get ready for your trip to Tradeson.”

“You’re not going on that one?”

“No.”

“Why not?” I asked curious as we reached the door to the inn.

“Because I’m going to be pregnant,” she purred, winking at me.

“Oh... OH!” I said and I know my tail bushed out.

She purred and rubbed against me as we went inside to eat.

“So you wouldn’t mind giving me another child?” She asked.

“Suddenly I can’t think of anything else I’d rather be doing.”

“Good boy,” she laughed.

It took us two weeks to finish the basics on the new temple. Kevi had been correct in his estimates, the altar and the enclosing structure was finished. It was basically just a sacristy, so it was only three walls. The pews and other parts were being laid out and a great tent had been erected over that portion for now. Real walls and a roof would be added later.

Narasamman held a high mass before she left, to christen the temple, and almost everyone in town attended. It was quite a sight to see, Narasamman was impressive as the high priestess, and she gave a sermon that had them all enthralled. Heck, I knew Feliogustus personally and had met him face to face dozens of times and it even had *me* on the edge of my seat.

Narasamman was without a doubt a very impressive female, that she was so very interested in me was almost humbling. I know that some men wondered why I didn't boff every fem that came along as they were sure willing enough. But the idea of lots of meaningless one night stands didn't appeal to me all that much, not anymore at least.

Especially not with females like Narasamman, Rachel, or Darlene in my life.

Five

(Saladin – Tradeson)

I looked around us as we neared Tradeson. We were still almost a half-day's travel from the city gates, but I could see farms off in the distance. We'd come out onto the grasslands this morning, and I could see why Tradeson hadn't been raided like the other towns, they could see you coming long before you got close. I could see several watchtowers off in the distance as well; there wouldn't be any surprise attacks here.

We'd been traveling from Hiland for four days now. Tradeson was farther than Kethel, but the road to it was in much better shape as well as being a lot smoother with fewer hills and other such obstacles.

The group with me was probably four times as big as the group I'd taken to Kethel, but then we had a lot more to deal with here, and it probably wouldn't be as safe. There were nomads out on the plains to the east of Tradeson, with which the town did a lot of trading. Those nomads, combined with Tradeson being on the other side of the river from Rivervail, had both been contributing factors to the lack of Mulander raids.

"I'd hate to be coming down this road during the rain," Second Carso said to me as we walked along.

"You'd be forced to go off it, or sink in your knees to the mud." I agreed.

"Makes you wonder what they've hidden in the grass, doesn't it?"

I shrugged, yes, a few well-placed ditches would have added to the defenses, but the grassland spread out rather far in all directions, so it seemed a bit pointless to me.

"Any idea on what kind of greeting we can expect, Will?" He asked.

"The courier Queen Rachel sent came back saying they were interested in our visit, not much more than that."

"Well at least we won't be a surprise showing up at their gate."

I looked back at the group, twenty-three of them were from the temple, sixty-four of them came from the army. Two days behind us at the still growing town of Midway we'd left behind a thousand more soldiers. Primarily they were there to help build the garrison, and engage in training, but they would be available if I needed any of them.

"We shall see," was all I could think to say.

It was late in the day when we finally reached the gates. The city had a fairly well built wall, close to twenty feet high. All the farms around here had farmhouses as well, though the houses were built a bit sturdier than I would have expected. Perhaps raiding from the occasion nomad tribe was a bit of a problem, but not enough that they had all moved inside the walls.

“You are the group from Hiland city?” The guard asked looking us over.

“Yes, that would be us.” I nodded. “This is Second Carso, and this is the Priest Toble.”

“And you would be?” He asked craning his head to look up at me. Sometimes being big was a pain in the ass.

“I am William.”

“William the Godslayer?” he asked a bit skeptical.

“William will do just fine.”

“Ya’ know, you cost the people here quite a bit of trade,” he grumbled as he waved to the others to open the gates.

“Oh really?” I said letting my voice drop down lower, tail lashing. “And just what kind of trade are we talking about?”

“Ich! Keep your ears up!” He said looking surprised by my reaction and taking a step back. “We traded foods and other such goods. What did you think we traded?”

“Slaves perhaps?” I growled.

“No, of course not! Slavery has no place here in Tradeson, we just trade goods, not people. Not at all, not ever.” He said keeping a wary eye on me.

“Glad to hear it,” I said letting my voice return to normal, but not missing the look on the Second’s face.

Another male walked up to us then, he was dressed in much nicer clothes than the guard was and wasn’t wearing any armor or weapons.

“This is Kyle,” the guard told me. “The council sent him to deal with your needs.”

I nodded and touched palms with Kyle.

“William,” I said introducing myself. “Though I suspect you already knew that.”

Kyle nodded. “My name is Kyle, and as he said, I’ve been asked by the council to see to your needs.”

“If I may be excused?” The guard asked.

Kyle nodded and he left.

“If you and your men will follow me we have set aside a barracks for the

men and wagons as well as an inn for your use and the use of the clergy.”

“Thank you,” I replied. “I was worried about finding enough space for everyone.”

“Oh think nothing of it. We get trade caravans coming out of the plains at least twice a year now. We’ve gotten used to groups showing up.”

I nodded, and moved to follow as he set off down the street, the Second signaling the rest of the group to follow.

“What about trade caravans from other places?” I asked curious.

“Well the ones from Rivervail have stopped of course; those were also twice a year.”

“Hopefully we will be able to start those back up soon,” I told him, “that is part of why we have come.”

“Well I’m sure people will be happy to hear about that,” Kyle said with a smile.

“Where else do you get caravans from?”

“Marland mainly. Occasionally Holden, Kethel, and of course Hiland.”

“To be honest I’m surprised that the Mulanders left you alone,” I said looking around at the city. The buildings were all well maintained, and they weren’t shoehorned up against each other. The city had wealth, even if it wasn’t obvious to most people.

“Well they learned that trade was a lot more profitable than conquest,” Kyle said.

“And how much did teaching them that lesson cost?”

Kyle coughed, “I couldn’t honestly say, I was just a young child at the time. But,” he turned and looked at me. “Imagine trying to lay siege to a well prepared city when there are dozens of tribes who think that it’s great fun to attack your encampments night after night.”

I smiled at that. “I think I’d like to meet some of these tribesmen.”

“I might be able to arrange a meeting.”

“After I meet the council first of course.”

Kyle nodded, “Of course. I had been asked if you would be willing to meet with them tomorrow?”

“The sooner the better,” I said looking down the street at what appeared to be a street performer. I’d never seen a street performer in Saladin before.

“What’s that?” I asked gesturing towards the figure that looked like they were playing some sort of instrument.

“Some new group that came to the city a few years back. Not sure if

they're a cult or just some kind of wandering tribe. They perform for money; some of them are quite good actually."

"Huh," I looked at the figure as we drew closer. There were actually two of them; one was playing something that looked like a flute, the other some kind of stringed instrument. They had a small hat sitting out and there were a few coins in it. I could hear the tune they were playing from here, nothing magical, just a pleasant tune.

"Well here we are," Kyle said and motioned to the two buildings we had stopped in front of. One was definitely an inn, the other was some sort of boarding house, most likely the barracks he had mentioned.

"Second Carso, would you sort everyone out please?" I asked.

"It would be my pleasure, William," he said and turning to his subordinates started getting everyone organized.

"What time should I expect to meet with the council tomorrow?" I asked Kyle.

"Probably around the ninth hour. I'll be here before then to escort you."

I nodded. "Thank you. I'll see you in the morning."

"You sure there is nothing else you will need tonight?"

I shook my head. "No, I'll be fine."

I looked around a moment as Kyle shrugged and walked off. Second Carso was getting his men organized; I looked over at the two priests and two priestesses who had accompanied me as they got their own people organized. Narasamman had sent a much larger group as they were planning a much larger establishment here, plus I'd be heading to Stongshold directly once we were done. I walked over to the four of them.

"I'm going inside to get a room and see how many rooms they have for us. Someone ask Carso if he wants to stay at the inn or with his men."

"I'll come with you," Tareassa said attaching herself to my arm. I shrugged, "Sure," several of the females had tried to gain my attentions, none had been successful so far.

"I'll go check with him," Lisel told me and went off to talk to Second Carso.

I nodded and turning headed into the inn with Tareassa in tow.

Walking inside it was actually a fairly nice place, it had a large open tap room with a rather well built long bar along the far wall. An older male walked up to me as I looked around.

"Yes sir?" He asked.

“How many rooms do you have open?”

“Twenty, sir.”

I nodded, “I think we’ll be taking them all. I’ll take the one with the most windows.”

He nodded, “Of course sir. Would you like to see your room now?”

I nodded and turned to Tareassa, “Go tell the others there are nineteen open rooms and to plan accordingly.

“But I wanted to go with you,” she purred smiling.

“I’m not going anywhere, but upstairs,” I said and putting my hands on her shoulders, I turned her towards the door and gave her a light swat on the butt. “Now go.”

She grumbled a little but went.

“You’re a better male than I,” the innkeeper said softly watching as Tareassa sashayed out the door. She was rather attractive.

I laughed, “I notice you don’t spend your whole day drinking beer for all that you have so much of it around.”

He chuckled and looked at me, “I see your point, though I must admit at first I did try to sample them all.”

I grinned, “You and me both!”

He laughed at that, “Come, let me show you your room.”

Dinner was served a couple of hours later after everyone had gotten settled. Tareassa, Lisel, Toble, Second Carso, a few acolytes I didn’t know the names of, and two of Carso’s officers sat at the long table with us. There were another ten or so at another table, but I understood that most of the troops were eating at the simple mess in the building next door.

The food was good, the conversation was enjoyable, and Tareassa seemed to think she had pretty much staked out a claim on my person. About halfway through the meal a minstrel of sorts came in and started to perform. She hadn’t been one of the two outside earlier; those had been a male and a female. She was rather good however.

“Do you hire them?” I asked the bar maid as she came by with more drinks.

“Harston, the owner, he allows them to play, but they only get what tips they make, he don’t pay them at all.”

I nodded. I found the whole thing very interesting. While the Hilanders liked to sing, I had yet to see any playing any instruments. It actually hadn’t

occurred to me until just now that there wasn't much music beyond that singing, a lot of which was for church, in the Hilander's city.

I noticed the rest of the people sitting at my table were fascinated by the minstrel's performance and watched it intently. At those tables in the room that had locals seated at them, most didn't pay it too much attention. I guess they were used to it by now, but it was obviously new to the members of my group.

When she finished I called her over to the table. She seemed hesitant at first and Tareassa was definitely not happy, until I put my foot on top of hers and pressed down slightly. She got the message and stopped growling.

I pulled a silver piece from my money pouch and laid it on the table, as an incentive. She hesitated a moment more, but approached then.

"Why so wary singer of tales?" I asked. Apparently, the language here had no word for 'minstrel' yet.

"I know who you are milord, you are a most fearsome warrior," she said looking into my eyes. I could see her nervousness, but I didn't think she was worried about my being a fearsome warrior. More likely she was worried about ending up in my bed unwillingly.

"I do not make it a habit to accost women, so put your mind at rest. I am curious about your instrument. I haven't seen any like that since I came here.

"May I?" I asked and held out a hand.

She looked even more worried then, I could see her eyes checking out the exits.

"I won't damage it, never fear. I'm just curious about the sound."

"Please be careful with it milord," she said handing it over hesitantly. "It is most expensive and hard to replace."

"I don't doubt it," I said as I turned in my seat from the table to give myself more room and took the instrument.

Looking closely at it, it was very similar to a guitar. It only had five strings however, and the fingerboard had no frets, though it was marked. Plucking the strings it had a tuning that I wasn't familiar with, but the notes were ones I recognized at least. Playing with claws I could see would be a slight issue, the strings were all gut of some sort I suspected.

It was a rather nice piece of craftsmanship and I played a scale up the A string, once I found it.

"Very nice," I said and handed it back to her. I noticed she was staring at me.

“You know how to play?” She asked a little suspiciously.

“I’m used to a different tuning, but a little yes.” I replied still watching her. Something about her seemed a little different, but I couldn’t really place it.

“Maybe sometime you,” she paused a moment, “could show it to me?”

“Perhaps.” I dropped the silver piece in her hand. “Thank you for the entertainment.”

She smiled and nodded and went back to the spot she had been sitting in and started to perform another song.

“She really does have a nice voice,” I mused looking at the others. “Interesting instrument too.”

“I have a nice voice,” Tareassa said.

I smiled at her, “Yes I know.” I looked at the others and stood. “I’m calling it a night; I will see you all in the morning.”

Tareassa of course followed me as I left the table.

“Going somewhere?” I asked as I climbed the stairs.

“Nara said you needed someone to look after you, and I volunteered.” She purred.

I sighed and shook my head. “I’m sure you did.”

“Besides, I don’t have a room; you wouldn’t want me to have to sleep out in one of the carts, would you?”

I shook my head again and when I opened the door to my room, she slipped in before me.

Well at least I had *tried*....

“Oh I’m sure you could have tried harder than that,” Fel said as I found myself in his bar once more.

I blinked, “Is something wrong?” Fel didn’t talk to me very often, and I hadn’t felt anything before falling to sleep that indicated he wanted to talk.

“Can’t a god want to talk to his champion?” He grinned at me.

“You have told me more than once that you are way too busy to waste idle time on me. So what’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” he said but looked more serious. “But I want you to investigate that cult of musicians.”

“Sure, I can do that. May I ask why?”

“I want to know if they have a temple in the city.”

I nodded. “And if they do?”

“Just tell me about it, don’t do anything to it.”
I nodded again, “Okay.” And went back to sleep.

#

“So this is the agreement your queen would have us sign?”

I nodded and looked up at the council’s leader, a rather old male by the name of Hoffen. I was lounging back in a chair at this point, I’d given them the copies of the treaty some six or seven hours ago and they’d been arguing over it with each other ever since. There were a dozen people on the council, plus Hoffen who led it. I gathered his role was inherited.

I didn’t know about the others however. Some I’m sure were, others I wasn’t so sure.

“So why did she send you? William the Godslayer? The Champion of Feliogustus who destroyed the Mulanders last year in a most vicious war?”

I sighed and stood up, which allowed me to look *down* at him.

“Because, she asked me to.”

“And since when does the Champion of Feliogustus answer to the *demands* of the queen?”

“When she’s his wife, that’s when,” I growled. “Besides, I had to come here because Feliogustus *commanded* me to come. If he doesn’t mind me doing this, then you most certainly should not.”

Hoffen had taken a step back when I growled, but hadn’t panicked and still looked rather composed. Most of the others on the council looked composed as well; a few might have looked a little worried.

“So the rumor is true then,” he stated looking around at the others. “So what happens if we refuse the treaty?”

“You don’t get to be part of the kingdom.” I said simply, while crossing my arms.

That got them; several of them looked at each other.

“What do you mean by that?” Asked a middle aged looking male whom I gathered was some sort of rich merchant.

“Just what I said. You don’t get to be in the kingdom. So you’ll have to deal with all the rules, taxes, and laws for crossing our borders when you want to sell us stuff. We won’t fix the roads, we won’t help you in your emergencies, and most important of all, if anyone raises an army, say the tribes get some great war leader, or maybe Barassa decides it needs more

slaves and brings a really big army, we won't help you."

"Do you really think they'll do that?" He asked me.

"Do what?"

"Raise an army and attack us?"

"Well you obviously do, or you wouldn't have asked the question." I smiled, "But to be honest, yes, I think eventually they'll come sailing up the river and look for the low hanging fruit to pick off. They're slavers and they lost one of their biggest suppliers of slaves."

"The Mulanders tried and failed, I'm sure if they come they will fail as well," Hoffen said and several around the table voiced their agreement.

"Thankfully that's not my problem, it's yours. I would like to remind you however that as I *am* here and that I *am* Feliogustus' champion, that Feliogustus does approve of this agreement.

"Now, I'm getting hungry, and could stand to stretch my legs a bit. I'll come back tomorrow in the afternoon, say a little after the noon meal, and you can let me know your decision then."

"But we have questions!"

"You should have asked them instead of making me listen to you argue for the last six hours. That's the treaty, its pretty clear. Organize your issues and I'll deal with the top three tomorrow."

"What about the rest?" Someone asked.

"They'll be forgotten. So if I were you, I'd try to keep the list down to three." I stretched again and yawned and walked out the door.

"Well that was rather rude," Kyle said following me.

"Yeah they were, weren't they?"

"I wasn't talking about them!" he retorted.

I stopped and looked at him, "Kyle, the offer is fair and they'll never get a better one. Over time as the Hilander kingdom grows, this city will be passed by and will wither and fail if it's not in on the deal. That is of course if someone else doesn't decide it's ripe for the conquering.

"The worst part is, they know the offer is fair, they're just trying to be greedy and win concessions that they're not entitled to."

"No one could take this city, especially not Barassa, they're too far away."

I shook my head, "I took Rivervail in two days, and they were how much larger? Kyle, your city would fall in a week, if not less; and remember that Barassa's army is several times larger than the Hilander army. They'll come

here eventually, unless of course we're all too big and tough to be worth the trip."

I left him standing there thinking about it. Rachel had confided in me back when she was planning all of this that both she and the council worried that one day the Barassian army would come to conquer. Getting the city-states to sign on, and making stronger alliances with the neighboring kingdoms would definitely forestall that day, perhaps even prevent it.

This was also why Fel was spreading his religion, and building more temples. He needed to increase his own powerbase for when that confrontation finally came.

I spent the next few hours wandering the city, getting the lay of the land. The city was fairly large and I could see the remains of old walls that told me that the city had expanded several times over the years.

I saw several more of those street minstrels, there were a few in almost every large open space in the town, as well as on a few corners. At least they sounded good and weren't very loud. It reminded me of the Sireens, but where songs had power there, they didn't here. So I had to wonder why there was apparently a religion based around it.

I didn't see any sign of their temple, but I didn't explore as much of the city as I would have liked to as it was getting late. So I headed back to the inn to join the others for dinner.

Sitting down I noticed there were a few new faces, two of whom were wearing the holy symbol of Fel that the priests and priestess wear. "Father, Mother," I said giving them both a nod. "Where did you come from? I know you weren't on the trip here."

They both smiled, "We're the clergy that preside over the local church," the male said. He was an older settled looking male; the female with him had that same settled and relaxed look.

"I thought there wasn't a local church here?"

"Oh no," the female started, "there has been a church here for many years, but its small and the flock has grown, and we've been petitioning Feliogustus for something larger for some time now."

Tareassa came up to the table then, "William, I see you've already met Joel and Kayryn," she said sitting down next to me and giving me a nuzzle. They both grinned at me then and I shrugged looking embarrassed, which caused them both to laugh.

"So do you have a building site for the temple yet?" I asked.

“Yes! And it’s a really nice one too!” Tareassa was almost bubbling with excitement when she said it. “Joel and Kayryn managed to secure a really nice location some months ago for us. Jezza and surveyors spent all day marking it out, tomorrow we can put the ward stones in and then begin construction almost immediately!”

“Wow,” I said surprised, “That really is good news.” I noticed then that we had a different performer than we had last night.

“What happened to the girl from last night?” I wondered out loud motioning to the minstrel.

“Oh you don’t need her,” Tareassa said, making me wonder if she’d done something.

“They tend to move around from place to place,” Joel supplied. “I think it’s so people don’t get bored with them. Most only know a dozen songs or so.”

I nodded, it made sense. “Is it true that they’re actually a religious order of some sort?”

“To be honest,” Kayryn said, “we’re not quite sure. Rumor is that they’re a cult, but they look too organized and well behaved to be a cult. I think it’s obvious that they’re following somebody, but as to whether or not that’s a god, a priestess, or just a person, I’m not very sure.”

“Do you know if they have any kind of a headquarters? Some place where they all meet?”

She shrugged, “I’d assume so, but as to where it is? I have no idea. Mostly everyone ignores them these days. They play nice music; give us free entertainment, so no one minds them much.”

“Why so curious, William?” Joel asked.

“Yes why?” Tareassa asked with a slight growl in her voice. I lightly stepped on her foot and she gave a little start but stopped growling.

“Never seen anything like it before, so I’m curious. I’m also wondering if we’ll start seeing this in other cities.”

“Well I hear they’re also in Marland, I suspect this group came from there.” Joel said.

I filed that piece of information away. If Fel believed they might have a temple here, then it was my duty to find it. So far, they seemed harmless enough, and maybe they were, but Fel asked me to find out, so I would.

I got drafted the next day to help with the burying of the ward stones. I

didn't mind doing it, I needed the exercise and it gave me something to do while waiting to go back and visit the council. They were about halfway done with digging the holes when I had to leave.

"So," I asked when I arrived at the council's chambers, "Any questions?"

"Yes," Hoffen said starting off, "We see that with the signing of this agreement I'll become a duke, but what about the rest of my council? They have served me well and truly for many a year and I'd like to see them rewarded too."

I thought about that, this city was rather prosperous, and they had been keeping it protected for some time now.

"Okay, who are your most trusted advisors who work with you everyday?"

Four members of the table raised their hands.

I nodded to them, "Congratulations, you're now viscounts, all the rest of you are barons or baronesses. I will need a list of your names to attach to the treaty for the queen."

"Well that was surprisingly easy," One of the more distinguished fems said.

"While walking around yesterday I had the opportunity to observe some of your city, you've all done a rather good job here, so why not reward you?" I looked around at the group. "You all seem to be fairly intelligent and hardworking, I suspect that ten years from now you'll all have risen quite a bit in rank and prestige in our kingdom, so I'm not at all worried about giving you those titles.

"Was there anything else?"

There were a few more questions of course; they just wanted to be sure that they understood a few minor points on the document.

"We will have a signing ceremony tomorrow afternoon. That should give everyone time to prepare," Hoffen said when they finished.

I gave a little bow to the group; I had been standing at the foot of the table while I was answering their questions. "Esteemed council members, I thank you all very much, and on behalf of the Queen, I thank you as well."

Taking my leave from the council chambers, I returned to the worksite for the temple to see several of them standing around one of the carts looking concerned.

"What's wrong?" I asked Tareassa as I walked up.

"Two of the ward stones are broken."

I walked around the others to look inside the back of the cart. Sure enough, two of them had broken rather neatly in half so that we now had four shorter pieces.

I turned back to her and the other priests and priestesses, as well as the head builder. "Can't you make another one?" I asked.

"They need to all be made of the same material, and roughly the same size and shape." Tareassa told me.

"And you need two more?"

"Just one really, the other one was a spare." Jezza the head builder said.

I nodded, then noticed there was another crate in the cart, towards the front, so hopping up I went over to it and pulled the top off, ignoring the nails that held it on.

"What about these?" I asked looking at the seven stones inside.

"Those are for the Stongshold temple."

I pulled one out and handed it to the Jezza. "Not anymore."

"But you can't do that!" Tareassa said looking shocked.

"Sure I can. Now let's get everyone back to work."

"But...."

"Work!" I said and pointed. They all looked at her, and then looked at me. I growled, they went. Tareassa gave me a scowl then followed the rest of them.

"What do you want to do with the broken ones?" One of the builder's crew asked.

"Pack them up, they're probably still good. We'll take them back home later."

He nodded and I got out of the cart and went in search of Second Carso.

"Yes, William?" He asked when I came up to him.

"Could you put a few guards on the carts for me please?"

"Sure thing, something happen?"

"It looks like someone got into a bit of mischief in one of them."

He nodded. "I'll take care of it right away."

"Thanks."

"How'd your day with the council go?"

"They're going to sign tomorrow, so you should probably find who your opposite number is here and see about working them into the command structure."

Second Carso smiled, "Oh, already did that. We've got most of it figured

out already.”

“Really?” I said flicking an ear in surprise.

He nodded, “We were both fairly sure they’d go for it in the end. Only thing that made sense really, the city just can’t afford to keep a large enough army to deal with the kinds of problems they’re likely to see in the future. They’re already starting to run into budget problems.”

I shook my head and gave a little ‘hrrump’ of surprise. “I hadn’t even thought to look at that angle. Well doesn’t matter now. They’ve agreed and that’s half of what we came for.”

“How long are you staying for the construction?”

“At least until it’s been christened and had its first service. Then I’ll head off to Stongshold so we can get this all finished. Can’t stay too long or I won’t get up there before the weather starts turning.”

Carso smiled, “Glad I’m not going!”

I nodded and went back to the building site to find Tareassa. They were just wrapping up setting the last ward and burying it under some dirt. They’d set a slab over the top next. She was just finishing the ritual blessing when I came up and she gave me another scowl.

“Oh get over it,” I told her.

“You overrode my orders!” She said growling faintly.

“Yes well, you have your orders and I have mine. As mine come straight from Fel guess who wins out? Now let’s get the altar set up.”

“We weren’t going to do that until the morning now.” She said.

“Why? I thought it needed to be set to tie in all the wards?”

“Well it takes a couple of hours to do it, and with the delay we wouldn’t be done until rather late.”

“So?”

“So we need light to see what we’re doing. In the dark, even with torches it would be too easy to make a mistake that would delay us even further.”

“Ah, okay.” I said and nodded, it made sense I guess.

I flagged down one of the acolytes.

“Yes sir?” he asked stopping in front of me.

“Go back to my room at the inn and grab the large pack at the foot of the bed and bring it here. Take someone to help you carry it.”

“Yessir!” he said and ran off.

“What are you doing?” Tareassa asked looking curious.

“Spending the night here. Those stones didn’t break by themselves. I

want to see if anyone tries to tamper with the ones in the ground.”

“Oh,” she stopped and thought a moment. “Would you like me to stay here with you?”

“You’d just distract me,” I said looking down at her. Her ears went flat and she blushed. “Besides, if anything does happen, I wouldn’t want you to get hurt.”

“Okay. I will have someone bring you your supper however.”

I smiled at her, “Thank you.”

It was late. I had donned most of my gear and weapons. I had no idea what, if anything, I was expecting, but in any case, I didn’t want to be caught unprepared. Most of the carts had been taken back to the barracks to be locked up and guarded for the night; there was also the possibility of things being pilfered of course. After what had happened to the two stones however I now wanted to be sure no one snuck in to do any further damage to the supplies.

There were two carts left here, as well as a large pile of planks for the building, nothing that you could easily steal without the city guard taking notice. Tomorrow I’d have Carso detail a temple guard to watch the grounds from this point forward. But for tonight, I was just curious if anyone was going to cause problems, and if so, I wanted to see if I could find out just whom they were.

Besides, it had been pretty boring, all this talking to the town council who all knew that they had no real choice and were just putting on a show, and then watching people put up a building. I really would rather be with Rachel and my son, but Fel wanted me here, so here I was.

I spent my time sitting in a dark shadow, where the few lights around the outskirts of the building site wouldn’t illuminate me. Even with the lanterns, things were rather dark. I had a cloak on to soften my outline and I did my best to meditate and not fall asleep. I think Fel was helping me with that, as I never started to nod off as the night dragged on.

When one of the lights suddenly guttered and then went out, I figured if anything was going to happen, it was going to happen soon.

Twenty or so minutes later, I felt it. A feeling that something wasn’t right, with a direction attached. I carefully made my way through the shadows until I saw it, several figures trying to pry up one of the slabs.

“Right, so what’s all this then?” I called out rather loudly as I got within

twenty feet.

They dropped their things and ran, which was not what I had expected! I had figured they'd attack me, thinking I was just a local guard.

Swearing loudly I took off after them, and they all split up, each into a different direction. I got maybe a block away when I realized that if I spent the night chasing one of them, I'd be leaving the grounds unguarded. So with a heavy sigh I turned around and trotted back.

As the tools they had dropped were now gone, I realized that coming back was a good idea. I also realized I should have just tried to ambush one of them, instead of announcing my presence.

I took a few minutes to examine the rest of the grounds and found nothing out of place, and then took up my position again to wait until morning. The rest of the night passed quietly however and when the work team rolled up with the carts and the tools in the morning, everything was as they had left it.

"Any problems?" Tareassa asked as she came up to me with Jezza and Second Carso in tow.

"Someone tried to tamper with one of the stones," I said leading them over to the spot where I had encountered the figures last night. "But they ran off before I could catch them."

The builder and Tareassa spent a few minutes examining the spot.

"Well nothing looks damaged, and the blessings seem to be intact." She stopped a moment and picked up a small object. "What's this?" she asked and handed it to me.

I looked at it; it was a small piece of bone, flattened shaped like a triangle. A guitar pick?

"Let me see," I said and taking it from her, I examined it, and then put it in a pocket. "I'll look into it," I told her.

She nodded, "Well let's get the footing for the altar placed, and then they start on the sacristy cover."

Jezza agreed with her and I went off to get some breakfast and to think about what I had found.

Six

(Saladin – Tradeson)

The treaty signing took almost three hours. They all wanted to make a speech, and once they got started, some of them didn't seem to want to stop. I'm not a fan of speeches to start with and I'm even less of a fan of long useless speeches. Having to sit through all of this while tired didn't make it anymore enjoyable.

When they finally finished and signed and I had witnessed it all, I gave a sigh of relief. At least they laid out a nice spread of food, beer, wine, and ale. I suspect the only reason so many people had sat through the whole affair was the promise of free booze and food at the end of it. It did appear that all the beer and other spirits did help to sell the populace on the idea, not that I doubt many really cared one way or the other.

By the time I had managed to free myself from my obligations and headed back to the building site for the new temple, I was rather impressed. The entire delegation that had come with me was working on it, even the priestesses and priests. They had also apparently hired quite a few locals to work on it as well, and one of the things I saw them building was a perimeter fence to control access to the temple.

As I walked inside the boundary of the ward stones I could feel Fel's presence, this was definitely holy ground now, which meant the altar must have been set. Coming around from the back of the site, where I had entered, I could see it indeed had been.

"William!" Tareassa called and waved from off to the side of the sacristy, which several workers were still finishing. I walked over and joined her.

"I see you've made quite a bit of progress today."

She smiled, "Well we're spending enough gold to get the work done as quickly as possible. Jezza told me we'll have the frame of the entire building done in two weeks as well as the roof and external walls."

"Wow," I said looking around. "Guess he hired a lot of people."

"He told me he'll have even more here after the frame goes up, to do all the inside work and the finishing work."

"Great, then I'll be able to leave here sooner than I had hoped."

"Awww, do you have to leave so soon?" she asked leaning into me.

“Oh don’t worry; I’m taking you with me.” I smiled.

“What!” She looked shocked.

“Didn’t I tell you that there would be a price to pay for warming my bed?” I scowled and put my hand on my chin as if deep in thought. “Could have sworn I told you that.”

She growled and stepped on *my* foot for a change.

“I like it here,” she said.

“Joel and Kayryn have been here for over a decade now. If anyone deserves the job of presiding over the new temple here, it’s them. Besides, I need you more than they will.”

She stopped and looked up at me surprised. “You will?”

“Of course, with a pretty little thing like you up there in Stongshold, the men won’t be able to stay away from services, and of course their women will all show up to keep an eye on them,” I said smirking.

She growled and stomped even harder on my foot. “Wise-ass.”

“You are also the most powerful of all the priests and priestesses here, and with one less ward stone, we’re going to need that power to get set up.”

Tareassa sighed, “I’d forgotten that, you’re right.”

“Well let’s go back to the inn and get some food, they seem to have things well in hand here and will probably be wrapping up soon anyways. Did you talk to Second Carso about setting up a guard?”

“He’s detailed three shifts of eight men each. Most of the acolytes and other clergy are staying at the old church where Joel and Kayryn live, it’s just down the street a ways over there,” she said pointing as we headed to the inn.

“I heard that place is pretty small.”

“For a house, it’s not too bad. For a church, it is positively tiny. But apparently they’ve been packing them in, so,” she shrugged, “obviously they’ve been doing a good job here.”

I nodded and yawned. I wasn’t really all that tired, but after being up all night my mind was telling me I should be. Sometimes the champion thing didn’t exactly mesh with my body’s expectations.

“You better not fall asleep on me!” Tareassa teased.

“Oh I’m sure you’ll find a way to keep me awake,” I chuckled and stifled another yawn.

I awoke to someone pounding on the door with Tareassa curled up against me. I tossed off the sheet and jumped out of bed grabbing a sword.

“What?” I growled.

“There’s a fire at the temple site!” Someone whose voice I didn’t recognize yelled.

I swore and grabbing my weapon’s harness, I ran out the door. People were opening their doors and looking confused. I grabbed one of the guards and ordered him to watch Tareassa and then just bolted down the stairs and out the front door, running across town until I got to the site.

As I watched, one of the sacristy walls, which was on fire came down, and it looked like it was being dragged away from the building. One of the adjoining walls to it that had also caught fire quickly followed.

As I got closer, I remembered that they hadn’t put the walls up yet, just strung up some heavy canvass for tomorrow’s services. Somebody must have had the presence of mind to cut the canvas loose and others were hauling it away.

I crossed onto the temple grounds and I couldn’t feel anything else wrong, so apparently nothing else had been damaged. But I heard the cries of pain from inside the building and quickly ran inside ready for the worst.

I didn’t find any fighting inside, what I did find were several soldiers who had nearly all of the fur burned off their bodies and were covered in burns.

“What happened to them?” I asked one of the soldiers who had apparently just doused one of them with a bucket of water.

“They climbed up the framework to cut the canvas loose,” he said looking at me wide-eyed in shock. “While it was still burning!”

I swore and went to the one who looked the worst and cast what healing spells I could on him. I could heal wounds, but something this bad wasn’t in my abilities unless I was casting it on myself.

I was rather shocked then when the power kept flowing through me! I was able to get him fairly stable and I went and helped the one next to him, then the third one who was still smoldering. About that time, Joel showed up.

I waved him over, “These men need more help than I can give them.”

“You’re in your god’s house, William; you should be able to draw on his power all you need.” Joel said looking at me as if I was one of the slow kids.

“I don’t know how to heal burns,” I told him. “I’m not a healer, I’m a champion.”

He tsk’ed at me and went over to the first one, to finish healing him. By the time he got to the second, the other clerics had all arrived and they spilt

up, some going outside to heal the ones who'd gotten burns while dragging the canvas away.

The city guard also showed up at that moment, a fire in a walled city was a dangerous thing, and they also wanted to know what happened.

I went and found the guard in charge, turned out he was the one burned the worst. He looked a lot better now, though he didn't have much fur left on his body, so they had wrapped him in a soft cloth.

"What happened?" I asked him as Joel gave him a canteen of water to drink.

"Flaming arrows came from the roof tops to the south of us," he said weakly, and then took a drink.

"That was a brave thing you did," I told him.

He smiled looking a bit pained still and very tired. "I figured it would hurt less than having the Godslayer pissed at me for not doing my job!" He coughed a bit and took another drink of water. "Besides, being on holy ground, I was sure that my god would take care of me."

I smiled, nodded, and resisted the urge to shake his hand or pat him, well anywhere. Even with the healing, I'm sure his body was still hurting all over.

I turned to the head of the city guard who had followed me. "Might as well take a look at the roofs over there."

"Whoever it is, I'm sure they're long gone."

"Still, wouldn't hurt to make sure. Besides, if they left anything burning up there, we should go put it out."

He thought about that a moment and then nodded. "I'll detail a couple of my men."

I stood up and looked around. I still had my weapon's harness in my left hand; I'd re-sheathed my sword at this point.

"You know, you look good like that," Tareassa purred.

"Hmm?" I said and looked down at my naked self. "Oh right, you didn't bring my clothes, did you?" I asked noticing I was getting quite a few looks, mostly from the fems.

"Sorry," she blushed.

I shrugged; we were all covered in fur already, so it didn't really bother me all that much. "Well, let me check with everyone, then we can go back to the inn."

"Do you think they'll try anything else tonight?"

I shook my head. "Not at this point, there are too many people here now."

But you should probably move a few of the clergy onsite now. They could have helped quite a bit.”

Tareassa nodded, “I’ll go talk to the others while you make the rounds.”

I went outside and took a few minutes to look around and check with the guards. Nobody could really tell me anything that I hadn’t heard already, so I gathered up Tareassa and went back to the inn.

I moved onto the temple grounds the next morning after the mass had finished.

“Expecting more trouble?” Jezza asked looking at me as I put my gear and a bedroll back behind the altar.

“Hoping to prevent any,” I replied.

He nodded. “Well as long as you’re here, care to help?”

“Might at well. What do you need?”

He took me over to the team that was working on framing out the main section of the temple. “Got ya’ some muscle to help out today boys!” He said giving me a slap on the back.

The foreman brightened up immediately, “Another pair of strong hands will definitely be a blessing Jezza! Thanks, Sir Will, for helping!”

“It’s just Will,” I said and looked at the others on the team who were looking at me curiously. “So what do you need me to do?”

I’d never framed out a large building before, and I was surprised at how tough a job some of it was. There were some pretty heavy beams that needed to be hauled up and set into place while the others secured them. Because of my enhanced strength, they were all rather happy to have me, and while it wasn’t the most challenging of jobs mentally, I enjoyed the work and spending time with the other workers.

That night everything was quiet, but the next morning as they moved the carts from the barracks where some of them were kept at night, the wheels broke on two of them. Apparently, someone had managed to cut through the felloes, or the outside wooden rim, of two of the wheels sometime during the night. As both carts were heavily laden it made quite a mess and I heard from some of the others that Second Carso had some rather rough words with the soldiers who had been guarding the carts that night. It was suspected that the two damaged carts had been parked close to the entryway of the area they had been parked in.

Later that afternoon, after the work for the day was complete, but it

hadn't started to get dark yet, I decided to go for a walk though some of the city and start looking around for wherever it was that the minstrels were meeting. I hadn't gotten far when I heard a commotion, turning back I saw a small herd of suzhen, the demonic version of sheep they had here in Saladin, attacking the people who were packing up for the day at the temple site.

Sighing I turned and ran back, suzhen could be pretty nasty and from the sounds of things, this group of them was. By the time we killed them all, it was getting dark. But at least we had lots of fresh meat for dinner that night.

The next day was more of the same, only by the time we got done, it was already getting dark, so I decided to stay on the grounds and see if anything happened tonight.

Nothing did and I wondered how long the break would last. I found out when I decided to spend the afternoon wandering the city instead of working. A runner found me and told me I had to get back to the site. Someone had tossed several beehives onto the grounds, and it was playing havoc with the work crews. Whoever was behind it had made sure to stir up the bees quite a bit before tossing them onto the grounds.

That night I was rudely awakened by one of the priests who said there was someone lurking on the grounds. As soon as he said it I could feel it too, but it didn't feel quite the same as the last time. That time it had a feeling of urgency to it. This time it was more like an annoyance.

Grabbing my bow, I went outside and quietly snuck around until I found the culprit. They had their head inside one of the carts, and were obviously looking around. I noticed that they had one hand braced against the cart, so drawing an arrow on my bow I nailed it to the side of the cart, rather impressed by the sudden loud shriek of my target.

"Unless you want the next one through the heart, I suggest you shut up and tell me what you're doing here!" I called out as I walked up to them.

"I was only looking! I didn't touch na'thing, I swear!" They yelled, head still under the tarp covering the cart.

"Come out from under the tarp, where I can see you," I growled.

"I can't move! I'm stuck here!" They cried.

"If you don't move now, you're going to be stuck there for the rest of your very short life!"

"You'll kill me!"

"Five... Four... Three..."

“Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot!” They cried out and ducked out from under the tarp. I looked him over as he stood there shivering in fear, that only got more so when he saw who I was and his eyes widened.

“You’re, You’re....”

“Annoyed that I’m having to deal with a petty thief,” I said looking him over. He was done up all in black clothing, he even had a hood over his face. The only weapons on him were a couple of daggers. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, umm, I....” he said looking side to side, for an escape route I was sure.

“Your hand is still nailed to the cart and I’m a lot faster than you are,” I growled. “Now if you want to actually go *home* tonight, instead of being the first person interred here, I suggest you tell me what you’re doing.”

“Well, ahh.”

“And take that silly hood off of your face.”

He looked at me, and just about then two other guards showed up and he sighed, his shoulders drooping.

“I was looking for the gold.”

I blinked and looked at the others who were looking at me.

“What gold?” One of them asked.

“Yes, exactly, what gold?” I said as well.

“The gold paying for all of this!” He said motioning with his free hand. “Word among me mates is that you have a cart load of it. Just sitting here.”

I sighed. “Take the hood off.”

He did and I got a good look at him. He looked kind of weasely, quite a feat for a felinoid actually. I handed the bow to one of the guards and walked over to him.

“The gold, which you are looking for, has mostly been spent paying the worker’s wages and buying all materials you see stacked around you.” I grabbed the pinned arm with one hand and yanked out the arrow out of the cart and his hand with the other.

“AHHH!” He cried out.

I grabbed his wrist and applied a little pressure to cut down on the bleeding and twisted his arm behind his back, grabbing his other shoulder with my other hand.

“Go fetch Mother Kayryn please,” I said to one of the guards.

He nodded and ran off.

“As for the little bit of gold that’s left,” I said softly in his ear, “we keep it in a small locked metal box. Under *my* bed. You make sure all of your *mates* understand that, okay?”

He nodded his head quickly.

“Now, you wouldn’t know who’s been harassing us the last few days, would you?” I growled.

He shook his head no.

“You sure? Information like that would definitely encourage me to not hand you over to the guard.”

“No! I don’t know! I swear it. I didn’t even know someone was harassing you! If I had I never would have come here tonight!”

I nodded; it made a certain amount of sense.

I asked a few random questions about the city next, and then after he answered them I asked if he knew where the musicians gathered and met.

“No,” He said and shook his head.

“What?” I said acting surprised, “You know where the guardsmen meet for drinks when they’re ducking their duties, where the best fence in the city is, plus the best whorehouse and you *don’t* know where a bunch of singers hang out?”

He opened his mouth, then closed it, and thought a moment. “Ya’ know, that *is* pretty strange now that I think about it.”

Priestess Kayryn showed up just about then. She took a look at the man I was holding and shook her head. “Allston, does your wife know you’re here?”

Allston gave a soft groan and shook his head.

“Really, Allston, I’m surprised at you! I think it’s time me and her had a little talk about you.”

“Priestess, Mother, please. Don’t do that,” He said shaking his head. “She’d leave me for sure.”

“Tell you what, Allston,” I said with a slight growl. “You come to church every week with your wife, and do a little something for me, and perhaps I can convince the good Mother Kayryn not to have that talk with your wife.”

He turned his head and looked over his shoulder at me. I could see the desperation in his eyes.

“Anything,” he said.

“You find out where the musicians and singers all meet, and you tell me

or Mother Kayryn. That and show up for services every week, and we can keep this little indiscretion all too ourselves, right?”

“Yes!” He said and nodded quickly.

“Good.” I turned to Kayryn who was looking at me curiously. “Could you please heal his hand for me?”

She nodded, “Of course, William.”

I let him go and gave him a little push towards Kayryn.

“Thank you, thank you Sir William!” He said bowing to me as I turned and walked away.

“You just best do as he asked and stay out of trouble,” I heard Kayryn tell him as I left. “William the Godslayer is not a man you want mad at you!”

I smiled and headed back to bed. Maybe he’d be able to find that temple for me.

The next week proved just as difficult as the previous one. Between having to help the building crews with the construction, and the odd harassments in the evenings, one night a bunch of rowdy drunks stumbled in thinking we were a new inn, I was pretty much chained to the temple grounds keeping an eye on things. Three more times at night there was an intrusion on the grounds, but they all scattered as soon as I came looking for them.

Eventually an additional contingent of guards showed up from the main temple, so I could finally leave for Stongshold.

“I’m sorry, Fel,” I said to him across the table. We were sitting in his bar, it was late and I was asleep. “Now that the guards are here I can go look for it if you want, but we’re already a week behind schedule on the trip to Stongshold.”

Fel nodded, “I know, it can’t be helped unfortunately. I knew there might be some resistance to this temple, but I didn’t think there would be as much as you encountered.”

“I thought you were omniscient?” I asked without smiling. I really thought he was, and finding out he wasn’t, was well, both surprising and maybe a little disturbing.

Fel smiled at me, “Future events are hard to see, especially when there are a number of other gods and goddesses disturbing the flow of events. I’m not very good at seeing the future, when I really have a need of that gift I rely on Aryanna’s powers for help.

“As for the present and the past? The more time goes by, the clearer

things become as the influence of those events on the future wanes. But when it comes to the present, if another god is involved, well things become much more clouded.”

“How is that?” I asked.

“Champions and high priests or priestess are invisible to the other gods. They can’t see you; they can’t know where you are, unless one of their followers, one with significant faith, or a member of the clergy, sees you. The only exception to this is when you are actively exercising my will, doing something major, like leading my army in battle.”

“And the high priestess?”

“Unless you’re physically holding one, I can’t see anything more than a mortal. Otherwise, we gods would be targeting each other’s lead clergy constantly. Even regular clergy can be difficult or impossible to see if they take off their holy symbol.”

“And everything on holy ground is invisible to the other gods as well, right?” I asked.

“In most cases, yes. We can not see into each other’s temples and holy places.”

“So why did you want me to find their church?”

“Because I wanted to know if there was one, and of course, keep track of it. A hidden temple is only a powerful advantage when no one else knows that it exists.”

I nodded, “I guess I can see that.”

“So as much as I’d like you to find it, I need you to move on. I’ve already told Tareassa that she’s going with you, as you wanted.”

I perked up a bit at that, “I thought you couldn’t talk to anyone but the high priestess?”

“Now that the basic religious functions of my temple have been completed, I can talk to any of my clerics inside the ground, or you for that matter, mentally. If things continue to plan I’ll be able to speak out loud in there in time as well.”

I nodded, I was still figuring out a lot of this myself.

“Well, I’ll get us packed up and on the road in the morning. The sooner I can get this done, the sooner I can go home to Rachel.”

Fel smiled at me and nodded, “Keep up the good work, Will.”

Seven

(Saladin - Road to Stongshold)

The trip to Saladin started out just fine; it was a long one however. We had to go due west from where we were, past Rivervail, and then up into the foothills, and finally the mountains. We were three days past Rivervail when we started up into the mountains, Stongshold was another two days trip from here.

Our group was considerably smaller now; I had Tareassa with me, plus two acolytes, one of Jezza's builders, a male by the name of Jacobs, and his helper. Plus a half dozen soldiers and one cart with all of our stuff in it. I was tempted to send the soldiers back once we got to Stongshold, they were a pretty paranoid lot from the accounts I had heard. Another day and we'd be in their territory and I'm sure they'd know we were there almost immediately.

"This looks like a good place to make camp," I said looking around. I could see the steep hills and cliffs in front of us, according to the rough map I had we'd start going up a number of switchbacks along the trail until we found ourselves up on the mountain trail. You could take that trail either to Hiland or Stongshold, but Hiland was a three or four day journey, while Stongshold was only a day's from there.

We set up the tents, hobbled the two oxen and let them graze, got a small fire pit going, and made dinner.

Personally, I would have preferred sleeping out under the stars, but Tareassa didn't want to, so we didn't.

It was late and I was awake. I wasn't sure why I was awake, but something must have woken me up. I was untangling myself from Tareassa and the bedroll when I heard it, the sound of an arrow sinking into flesh, followed by the thud of a body to the ground.

"Alert!" I yelled as I felt everything start to slow down around me. Grabbing one of my swords, I sliced through the back of the tent and ducked outside.

"Alert!" I yelled again and looking around I could see several dark shapes running into the camp, we were being attacked!

I ran forward, keeping my body slightly bent to try and present as little of a target as possible as I engaged the first attacker I came to. He looked

surprised as I knocked his guard aside and ran him through, leaving him with a handful of guts as I ripped my sword out and attacked the one behind him next.

I could hear others taking up the cry and I also felt the sting of an arrow hitting me in the right shoulder. Swearing I grabbed it with my left hand and pulled it out, healing the wound as I did so. I then stabbed the figure to my left with the arrow as I hacked at the man in front of me. He was able to block my first strike, but not my second, I was moving far too fast for him, but I was forced to back-peddle by the sheer numbers of attackers I was facing, I picked up three more wounds as I killed him, there were at least a dozen attackers, possibly more.

Healing myself once again, I kicked myself mentally for being an idiot and cast a cantrip for light around me, momentarily blinding my opponents, and then cast the spell that gave me my champion presence, the one that would inspire my allies and demoralize my foes.

In the pause that followed, I killed two more of them, setting into them with a will I stepped forward into their ranks. I could hear fighting around me, but I couldn't take the time to look. I took two more arrows, and was forced to switch the sword to my left hand so I could pull them out with my right. The only thing saving me from a killing shot was my constant dodging and weaving in the midst of the attackers, and my increased speed.

As I maneuvered around them, I could see the camp, there were quite a few bodies surrounding it, and several were from my group. The men we were fighting were starting to look scared at this point. I had killed at least seven of them, and their numbers were thinning. I killed another one and suddenly they broke, turning and fleeing. I got one more in the back, then ducked and turned as an arrow flew overhead.

I could see the archer now, and I flung my sword at him with all of my might as I charged.

He deflected the sword with his bow, shattering his bow in the process, and before he finished drawing his own sword, I was on him. Using my claws, I made short work of him and then turned to look back at the camp.

It was a disaster. I could see four of the soldiers were dead, with arrows through them, the other two were wounded and I headed quickly for them.

"Tareassa! Are you okay?" I called out.

"I'm fine," she said poking her head out of the tent. She saw the two soldiers and ran over to them as well, healing the worst of their wounds.

“Jacobs, Dani, Harson, Laurie?” I called.

“Dani and Harson are wounded,” Jacobs told me walking up with a sword in his hand and a number of cuts on his own body. “Laurie is dead.”

“They killed her?” Tareassa said looking shocked.

“I think they panicked when they realized they had attacked a champion,” Jacobs said as we followed him over to Dani and Harson where they lay on the ground. Dani was still conscious and was trying to stop Harson’s bleeding. I let Tareassa heal them both as well.

“How many got away?” Cass, one of the soldiers asked from where he was sitting, still recovering from the effects of being healed.

“Not many,” I said. I looked around at the bodies of our attackers. There were fifteen on the ground. I walked over to my tent and pulling out my gear, I started to put my armor on.

“What are you doing?” Tareassa asked looking at me in surprise.

“I’m going to track them down and kill them. You stay here with the others and help them.”

“Let me go with you, Sir,” Cass said trying to stand up.

“You’re too weak yet. Put your armor on and help Geoff with his. Stay here and protect the camp.” I looked over at where he was sitting; Geoff was still flat on his back panting. “That’s an order.”

“Yessir!” They both said.

“You can’t go!” Tareassa said running up to me and looking panicked. “There’s only one of you!”

I looked up at her and growled, “This is what I do, like it or not I have to go after them. Go tend to the wounded.”

She looked like she was going to say something else so I gave her my best scowl and her expression became one of shocked surprise as I guess she suddenly realized that right now, I was not a nice person. Turning away from me she went back to deal with the wounded.

Finishing up with my armor, I buckled my weapon’s harness on and retrieving my sword from where it had landed, I went and tracked our attackers back to their lair.

They had a good fifteen-minute head start, but I was guessing they’d be making for their camp. If they were smart, they’d be packing up and leaving. If they weren’t smart, they’d be sitting there licking their wounds when I showed up.

I almost missed the entrance to their camp when I came to it. If one of

them hadn't been bleeding I probably would have. Their trail led to one of the cliffs, and in the cliff was a narrow cleft, which wound back and forth. At its opening it was maybe two feet wide, a tight squeeze with my armor, but it opened up once inside and twenty or so feet down it opened up into a tiny box canyon, a couple hundred yards wide and maybe half that deep.

I stopped and drew my own bow out. There were a dozen of them; one looked like he might be a healer of some sort. I shot him in the head, and then put a second one in his neck before he fell to the ground.

They all turned and charged me then, and I was able to drop another one before I had to toss my bow to the side and draw my swords.

I roared at them as they drew near and welcomed the speed shift as I stepped out into their midst and went to work. I knew it would have been safer to stay at the opening and take them on one or two at a time, but I was *pissed*. They'd killed a woman, an acolyte, someone who had no weapons, no magic, and no fighting skills. Just a person who worked hard because of their faith, who did the menial jobs and the hard tasks. She wasn't invading anyone's land, or sneaking about. She'd been out traveling openly and honestly and her death made me incredibly mad.

I called upon the might of Fel, I called upon his vengeance, and I could actually feel it filling me as I went berserk in their midst.

When it was all finally over, I had a dozen cuts on my body, two of them rather deep, which I used the last of my healing to fix. One of my swords was actually broken, the broken hilt stuck into one of the bodies, I wasn't sure what I had broken it on even, I honestly couldn't remember.

The bandits, or enemy, or whatever, were all dead. They looked like they'd run into a turbine propeller, several of them were in more than two pieces; none of them were still in one piece.

I walked over to the healer and tore off his holy symbol, and looked around. There was a small pool of water fed from a waterfall coming down from the rocks above. I guess it drained off somewhere, as it wasn't getting any larger. The walls were steep enough that you probably couldn't climb out. A rather nice place to hide something.

I checked the tents to be sure there was no one left alive, and then headed back to camp.

"How are they?" I asked Tareassa when I came back into camp. I'd remembered to use the cleaning cantrip, so at least I wasn't covered in gore and blood anymore.

Tareassa almost threw herself at me and gave me a tight hug.

“Geoff and Harson won’t be able to travel at all for probably a week, Cass and Dani will need a day or two as well.”

I nodded, “I found their camp, let’s move everyone there, it’s a lot safer than staying here.”

Tareassa nodded and then letting go of me noticed I was now bleeding from a few wounds that her hug had reopened.

“Oh! Let me fix that!” She said and putting her hands on me she blushed as she fixed the minor wounds I hadn’t had the power left to deal with.

It took a couple of hours to get everyone moved, a few more to get things cleaned up, the bodies buried, and everyone comfortable, by then the sun had risen and it had been light out for a couple of hours. The oxen and the cart wouldn’t fit in through the narrow opening. I moved most of the food and other supplies inside and while doing so I came across the box with the four broken ward stones.

Looking at them gave me an idea.

“Tare?” I said walking up to Tareassa, “Can you use these?”

She looked at the stones in my hands, “For what?”

“I want to stake out a church here.”

“Why would you want to do that?”

“Just humor me; can you do it with these?”

She nodded. “As long as they’re no farther apart then twenty six strides, sure.”

That was about eighty feet, more than I needed. I nodded to her. “Fine, I’ll get Jacobs to help me mark it out; you can consecrate the site then bless these.”

“We don’t have an altar you can use Will. We only have the one for Stongshold.”

“I’ll make one.”

She shrugged, “Okay.”

I went and found Jacobs, and I told him what I wanted to do. Marking out a square was fairly easy, it took maybe an hour to get it marked and the holes dug.

Then while Tareassa started in on all the blessings and such I went looking to see what I could find to use as an altar. All an altar really is, is a table. But it has to be something sturdy and long lasting. Stone was pretty

popular, so were thick slabs of wood. In the largest tent there, I found a decent table with a heavy top. The legs weren't exactly what I would have liked however, so I found two barrels and filled them with rocks I picked up around the base of the canyon's cliff walls, and I secreted Laurie's holy symbol within one of the barrels before nailing the top to them. Altars needed some sort of holy object when they were made, and I felt it was only right to use Laurie's.

I set it all up, in the midst of the area we had marked out, after moving the largest tent to the insides of the area. By nightfall we were finished and I could feel Fel's power as Tareassa finished blessing the altar.

"Whew, am I tired," she said sitting down.

I looked around the tent; it wasn't all that big, say ten feet by twenty. But the rules had been followed, and it counted.

"So why did you want to build this?" she asked looking at me.

"I don't know," I said giving a shrug, "I just did. Seemed like the thing to do, it's a nice, well hidden place."

"We'll call it the 'Champion's Temple' then," she said with a smile.

"Tomorrow you can do a mass here, then we'll leave for Stongshold."

"What about the others?"

"Jacobs can walk, Dani can ride in the cart, Geoff and Harson can stay here with Cass taking care of them. There are a lot of supplies here, and we'll leave most of ours behind as well."

She nodded. "Well I'm exhausted. I'm going to see what Jacobs has made us for dinner and then go to sleep."

I nodded and followed her out of the tent.

"It needs a pub," Fel said looking at me from across the table.

I smiled and shook my head. "I think there is a barrel of ale around someplace, I'll set a tent up across from it with that in it."

Fel laughed, "Better."

"So you don't mind?"

He shook his head, "Actually I like it. Nice hidden location, few people know where it is, and the ones other than you and Tareasse will forget soon enough."

"Whose holy symbol was that I found on that cleric I killed?"

"You'd have to ask Tareassa, I can't tell you that."

"Rules?" I asked.

He nodded, "Yup."

"Can you show me a list of all the holy symbols, of all the gods and goddesses, on this sphere?"

Fel smiled, "Of course I can!" And a chart suddenly appeared on the table. I looked it over, I'd have to try and memorize it.

"Don't worry, I've just put it in your memory," Fel said.

"I hate when you do that," I grumbled.

"Well I figured you weren't going to ask."

I sighed, "Good point. And yup, what I suspected. Tantrus, Barassa's main god."

Fel nodded and looked a bit grim, "They'd been in there about a week, you were the first group that they attacked. They were figuring on setting up a small slaving operation while scouting out the land for future attacks."

I nodded, "Does that mean I'll have to get someone to guard the place?"

"No, they hadn't told anyone else yet about the location, and of course will no longer have the opportunity to. I will send a couple of priests with some carpentry skills to see about something a little better than the tent, but not right now.

"Can I go out and talk to the ones who died last night? I want to thank them for their fighting, without them we probably would have all died."

Fel smiled, "Of course you can."

I got up and left the bar, I'd never really done this before in a dream, usually I was here recuperating from a death when I went outside. But I still felt bad about Laurie's getting caught up in the fight, and wished I could have done more to save the others as well. So I thought it only right that I thank them personally for their service, and apologize for my having failed them.

Eight (Saladin - Stongshold)

“So, are you going to let us in, or not?” I sighed looking up at the man on the city wall. The gates to Stongshold had been closed when we got here; somehow, I wasn’t surprised by that.

“How do I know you’re who you say you are?” He said eyeing me from on top.

“If I wasn’t, I wouldn’t think you’d be so terrified of me and my three companions that you’d lock the gate and sit up there pissing yourself,” I growled.

“I’m not afraid of the likes of you!” He growled back.

“Then why are the gates locked, and why won’t you let us in?”

“Because I have my orders, that’s why.”

“Ah, so you’ve been ordered to *intentionally* be rude to the representatives Queen Rachel of the Hilanders then?”

“You don’t look like no representatives to me!”

I sighed, “Have it your way then, I hereby declare this city under siege, and we will sit out here and await your surrender.”

“What?” He shouted down at me.

“Siege, you’re under siege. No one comes out or goes in.” I turned to the others. “Might as well set up camp here, it’s gonna be a while.”

“Are you serious?” Jacobs asked laughing, “There has to be thousands living in there.”

“Well they can’t all be as stupid as he is, but we’re sort of stuck until someone else comes along.”

“But a siege?”

I shrugged, “Couldn’t think of anything better to say and I can’t kill him. People would probably get upset.”

We settled down to wait then, blocking the road. After an hour or so, a group came up and stopped, looking at us.

“What are you doing?” One of them asked me.

“We’re besieging the city, sorry, you can’t go inside.”

“You’re what?” He said looking me and the others over. I myself counted twelve of them total.

“Conducting a siege.”

“The four of you?”

“Well they’re terribly frightened of us, apparently the guards pissed themselves in fear when we showed up and sealed the city gates.”

He sighed and shook his head.

“Farnesworth!” He yelled.

“Yes?” the guard’s head popped up from behind the wall.

“Open the damn gates.”

“But sir, we don’t know who those people are!”

He turned towards me, “I’m Stewart, I’m in charge of the northern patrols.”

I nodded and touched palms, “I’m William, Feliogustus’ champion, sent here by Queen Rachel of the Hilanders to discuss a possible treaty.”

His eyes widened slightly at that. “William the Godslayer?”

I sighed, “I really hate that name.”

“Farnesworth!” He yelled. “Consider yourself on report! Now open the damn gate!”

“Oh hold on, alright already!” I heard him grumble and about five minutes later one side of the gate slowly ground open.

“Allow me to welcome you and your group to Stongshold,” Stewart said to me. “Do you need a place to stay?”

“Actually yes. Is there an inn or such available?”

“Several, and as there is only a few of you, I doubt you’ll have any trouble securing rooms for the night.”

“If you could show us to the one closest to wherever your Prince Wicks holds court, I would greatly appreciate it.”

He nodded, “That shouldn’t be much of a problem” he said to me, as we walked through the gate, Jacobs leading the cart.

“I must say I am surprised you only brought three others with you,” Stewart said looking us over, apparently noticing the state that Dani was in as she rode in the cart.

“We were attacked on the way here by a large group; I lost several men, and had to leave several more behind to take care of the wounded, who were not yet able to travel.”

“Brigands? In a large band you say?” He said looking very concerned.

“Oh, they weren’t brigands, don’t worry about *that*,” I grumbled.

“Then what were they?” He demanded, tail now lashing in anger.

“Barassain slavers, and advance scouts for their army.”

“What!? I’ll have to tell the Prince about this immediately! How many got away?”

I looked at him and growled, “Do you really think I’d let *any* of them get away?”

He stopped suddenly and looked at me, his men almost piling up behind him.

“You’re sure?”

I nodded, “Very sure. They hadn’t been here long enough to get established. Probably only settled in a few weeks ago. Snuck all the way up here on foot, not wanting to let anyone know they’re already taking an interest in us.”

He swore. “I still must go talk to the Prince.” He turned to one of his men, “Harris, take them to the Rose. Come find me after that.”

One of the men nodded and came over to us as Stewart ran off, with the rest of his men jogging behind him.

“Follow me if you would please?” Harris said and we let him lead us to the inn.

As we walked through the streets, I looked around, interested. There was very little wood used in the construction here, almost all of it was stone. And the city, being on the side of a mountain, was anything but level, with the streets winding and turning as you went up the side of it. I also noticed that a number of buildings appeared to be hewn out of the rock.

I asked Harris about it.

“Oh, that’s how they get the rock to build the walls and the houses, just quarry it here, and often they’ll turn the quarry into a house, or a business when they’re done with it.”

“What other things do you find when you’re quarrying the stone?” Jacobs asked, apparently he knew something I didn’t.

“Oh, copper, some iron, a little gold,” he said and grinned. “That’s what we’ve been trading to your city for most of our food and supplies for years now, but I’m sure you knew that already.”

I hadn’t known it! I silently thanked Jacobs for asking the question.

“Well, here we are,” He said a little while later when we finally came to a long one story building.

“Where are the prince’s council chambers?” I asked.

He pointed to a large fortress type structure built into the side of the mountain across an open area that looked like a small parade ground. “Right

over there, in the original Keep.”

“Thank you,” I said and touched palms, then went inside to see about getting us rooms.

The taproom inside was fairly large, with wooden buttresses and columns supporting the stone roof; the place looked to be rather solidly built. I was a bit surprised to see few people in it, even if it wasn’t that late yet.

“What do you need?” The man behind the bar asked as I walked up.

“The two largest rooms you have.”

He nodded, “Here to see the prince I take it?”

I nodded back.

“Yeah, rumor has been floating around that the Hilander queen wants us to join up with her. Guessin’ you’re the ones she sent.”

I nodded again, “Think your prince will be interested in it?”

He shrugged, “Don’t honestly know. We be pretty safe up here, the Mulanders, yeah they were a bit of a pain, but we always killed a lot more of them, than they did of us, so it didn’t bother us all that much. Just gave the young lads something to do besides mining.”

I nodded again. We haggled over the price next, and then he showed me the rooms. I got two, which surprised Dani and Jacobs a little, but I didn’t want us being spread out too thinly, being as there was only four of us now. I told them if they didn’t like sharing the bed, one of them could sleep on the floor.

I brought in the things from the cart I was most worried about being damaged, I would like to have carried the altar in as well, but it was too big to get down the hall, much less fit in one of our rooms. But they did have a storage room of sorts that I could store the cart in, and one of the youngsters working there took our Oxen down to the local stable for us.

“Well now what?” Tareassa asked me as the four of us sat around a table eating our dinner.

“Tomorrow I’ll go see Prince Wick, and present him with the agreement. You two,” I motioned to her and Jacobs, “go look for a place to buy to set up a church in.”

“I thought we were going to look for a place to build something?” Jacobs said.

I shook my head, “You saw how everything was laid out, this place is more of a fortress than a city. I doubt there’s all that much open space, and even if you were to find a place, I suspect getting anything built around here

takes years. Might be better just to mine the temple out of the side of the mountain, but even that will take time.”

Tareassa nodded in agreement, “We get the biggest building we can buy and set up in there, we could have a nice church set up and running in a week. Then we’ll spend a few months canvassing the locals, talking to the faithful, and figuring out where we want to build. I like the idea of something build into the side of the mountain, I just don’t know if Narasamman or Feliogustus would approve.

“But in either case, we don’t know enough about things here, and there are only four of us. Besides, we only have six wardstones left.”

Jacobs and Dani nodded.

“What do you want me to do?” Dani asked.

“Until we find a place, nothing much,” Tareassa told her. “So just talk to the town’s people and see what you can learn about the place. We’re going to be here awhile after all.”

Dani nodded.

We were just finishing up our meal when Stewart came in, saw me and came over to the table.

“William, if I might speak with you a moment?”

I nodded and stood, “Sure, what can I do for you?”

“The Prince would like to meet with you.”

“Now?” I said surprised.

He nodded.

I smiled, “Well just let me get the agreement Queen Rachel gave me, and we can go.”

He agreed and a few minutes later, he was leading me into the building across the small square.

There were guards at the entrance, but none once we got inside. We turned to the right and he took me down a short hallway, then into a small room with two narrow windows on the wall facing outwards. They were more like arrow slits than windows I noticed.

Sitting at a large desk with a guard on his left and a scribe on his right was a rather old looking male. He was rather big, almost as tall as I was, and looked to be rather fit as well.

“So, you’re the one Queen Rachel sent to meet with me, are you?”

I nodded, “Yes Prince Wicks, that would be me.”

“So tell me, why should I join her kingdom?”

I dropped the document carrier on his desk, "It's all in there, read the offer." I said gesturing to it.

"Oh I will, don't doubt that, but I asked for your reason."

"Because if you don't all hang together, you will all hang separately?" I said with an exaggerated sigh. "We all know there is going to be a war. Oh probably not this year, or next, but there's going to be one. Unless we all unite and build ourselves up to be too tough a nut to crack. Barassa will come if they think they can win, and if you don't join us, well, they'll try and conquer you."

"I'd like to see them try," Prince Wicks said with a smile. "We're in a good position here, they'll never take us."

"Oh? How many years worth of food do you have stashed in those mines of yours? Just how long a siege can you really withstand? How long do you think it would take them to build a bridge from one of those neighboring hills, using their slave labor, to be able to bypass your walls?"

He looked at me as if I'd grown a new head, "Build a bridge?"

I nodded, "Where I came from, a very large army tried to take a city, not much different than this one. They surrounded it, and prepared to besiege it for however long it took, decades if necessary. It took them a few years, but they built a huge dirt bridge all the way up to the city walls, and took the city."

"We have a saying where I came from now, 'Fixed defenses are a monument to man's stupidity.' You join with us, if they try anything you'll have the entire Hilander army keeping them from ever having the luxury to just sit out there and take you at their ease."

"And why do you want to join with us?"

"Because you're here, you've got mines with materials we can use; you have an effective fighting force that would work well with ours. Our cultures are similar; we've been good neighbors for ages. I would think that you'd like to be able to spread out to the other hills and mountains around here as well. As the Hilander kingdom grows, you'd grow along with it; our strength would be your strength."

"Sounds like you've thought about this quite a bit."

"Well I went to Kethel and Tradeson first, saved you for last."

"Oh?"

I nodded, "Everyone says you're an ornery old man who's hard to deal with and doesn't like change. Figured if I was going to get stuck someplace for a month or two, might as well be here, they tell me the pubs here are the

best.”

He laughed at that. “Only if you like fightin’!”

I gave him my best evil smile, “I not only like fighting, I like winning fights even more.”

He chuckled at that. “Well I will read your queen’s offer, and we can discuss it further tomorrow.”

I gave a short bow and left the building with Stewart, heading back to the inn.

“Despite what our prince said, there really aren’t that many pub fights in our city,” Stewart sighed.

I laughed, “That’s okay, I’ve never really heard anything about the pubs and the inns here. I just figured he wasn’t the type for flowery speech.”

Stewart grunted, “You got that right. Life can be tough up here, especially in the winter. People tend to be blunt.”

“Well I hope he likes my queen’s terms. You’d all make a welcome addition to the kingdom.”

“Do you really thing the Barassain’s are going to come up the river?”

“I gather a lot of their economy depends on slaves, if they have to start coming up here to gather their own, then they’ll probably come to conquer. They know we’re fragmented and they think we’re weak.”

“So if we get strong, we’ll beat them when they come. Is that the idea then?”

“If we’re strong, they’ll just go look for a weaker target.”

Stewart nodded, “Typical predator tactics.”

We came to the inn, “Well goodnight, I’m off to find my own bed,” he said and touching palms we went our separate ways.

I was in a deep sleep when suddenly I felt something painful and I was suddenly in Fel’s bar.

“What happened?” I gasped, “Did I just get killed in my sleep?”

Fel growled and looked at me; he looked pained as well, “No, worse. The altar at the temple in Tradeson was just destroyed!”

I stood up, “What?”

“A small group broke in, killed three of my priests and destroyed the altar before they were killed.”

“What about the other one? The one in the small church?”

“It’s on fire as we speak; it will probably burn to the ground.” He

growled.

I swore, "I think I can get there in three days if I run, maybe less."

"Good, go! Find out who is responsible and remove them from my city! Do whatever you have to do!"

"Is there anything I need to know?"

"Yes, all of my spells will be weakened for at least a couple of weeks. Less if that altar gets restored, longer if I lose another one."

I nodded, and then sat up suddenly as I realized I was now awake. Tareassa was gasping in bed besides me.

"What happened?" She asked looking scared in the moonlit room.

"The altar in the temple in Tradeson has been destroyed and the church there is on fire. I have to go."

"What?" she blinked, looking confused.

"I have to go. Tell the prince that Fel called me away on an urgent matter, and I had to go. Do not tell him anything more than that." I said getting out of bed and donning my gear.

Tareassa got out of bed and helped me put it all on, including the small pack that had what was left of our rations in it, plus a couple of water skins.

"Should I still put up the temple?" She asked looking concerned.

I nodded, "Yes, the sooner the better." I bent over and gave her a kiss, "Be careful, don't go anywhere alone."

Then I left the room, the inn, and headed down to the city gates at a brisk trot.

They were closed of course when I got there.

"Who goes there?" The guard asked as I approached.

"William the Godslayer," I growled. "I need to leave, I have urgent business elsewhere."

He looked at me a bit strange, "Who would have business at this time of night?"

"Feliogustus, he calls I serve." I growled louder, "Now how do I get out of here?" I was pretty sure they wouldn't open the gates this late at night.

"Fourth Leon!" He called turning to the tower on the right side of the gate, "Got an urgent request for someone to leave."

"Send them up, I'll lower the rope," someone shouted down.

I went inside the tower and quickly climbed the ladder to the top. A soldier, Fourth Leon I guess, was tossing a rope over the side. I just grabbed it and slid down quickly, ignoring the heat coming from my gloves.

As soon as my feet hit bottom I was off. It took us six days to get here; I knew I could run almost nonstop for two before I had to rest. I just hope I could get there before things got any worse.

Nine

(Saladin - Tradeson)

I got to Tradeson the morning of the third day. I was tired, dirty, and hungry, but I got there. When I came jogging up to the gates they just stepped aside, I ran right to the temple and stopped once I got inside.

I could feel that the ground was still consecrated, but I couldn't feel Fel's presence. The altar was gone; I guess they had removed it. I grabbed one of the acolytes who were standing there staring at me.

"Where is the altar?"

"What?"

I shook him, he rattled, "I said where is the altar? What did they do with it?"

"They, they took it outside, it was cracked down the middle, not quite broken, but they had profaned it, and it couldn't stay in here anymore."

"Who died?"

"Father Toble and Father Joel. Father Toble was in here when the attack came and they killed him. Father Joel was at the old church when they attacked that."

I nodded, "Take me to Mother Kayryn, then go get me as much food as two men can carry."

He nodded, "Yes, Champion, this way!" and he led me to a room behind the Sacristy that hadn't been finished when we left here. There were four guards surrounding it, and two inside when I entered.

"One of you help him get me some food, the other can step outside," I said going over to Priestess Kayryn, and kneeling down I gave her a hug.

"Are you alright, Kayryn?"

She nodded, she didn't look all right, but I expected as much. I turned to the others, "Why are you still here?" I growled. They quickly left.

"Tell me what happened," I said and I kneeled on the floor before her as she sat down in a chair.

"I was asleep upstairs in our old church when the attack first came, Joel and I both felt them when they entered the building. He ran downstairs yelling for the guards as I gathered up what I could of our vestments and icons.

"He took an arrow to the throat, then they set on him with swords as the

guards killed them,” she told me, her ears sagging down.

I interrupted, “The guards killed the attackers?”

She nodded, “It was suicidal of them, but they must have set the building on fire already, because it was burning by the time I got downstairs.”

“What of the altar?”

“It was destroyed in the fire. It spread too fast to get it out in time.”

I nodded, “And what happened here?”

She shook her head, “I don’t exactly know, you’d have to ask one of the guards, but a group of twenty men charged the place, they didn’t stop to fight, just tackled any guard that got near them. Two made it to the altar, and attacked it with large two-handed hammers after throwing blood and excrement on it. Once it cracked, that was it.”

I sighed and nodded, “Did they find anything on the bodies?”

She nodded, “Several of them had picks for playing instruments, one had a flute.”

“Has anyone questioned any of the musicians?” I growled.

“No one can find any of them, it’s like they all disappeared.”

I sat back on my heels for a minute to think about it. I was pretty tired; I’d have to sleep soon. Right after I ate no doubt. It took me a minute to track down the thought I was trying to remember. “That weasely guy I had you heal. He still coming to mass?”

She nodded.

“I need to eat and sleep a little. Once I’ve done that, I’d like to speak to him, see what he’s learned.”

She nodded, “I can have someone find him.”

Just then the acolyte came back, carrying a large tray of food, with one of the soldiers behind him carrying a second one. “Ah good,” I said and went over to the table they had set the trays on and ate until I passed out.

I was in Fel’s bar of course. He was looking a little haggard, which wasn’t good, I could tell. Instead of sitting at one of the tables like we usually did, he was behind the bar, leaning against it. I was sitting on the other side.

“It’s from the backlash of losing the church and the altar at the temple. If they’d destroyed the markers and de-sanctified the grounds, it would have been worse. Thankfully I’ve got two full temples now and eight other churches, so it’s not as bad as it would have been a year ago.”

“How is Tareassa doing?”

“She found an old warehouse that nobody wanted and moved in. Got the whole thing up and running last night and will be holding a mass to christen it in a little while.” He looked at me, “You *will* give into any demands she makes of you, understand?”

“Helped that much?” I said surprised.

“Yes. And before you go running off looking for whoever did this, I need you to replace that altar. That is paramount, understand?”

I nodded and looked at the bar. Something about it looked familiar, “Is there anything else I can do?”

He shook his head, “This will pass with time, getting the new altar set up will make it pass quicker, but it will still be a week before I’m back in my prime. I need you to find the right altar for me as well, something a bit more distinctive, and no don’t ask why, I can’t tell you.”

I nodded. “Is there anything you can tell me about the ones who did this attack?”

He shook his head again. “You can search their bodies, look at them, whatever you want and I don’t think you’ll find anything. It was very thorough.”

“Okay, I’m on it. How long until more priests get here?”

“Two more days. So hurry up.”

I woke up, I was still sitting at the table, or rather I was semi-collapsed over it with my head next to my plate. I sat back and yawned, tripping the cantrip to clean my appearance up. I was sure I was a mess.

“How long was I asleep?” I asked Kayryn who was still in the chair I had last saw her in.

“About an hour. What did Feliogustus have to say?”

“That we need to get a new altar set up, now.”

“We don’t have anything suitable,” she sighed.

“Can’t you just make it out of anything?” I asked thinking of the simple one I had made for the small church in the woods.

“Not for a temple. It needs to be something special, something grand, or something representative of our god. Normally we make them from stone, but even a quality wood one would take a couple of weeks to make.”

I thought about the meeting I’d just had with Fel, and something sprung to mind.

“Have someone go fetch the weasel.” I turned to one of the guards,

“Where are the bodies of the attackers?”

“Buried, Champion, Sir.”

“It’s Will,” I said, “And tell whoever buried them I want them dug up.”

I turned to the other guard, “Send someone to fetch Jezza if he’s still here.”

“Yessir, Will!” he said and the two guards departed.

“You have an idea then?” Kayryn said looking up at me with a glimmer of hope in her eyes, her ears perking up a little.

“Always. Go prepare whatever you need to do to set an altar, we’ll be back with one soon enough.”

She nodded and got up, and grabbing a leg of suzhen I went outside to wait for Jezza and his men to show up.

Surprisingly, or maybe not so surprising, they came running up only a few minutes later.

“What’s up, Will?” Jezza asked panting.

“Got an idea. Grab a few of your men and come with me.” I pointed to what looked like a sergeant in the guard, “Go grab the strongbox, and follow me.”

He nodded and went back inside the room I had just left.

I led them out of the temple and across town until we came to the inn we had been staying at when we first got here. Walking inside I looked at the bar. It was the same one that Fel had been standing behind in my dream.

“William,” Harston, the inn’s owner, called from behind the bar, “What can I do for you?”

“I want to buy twelve feet of that bar,” I said looking up at him. “How much?”

“The bar?” He looked confused, “I can’t sell this!”

I took the strong box from the guard and looked in it.

“Five gold,” I growled.

He blinked “Five gold?” He said looking shocked.

“Yes.”

He jumped back and waved at it, “Take it!”

Jezza looked at me, “What do you want that for?”

“That Jezza, is our new altar. Cut it out of there, and haul it to the temple and set it up. And be quick about it, we need this done *now*.”

Jezza turned to one of the men he had brought with him, “Go get a cart, all the saws and five, no, ten more men. We got work to do!”

Jezza walked up to the bar and started to examine it as his man ran off. I got the five gold out and handed it to Harston, who still looked shocked.

“You’re going to make my bar into an altar?” He said looking up at me.

“Yup,” I handed him five gold. “It’s the nicest one in town.”

Three hours later, they had it sitting in the temple and were aligning it as Jezza and his helpers attached some bracing and fastened it to the floor.

“A *bar*, William?” Mother Kayryn said to me giving me one of those looks you’d get from your mother before you got a beating as a child.

I nodded, “Yes, a bar.”

“I hardly see how a *bar* is appropriate, William,” she growled.

“Fel’s first church was inside an inn, his first altar was a bar. This has significance to him and is very representative. Trust me, it’ll work and he’ll like it.”

She looked skeptical, “If he doesn’t, well I guess that’s between you and him.”

I took a few steps back and looked at it, “To be honest it actually looks kind of good there.”

“I’m done,” Jezza said standing up and moving away as his men cleaned up and packed up their things.

“Well I guess it’s my turn then,” Kayryn said.

“How long will this take?”

“A few hours.”

I nodded, “Is your weasel friend here yet?”

“Allston? Yes, the guards are entertaining him in the back room where I’m staying now.”

I nodded, “Thanks!” and left her there to get started.

Walking into the room I could see Allston was looking rather nervous, his eyes darting to either side, checking out possible routes of escape. When he noticed me, he flinched and started to look rather panicked.

“I... I had nothing to do with it! Honest! I would never do anything to hurt Kayryn or Joel! Or Feliogustus!” he spit all out very fast, almost pleadingly as he rose out of his chair.

“Relax, Allston,” I said waving him back into his seat, “I already know you didn’t have anything to do with it. What I want to know, is did you find the central location for the musician’s cult?”

He nodded rapidly, “Yes, yes I did! Do you think they had anything to

do with it? They didn't kill Joel, did they? Why if they did...."

I was surprised when he actually growled at that last bit. Maybe he had a little backbone after all.

"I don't know if they did, or if they didn't, but I do have a lot of questions I want to ask them, so if you could show me where they are, I can go ask them."

"You, you think they know something?" He asked leaning forward a little in the chair.

"Oh I'm sure they know something, the hard part will be finding out exactly what." I turned to one of the guards, "Is there a map of the city handy so he can show me where the building is?"

"Don't bother," Allston said shaking his head, "any maps of that part of town would be worthless, I'll have to show you myself, it's pretty well hidden."

I looked at him surprised, "You're volunteering?"

His ears flattened and his tail curled in a combination of embarrassment and nerves, "Father Joel married me and my wife Emily, I... I think I owe it to him."

I nodded, "He was a good man, and your loyalty is noted." I stood up, "Take me there."

He nodded and stood himself. "Umm, you may want a cloak or something, you do sort of stand out dressed like that."

I looked down, I was still dressed in armor and wearing my weapons, he had a point. I turned to one of the guards, "May I borrow your cloak?"

He nodded and gave it to me. I took my helm off and set it on the table; I figured I'd be better off without it on.

Allston nodded, "Better, let's go."

We set off across town, into one of the warehouse districts and he led me through a series of alleyways and paths that twisted back and forth enough that I wasn't sure I'd even be able to find my way back out.

"This is where some of the council keeps a lot of the things they don't want people to know about," Allston told me. "That's why it's like a maze back here and there isn't any maps."

"What kinds of things?" I asked curious.

"Their gold, their treasures, the more valuable spices that they trade, I've heard sometimes they keep drugs and their less than savory hirelings back here as well. They think by hiding everything back here that the people won't

know about it, and the thieves won't find it."

"Guess the thieves found it then, didn't they?" I snickered.

He snorted, "The only reason we don't touch it, is because it's not worth the risk. But every once in a while someone manages to grab a few things."

He stopped me then, "Around that corner," he pointed, "you'll see a door on the right. Through that door is a small courtyard, or used to be, there's some kind of building in there now."

I raised an eyebrow and flicked an ear. "Did you go in there?"

He shook his head. "Not since I was a much younger man. Used to be where Hoffen kept some of the fancier carts he used for the founder's day parade. But he moved them out years ago. When I saw one of the musicians duck in there last week, I noticed something past the door, but wasn't close enough to see what it was. I don't know if they built it, but whatever it is, they're using it now."

I nodded, "Go back to the temple, I'll meet you there."

"You sure?" He said looking rather surprised. "You'll never find your way out of here by yourself."

"Well if you want to wait, wait back there," I motioned a way's back down the alley. "But don't take any risks; I may need your skills again. So I won't be upset if you're not there."

"Like they could find me!" He huffed and turning headed back down the alleyway.

Moving up to the corner I got down low and peaked around the corner, there was nobody there and I could see the door he had told me about. There were no other doors along the alley, which went maybe ten feet past the door and then split off in three directions.

I suspected there were a lot of other exits from the courtyard as well.

Doing my best to be quiet, I slowly picked my way down the alley. Just as I got to the door it opened a crack and I locked eyes with someone looking out, eyes that got very wide all of the sudden.

Kicking the door with my foot, it flew open and the person on the other side stumbled back a moment, momentarily stunned. Stepping forward I recognized her immediately, even though she was wearing a hooded cloak like mine, it was the female minstrel from the inn I had seen on that first night over a month ago.

I looked around the courtyard, there were a few people walking around who were starting to turn to see what had happened. The courtyard was a

small one, and there was what I would best describe as a pole barn in the middle of it. It looked pretty rough, and beat up, and had one set of large doors that were closed, and a smaller door that was open.

The woman was taking a step back, off balance from getting hit by the door; I grabbed her arm, with one hand, and pulled her close.

The moment I touched her I knew it: she was a high priestess.

“Oh I’m so sorry Mother; I didn’t see you standing there! Come, let us be quick, they are waiting for us!” I said and physically dragged her out pulling the door closed behind us, before she had a chance to gather her wits. Hopefully the few people in the courtyard would think I was supposed to be with her.

“You, you! Let me....”

I grabbed her by the neck, glaring down into her eyes.

“I know who you are, you know who I am. You keep your mouth *shut*, you do as I say, and I’ll bring you back here.”

She started to growl and I could feel her stiffening.

“If you start anything, I’ll kill you and go in there and kill everyone. You know I’ll do it.” I growled right back at her showing my fangs.

I turned then and letting go of her throat I dragged her back the way I came, running. The only thing keeping her upright was the strong grip I had on her arm; she was stumbling and unable to regain her balance.

“Who’s that?” Allston said as I came around the corner.

“Someone I need to talk to, lead!” I growled.

He led.

We made it back to the temple grounds in record time, and the priestess started to put up quite a fight as I dragged her towards the grounds. I stopped and turned to face her grabbing both arms. I did the eyes and ears thing, I suspected Fel would be very interested in what happened next.

“Did you have anything to do with this?” I asked, still growling softly.

“No, we did not.”

“Then why are you hiding?”

“Because you will not believe us.”

“Why don’t we put that too the test?” I said pulling her towards the gate.

“Stop! He will kill me!” She protested.

“Why? Why will he kill you?”

“I am not his priestess, I belong to another goddess, he will kill me to

gain advantage.”

“If you are innocent, Feliogustus will not kill you. If you are guilty, he won’t have the chance because I will. Are we clear?”

“You can’t speak for him.”

“Oh yes, in this I can. Right Fel?” I growled.

I could feel his agreement and sent a silent thought thanking him for his faith in me.

“Now come.”

“No!” she said pulling back.

I gave her a hard yank and threw her over my shoulder, and turned and walked onto the grounds. She tried to claw my back, but quickly discovered I was wearing armor underneath the cloak.

“What do we have here?” One of the guards asked as I walked up to the temple.

“Did they get those bodies dug up?”

“The ones who attacked us? Yes sir, they’re around the back of the temple.”

“Good, take me to them.”

I followed the guard as the woman over my shoulder continued to struggle.

“You know, you’re just making me think you’re guilty,” I told her.

“You’re going to kill me no matter what you decide. We know all about you, Godslayer!”

“If you know all about me, then why are you still here in town?” I growled.

She didn’t have an answer to that.

“Here they are sir,” he said.

I set her on the ground, still holding her arm tightly with one of mine. The guard got a good look at her then, as did Allston.

“She’s one of those singers and players!” The guard said, “Like the ones here!”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

“But we found them with picks and instruments on them.”

“That means nothing!” She said loudly.

“Quiet!” One of the guards said taking a step forward.

“STOP,” I growled and they stopped.

“If anybody is going to kill anyone, it will be *me*, understand?” I said

looking at all of them.

They all nodded and backed off.

“Allston, you’ve got sensitive fingers, check the fingertips of her left hand.”

“Why?”

“Just do it.”

He nodded and did it. She put up a brief struggle when he took her hand, but I shook her and she stopped.

“She’s got calluses!” he said looking up at me surprised.

“Of course I have calluses!” she growled.

“Show us your claws, as well.” She flexed them out; they were all cut shorter on that hand.

“Examine theirs,” I said nodding at the pile of bodies.

“All of them?” Allston said looking a little leery at the idea.

“All of them,” I growled.

It took him ten or fifteen minutes, which considering the state of some of the bodies was impressive.

“Ten of them have the shortened claws Sir William,” He said when he was done, “but none of them have any calluses on the end of their fingers.”

“What does that prove?” One of the guards asked.

“It proves,” I said turning to look at the high priestess, “That none of them were musicians.” I could see that she was looking relieved.

“But what about their clothes? The picks for the instruments? The flutes?”

“Playing an instrument like theirs gives you calluses. If you’ve never done it, you wouldn’t know it; you wouldn’t know to check for it.”

“But their claws were cut short!”

“If you’d looked at them before we put them in the ground, you probably would have noticed they were freshly cut.”

“May I look at them?” She said unexpectedly.

“Sure, be my guest,” I said letting go of her arm.

She stepped forward and put a paw on one and said something, then made a sign. There was a momentary glow and then she gasped and stepped back suddenly, bumping into my chest. I steadied her.

“What was that all about?”

“These men were priests!” She snarled.

“Whose?” I asked a bit shocked myself.

“I can’t tell, but I can make a pretty good guess,” she growled.

I felt it then, suddenly Fel’s presence was back, I guessed Kayryn had finished the ceremony.

The High Priestess gasped and took a step as if to run, but I grabbed her.

“Come on, I think there’s someone you might want to talk to,” and turning her I marched her into the doorway.

“What about the bodies?” One of the guards called.

“They can wait.” I said.

I could feel her shivering in front of me, “No, please, not this,” she protested.

“No one is going to hurt you, and you will be escorted home shortly,” Fel’s voice said out loud surprising me.

“I thought the temple had to be more developed before you could talk?” I said out loud, rather surprised.

“The new altar really helped,” Fel laughed.

“You got an altar down here already?” She said shocked.

“My champion is a most resourceful man,” Fel’s voice said as I steered her into the back room we’d been using, and sitting her down in one of the chairs.

“Now, what is your name?” Fel asked.

“Felecia,” she said looking around.

“And the name of your goddess?”

“Fordessa.”

“Fel, how could she tell they were priests?” I asked curious.

“Because she’s a high priestess. One of the rules of the game.” Fel replied.

“Can we tell whose they are?”

“No, but I think we can guess. Right Felecia?”

She nodded, “Tantrus.”

“Why would they send priests to attack us?” I asked.

“Because neither your god nor my goddess would be able to track them, and they’d be immune to any control spells your priests could throw at them when they attacked.” Felecia said.

“Still, seems like a waste.”

“Tantrus’ priests are very fanatic; to them this would seem like a wonderful way to serve their god. I doubt they thought they would die in the attempt either.” Felecia growled, “And think about it, if you had thought

Fordessa responsible, you would have hunted down her clerics, torn down her temple, and did to us what you did to the Mulander god.

"I'm sure they thought it was worth their lives," she growled.

I thought about that, it was a pretty smart idea. But it also made me uncomfortable as I realized something else.

"They've got a church here, don't they?"

"Probably," she agreed.

"Most likely," Fel's voice said.

"Allston! I called and turned to find him standing in a corner looking a bit overwhelmed by what was going on, watching us quietly.

"Yes..s?" he asked looking guilty.

"Seen anything that looks like a church or a temple to an evil god around here?"

"Well... not exactly, but..." he trailed off looking unsure.

"But what?" I asked prompting him.

"Well there's a part of town, in the poor section, that's been kind of dangerous for a while now. Most of my friends avoid it after a few people who went down there to umm, *look* around didn't come back. Course not like we go there much, people down there tend to be poor. We just thought some sort of gang was forming, so we been steering clear of it lately."

"Thank you Allston. Now, why don't you wait outside?" Fel's voice said.

"Y... yes Feliogustus!" Allston said, eyes a bit wide as he hurried out of the room.

"Guess I know what I'm doing tonight," I sighed.

"Yes, take as many men as you can get, this won't be easy," Fel's voice said, "I don't have any priests I can spare to help you tonight."

"I could send you some," Felecia said from where she was sitting.

I blinked, surprised. "You would?"

"Fordessa has told me to help. This was an attack on her as well as on Feliogustus."

"I would be in your debt," Fel's voice said into the room.

"Then I will go gather them and meet you back here in a few hours," She said standing.

"Let me get you an escort," I said going to the door.

"Thank you."

I waited until the guards and Felecia had left the room.

“How long as Fordessa been a goddess here?” I asked Fel.

“Less than one hundred years.”

“Really? Why would anyone come here now? I thought this place was already rather full.”

Fell laughed, “She didn’t come here the same way I did. She’s a local.”

“A local?” I asked sitting down in a chair and relaxing for now.

“She was a gifted musician, here on Saladin. She became very famous, and did a lot of good works and deeds with the money and prestige she earned from her talent. People started to follow her. When she died, they venerated her.

“Someone started a religion, some of her younger students as I understand it, and eventually she achieved godhood.”

“Sounds a lot easier than what we went through,” I sighed putting my feet up.

“It isn’t,” Fel said and I noticed I was sitting in the bar suddenly.

“I must be tired; I didn’t even notice falling asleep!” I said looking around.

“I did that.” Fel admitted.

“Oh?”

“Less chance of us being overheard.”

“What do you want me to do?” I sighed, I wasn’t sure I was going to like this.

“I want you to go back to Fordessa’s temple tonight with Felecia after the fight.”

“Assuming I’m still alive of course,” I grumbled.

Fel laughed, “Of course.”

“Then what?”

“I want you to talk to Fordessa, I want to see what the inside of her temple looks like, how her people act.”

“Why?”

“Because if she’s going to be a threat to me, better to deal with it now while she’s weak and small of course.”

“What if they’re not going to be a threat? Can they become an ally?”

“It’s hard to be allied with another god, Will; we’re all sort of competing for the same thing.”

“But you’re allied with Aryanna,” I pointed out.

“She’s not on this plane, or in this sphere. We’re not competing to become the dominate god here.”

“So sooner or later we’re going to come up against them, is that it then?”

He nodded.

I thought about that a moment, “What about a partnership?”

“A what?” Fel looked at me curiously.

“No, not a partnership,” I said thinking about it a moment, “A pantheon. She could be your wife or your girlfriend or something?”

Fel laughed at that. “Why would I want to do that?”

I shrugged, “I don’t know, maybe you’re lonely and want to get laid? I don’t know, Fel,” He was laughing quite a bit as I said that, “but you have to admit, music does tend to spread and minstrels get around. Sooner or later you gotta send out the missionaries.”

“You just like music and think she’s cute!” Fel said smiling at me.

“To be honest, I totally missed on the cute part,” I said sitting back and thinking about it a moment. “But yeah, I like music, and who knows how many places she’s got churches stashed at this point.”

“And what would be in it for her?” Fel said, “Even if I should be interested in sharing my power?”

“Survival obviously. She’s new to the game; she’s already got Tantrus gunning for her, probably quite a few other gods and goddesses as well. You get a shot in the arm right now when you need it the most, she gets a big promotion.”

Fel appeared to think about that a moment. “Don’t discuss this idea with anyone just yet. Sound Fordessa out if you get the opportunity, but don’t be obvious. I’m not all that interested, but I should consider the possibilities.”

I nodded. “Oh, what’s the best way to profane an altar, once I get there?”

Fel smiled, “Pissing on it works wonders.”

I laughed, “Pissing it is.”

I awoke about an hour later; the Priestess Kayryn was in the room, as were the usual guards. I stood and stretched.

“Is Second Carso still in charge here?” I asked one of them.

“Yes Sir, he is.”

“Good, go fetch him, tell him to bring as many men as he can, in an hour. Armed and armored.”

He nodded and left the room.

“What’s going to happen?” Kayryn asked looking at me.

“Tantrus has a church or something here. We are going to wipe it out.”

She gave a bit of a start at that, “Here?”

I nodded. “We’re fairly certain they are the ones behind the attack.”

“Yes, they told me you pretty much disproved our original suspicion. So after you get rid of their temple, then what?”

“I don’t know yet. We’re not in any position to take them on in a war, they’re too far away.”

“I guess we will just have to see what comes next,” Kayryn said.

I nodded again and set about checking my gear and my weapons.

The priests from Fordessa’s temple and the soldiers from the barracks showed up at about the same time. I had already made sure that Allston was there to lead us. He may look like a weasel, but at least he was a faithful and loyal one to his god.

I addressed the group, there were a dozen priests surprisingly, and Second Carso had brought a lot of soldiers, at least five hundred. I was impressed.

“Okay, the clerics here are from the Goddess Fordessa, who is helping us because those we are attacking tried to frame her followers for the attack on our temple, that killed so many of our people.”

“So we know who did it?” Some one asked.

“Yes. We are going straight to their church, or whatever it is, they have built. Protect our clerics, Second Carso, could you assign people to deal with that?”

He nodded.

“Okay, our man Allston here will lead us to our target. Let me make this clear: Kill *everyone*. No one is to survive. If you see an altar, destroy it. Do not hesitate to set fire to the temple if at any time it seems like we will be rebuffed. Those of you, who know what ward stones are, if you see a spot that has one, dig it up and destroy it as well.

“This is a full on assault, this is for our god. Feliogustus is with us, and commands that we destroy these vile followers of Tantrus.”

I heard a lot of growls when I said that.

“I suspect they will be expecting us, I have no idea what their numbers will be like, but only hope that they are small due to their need to be discrete. However,” I said raising my voice slightly and casting a cantrip to give my

words more power, “understand that we have Feliogustus with us, and that we are fighting for our homes, and our families. We know what Barassa and Tantrus would do to wives, our families, our friends and neighbors should they come here. We will not allow them to come here; we will *not* allow them to stay! We will pay them back for what they have done here, to us, to our clergy, and to our god!

“And we will pay them back in *blood!*”

“Are you with me?” I yelled.

They cheered.

“For Feliogustus! For Hiland!” I yelled raising a sword.

“For Feliogustus! For Hiland!” They all roared in response.

“Then let us be off!” I turned to Allston, “Take us there, run!”

He nodded and ran off and we followed, it was dark, the sun had set hours ago. Many of the men in the host were carrying torches. I hoped we didn’t burn down the whole of the city, but I knew we might very well burn down a decent part of it. But there would be no help for it; we had to get them now, before they had any more time to prepare.

The trip took us fifteen minutes, the part of town we were looking for was not close, and once we got into it, the area was a maze of hovels and run down buildings. People came out to look at us as we ran by. About a hundred of the men were the heavy foot I was familiar with from my last battle, I had ordered them to bring up the rear and catch their breath before they engaged. I knew if they showed up exhausted, they wouldn’t be worth much in the fight.

The rest of the group was lightly armored, so for them it wasn’t that hard of a jog. I’d told Second Carso to put the archers in the middle, and have them find cover before getting involved in the fight. I also told him that I expected this to be a very nasty battle.

When we came to it, it wasn’t a very large building; the others around it were set back maybe twenty feet or so from it. It looked run down, and was hard to distinguish from most of the others, but I could feel what it was before I even crossed the boundary behind it.

I felt Fel’s power imbue me then, I know I suddenly glowed with his aura and I could feel the men surge forward with me as I charged.

“Attack!” I yelled, kicking in the front door and running inside.

There were a dozen men in the hallway, I didn’t hesitate to cut several of them down using my enhanced strength and speed, and with the help of the

soldiers to either side of me, we pushed into the main room of the church.

I could see the altar; it was surrounded by a row of men three deep, all heavily armed. And in the front of them, right across from me was Tantrus' champion, with Tantrus' device displayed on his armor, just as Fel's was upon mine.

He opened his mouth to say something, probably to make some inspiring speech, or attempt to influence my men. I didn't care either way, I was here to fight and I attacked him immediately, not giving him the chance to talk.

I went at him right handed; he was fighting with a sword and shield, which wasn't all that surprising. It didn't take me long to figure out who he was either, it was Benjiman, the champion who had accosted me in Hillshire so many years ago.

"I'll have you this time!" He swore at me, trying to bash me with his shield, but not moving too far away from the wall of men around him.

"Torches!" I yelled, figuring I might as well make it interesting.

"Hah! Good luck with that, William!" he growled and tried a feint that might have worked if I hadn't fallen for it the last time I'd fought Cenewyg. I took a step to the left then and switching to a left-handed attack I was able to behead one of the men fighting besides him. Benjiman swore and closed with me, and I backed away, hacking the head off yet another man.

When he turned and killed one of mine, I killed two more of his. "My supply is unlimited, how about yours, Benji?" I said laughing at him.

Swearing again, he came after me, as I dropped two more. We were to the left side of the room at this point, and with him out of the center my men were pouring in, what surprised me was when several of them started attacking the wall on the right end of the building. But I had no time to pay attention to that as Benjiman pressed his attack and several of his men in the room helped him. At that point, I was fighting for my life.

I got stabbed several times over the next several minutes as I let myself be backed into a corner. Benjiman was laughing at me, but it limited the attackers to just him and gave me the chance to heal myself. I could also see what happened when the wall on the other side of the room suddenly gave way and the men all ducked down low.

The archers.

A large flight of arrows entered the room, pegging about half of the men still standing, they were sprouting arrows from their bodies a half dozen at a time. I could see the priests behind the altar being burdened down with

healing spells, especially as several of their own got skewered as well.

My men stood up then and started to hack at the ones who were down with arrows sticking out of them, taking their heads off before they could be healed. I heard a loud whistle then and they all ducked again.

Unfortunately for me I couldn't duck and I took an arrow in my left arm, pinning it momentarily to the wall, giving Benjiman the opportunity to stab me in the shoulder with his sword.

Swearing loudly I had to reach across my body and pull the arrow out, so I could move as he withdrew his sword and smashed me with his shield in the head. The only thing that saved me was he suddenly got hit by several arrows, and had to pause to heal himself.

I knew however, he had unlimited healing powers while mine were limited. So I lunged forward snapping my jaws at his face, like I had last time when I bit his nose off. He flinched, ducking back and I got inside his shield, running him through with my right hand sword I grabbed his hair with my left and yanking it down I got his throat in my jaws.

My felinoid jaws were a lot bigger than my human ones and I was able to rip his throat out, which he healed, which I then ripped out again, and again. After the third time I could tell I was making progress, not that I could see anything as my face was covered in blood at this point.

I think the others realized then that their champion was in trouble, as I got stabbed several times, but we were so close I could tell they hit him almost as many times as they hit me. On my eight or ninth attempt I noticed he had stopped healing himself, and pulling my sword out of his body I pulled back and hacked his head off.

The effect on the other soldiers on my side was impressive; they all suddenly rallied and started fighting twice as hard. The enemy fighters were slowly starting to give ground now and I noticed there were only three priests left behind the altar.

Looking around the floor I saw a torch laying there, it was barely burning; something about the priest's magic was hindering it. When I picked it up however it flared to life, twice as bright as before.

"Feliogustus!" I cried out and charged the altar, waving the lit torch in the faces of the priests as I brought my sword down as hard as I could on the altar, a shock going up my arm that was pure pain as I did so.

"Feliogustus!" I cried again and repeated my stroke, the pain was even stronger the second time, but I could feel the wood beneath the blade start to

give, but I needed something heavier. Looking to my right I saw a man with an axe and dropping my blade I grabbed the haft from him, surprising him, but he quickly let go and stepped back.

Three more times I shouted out the name of my god as I struck the altar, and on the third strike it broke, a sound like a thunderclap echoing through the room. Tossing the brand aside, I pulled up the axe to attack the remaining two clerics, but both of them suddenly dropped under a hail of arrows, their magic exhausted.

I looked around the room, exhausted, bloody, and bleeding. The enemy was dropping like flies, as the heavies had entered the room while I was attacking the altar and were dealing out punishing blows while letting their armor deflect the quickly weakening attacks of the remaining forces.

“For Feliogustus!” I cried, “For Hiland!” and the men cheered as we cut the last of them down.

And then I did exactly what Fel told me would desecrate what was left of the altar. And nearly every other fighter in the room took a turn as well as we hauled out our dead, and our wounded.

I went and found the healers, I was completely out of magic myself at this point, and I had a few bad wounds that needed bandaging at the very least. I told them to save their magic for my men, and went to find a place to sit, with my back propped up against a wall. Second Carso found me there a little while later, sporting several bandages of his own.

“How many did we lose?” I asked as he sat down besides me.

“Sixty three dead, one hundred and twelve wounded.”

I nodded, “How many of them were there?”

“Thirty two, plus six priests and one champion.”

I nodded, “I’m surprised that they sent their champion.”

Second Carso nodded, “So am I. Good thing you were here, or we would have lost five times as many men.”

“Yeah, but they still would have lost. All they did was incite the people more to hate Barassa, give us stronger support. Once they knew we were on to them, they should have just hightailed it out of here.”

“At least we won,” Carso said.

I nodded agreeing with him. “At least we won.”

“So now what?”

“Send someone for Jezza, or whoever is in charge of building around here, borrow one of the priests, and look for the wardstones, dig them up,

break ‘em, and destroy them.”

He nodded. “I’ll keep a couple hundred men here until that’s done.”

“Good,” I noticed the healers were about done, and were starting to gather up their stuff. “Excuse me; I have to go do the champion thing.”

He nodded, “I need to get the men ordered.” And got up as well.

“Yes, Champion?” One of the priests asked I walked up to him.

“If everyone is taken care of, I could use some healing now.”

He looked a little embarrassed, “I’m sorry, but we’ve used up all our spells.”

“That’s okay; I’ll follow you back to your temple. The high priestess can help me.”

“But, but that’s not allowed, Sir Champion!”

I smiled, “It’s Will, and I’ve already been there once if you recall.”

He looked down a moment, ears splayed, tail curled.

“Yes, Sir Will.”

“It’s just Will. Now how about giving me a hand here? I’m tired and I hurt.”

“Yes, Will,” he said and led me off to their temple.

Which was a good thing, because I never would have found it by myself.

“I was wondering how long you would stay away,” Felecia said as I stumbled into the temple.

“Yeah well, I figured they’d be busy back at Fel’s place, so I thought I’d come here where there wouldn’t be any wait.” I said with my best smile.

“Uh-huh, sure you did.”

“You know, I really am in a great deal of pain here.”

“And that’s my concern, why?” she said smiling back.

“Because I’m leaving blood stains all over your nice clean temple, which I’d like to see more of before I call it a night.”

She gave a very theatrical sigh, “Oh, alright.” And came over and healed me.

“So why are you here?” I asked as she finished with the last of my wounds. “I’m fairly certain that this is not your main temple.” I was looking around, and what was inside what looked like a simple barn was a very nice church, it was actually bigger than a church, definitely a small temple. If they tore down the outside walls, this could easily be rebuilt into a rather large temple.

“Fordessa is concerned about our temple in Marland, Tantrus’s people have been taking bolder steps against it, I came here to look into possibly relocating it. We had no idea that Feliogustus was planning on building a temple here as well. So of course I stayed to observe.”

I nodded, “I’d like to meet your goddess sometime, if I could.”

“*And why would you want to do that?*” A pleasant sounding voice said inside my head.

“Because I have a thing for music mostly,” I replied out loud. “You probably know I’m not from Saladin, heck I think all of the gods probably know where I’m from at this point. And I’m intrigued by the idea of a goddess of music. Not sure how well that will work here in the long run however.”

“*Oh? Why would you say that?*” She said sounding rather curious.

“From what I’ve seen so far of this world, culture isn’t exactly high on the list of a lot of kingdoms. Yeah, a thousand years from now you’ll probably be in a nice spot, but right now?” I shook my head, “Course I’m not a god, or a goddess, so I don’t know all the rules of the game.”

I heard her laugh in my head, “*I see you are a crafty one, and your God Feliogustus is even more so.*”

“Well he was a pub owner you know.”

“*Oh trust me, I know. As a performer I’m rather familiar with the type.*”

“Umm, is that a good thing or a bad thing?” I asked trying not to blush myself, because I was a pub owner as well these days.

“*Felecia and two dozen of my people will accompany you when you head home in two days.*”

“Fordessa, what?” Felecia said looking surprised.

“*Feliogustus wishes to discuss an arrangement. An idea I find most intriguing. It will require you to meet with his high priestess to discuss. Do not fear, you will be safe.*”

She bowed and I bowed towards where the altar was.

“Thank you, Fordessa,” I said to her when I straightened up. “I honestly hope we will all be able to cooperate.”

“*I know you do, William. You are dismissed.*”

I bowed again, and then bowed to Felecia. “I will see you again when it is time to leave.”

She smiled and gave me a nod of her head and I went back to the temple. Then of course, I got totally lost trying to find my way in that maze of

alleyways until Fel started sending me hot and cold signals to help me.

Ten

(Saladin – Tradeson / Hiland)

When I awoke the next morning, I was surprised to find that Kyle, the man who had been my guide when I had first come here was looking for me.

“Ah, William!” he said as I met him outside of the temple. “Good to see you. Sorry to hear about what happened here, but I have news I believe you might be interested in.”

I flicked an ear, “And that would be?”

“A small band of tribesmen have come out of the grasslands to trade. You had said you wanted to meet with some of them, so I thought I would offer to take you over there.”

I smiled, “Ah yes, I’m very much interested. Let me just check on my men and I’ll be with you in a moment.”

I went back inside and made sure everyone knew what I wanted them to do, and checked with Kayryn to be sure everything was fine, then grabbing my weapons harness I went off with Kyle.

“How big a group is it?” I asked curious as we walked across town.

“Not very, about a dozen. We often get small groups coming in to trade on small lots of stuff, skins, baskets, some foodstuffs. Things that they catch, grow, or gather out on the plains.”

“What do they want?”

“Mostly weapons and metal implements.”

I nodded; bronze weapons were mostly the rule here, though I did have an incredibly rare high quality steel sword. Iron had only recently been discovered, poor quality iron and steel swords were slowly starting to filter in from the east via our merchant fleet and the local smiths were still learning how to extract it and work with it.

“What kinds of weapons do they favor?”

“They like to use spears mostly.”

“Spears?” I said curious. “On the plains?”

“Well they ride these animals called wolats, and they take game by charging it, and spearing it as they go by.”

I looked at him shocked, “They charge the game?”

He nodded and laughed, “I know, sounds suicidal, doesn’t it?”

“Just how fast are these wolats?”

“Oh, about as fast as a suzhen.”

“Does anyone around here sell them?”

“What, wolats?”

I nodded.

“No, we really don’t have any need for them. They can’t pull farming gear like an ox; the wooden yokes don’t work well with them.”

I nodded, horses had the same problem, but someone I recalled had solved that back home. I increased my pace, and Kyle sped up as well.

When we got there, I saw the tribesmen. There were a dozen of them, all male. Their outfits were rather simple, though they all wore headdresses not much different from what I recalled of American Indians. Then again, on a plain with tall grass, that would make it easier to locate your fellow tribesman and identify who you were looking at as the headdresses while simple, held unique combinations of feathers of varying colors that looked like dye as we got closer.

They were discussing trade with one of the merchants when we approached. I waited until there was a pause in the discussion, and then turned to the one doing the dealing.

“Excuse me; may I see your mounts?”

He turned abruptly and looked at me intently, almost glared. “Why would a city man like you wish to see the mounts of my tribe?” His accent was a little odd, I suspected that the tribes on the plains spoke a different dialect, or perhaps a different language altogether.

I unclipped the dagger from my harness; it was a nice one, with a good edge and decent balance. I handed it to him.

He looked at it, drew the blade, and then tested it by shaving a small patch of fur on the inside of his arm. He looked up at me and smiled. “Come; let me show you our mounts!”

I followed him around behind the trade barracks, there was a corral behind it, but instead of oxen or cattle there was a completely different animal.

“Wolats?” I asked looking at them.

“Yes!”

They were large, about the size of a horse, but the similarities ended about there. They looked more like wolves, though their fur seemed a bit shorter, their legs longer. Their jaws were wider too I noticed, several of them all came over to where we were standing at the fence, sniffing the air as they

did so.

“What do they eat?” I asked curious.

“Everything!” The tribesman laughed.

I looked at the teeth, they had canines, though not as long as I would have expected for something so large. Their front teeth were not at all like I remember from any dog I had ever seen.

“They eat grass?”

He nodded, “Grasses, leaves, fruits, berries, and anything that they can catch.”

I reached out to pet one and it tried to snap at me, but my enhanced speed kicked in at the attack, so I poked it in the nose and then patted it on the head before withdrawing my hand, leaving it looking confused.

“Oh, yes. They bite.” He laughed.

“Show me how to ride one.” I said looking at him.

He nodded and led me over to where they kept the gear, and as I watched, he got out something that looked almost exactly like the bridle I was used to seeing on horses. The bit was a little different, but I could see the function was the same. The saddles they used were simple, more to spread the weight off of the spine I guessed.

I watched as he went in and called one to him, then put on the bridle and the saddle. I noticed they didn’t have stirrups.

“Can I try?”

He shook his head, “They don’t know you.”

I smiled, “Let me worry about that.” I went and grabbed a set of gear and came over to the fence. A number of them trotted up.

“What are the commands?”

He looked at me and shook his head, but told me the words they used for ‘go’, ‘come’, ‘stand’, ‘no’, and ‘good’.

I looked at the one who had tried to bite me and cheating I used a cantrip that calmed animals on him. I told the others to ‘go’ and made shooing motions and they trotted away.

Putting the bridle on wasn’t all that difficult. He shied away a little at first when I put the saddle on, I had to use the cantrip again and make soothing sounds as I’d seen the other do.

When I mounted up he turned and tried to take a nip at me, so I hauled the reins in, yelled ‘no’ at him and gave him a little love tap on the head. He snorted but I quickly got him going and to the surprise of the tribesman, I

rode him around the corral a couple of times.

“You have done this before!” He said staring at me.

I nodded, “Yes, but with something different. They weren’t as nimble or as fast.” I looked up at him and smiled. “How much?”

“Not for sale!”

I grinned, “Everything is for sale my friend.”

“Maybe, but that one is not mine to sell.”

I nodded, “Ah, I misunderstood. Can I talk to the one who can sell it?”

He turned and talked to one of the others who had walked up; they all seemed rather surprised that I could ride.

“He wants three of those metal spearheads that the trader here sells.”

I looked around at the other wolats in the pen there was a female that looked rather nice to my eye as well.

“Add that female, with all the riding gear and I’ll give him four.”

“Six.”

“Five.”

“Six and we’ll teach you how to care for them,” he said grinning at me.

I laughed and nodded, “Six it is.”

We dismounted, and adjourned to the inn next to the barracks; I paid the trader for the spearheads and gave them to the tribesman who apparently owned the two wolats. We then spent the next several hours talking, as he taught me everything he knew about them.

For the most part, they really weren’t much different from dogs, there were some differences, because they could eat grass and grains and such. But they did run more in herds than in packs, and only gave birth to one at a time, so unlike with a wolf pack, you didn’t have only the alpha pair breeding.

“Why so interested?” The first tribesman asked when I had finished speaking with Tau, the one who has sold me the two wolats. His name was Samoe.

“Because these are how you beat the Mulanders,” I said softly smiling at him. “And how we’re going to keep those Barassain’s from getting big ideas.”

“They are good for harassing camps late at night, but I do not see fighting a big force.”

“You let me worry about that. How many of them would your tribe would be willing to sell to us?”

He laughed, “How many do you want?”

“Let’s start, small, say one hundred? At two spearheads each?”

“Three each,” he said while the others all looked shocked.

“Two hundred fifty, for one hundred wolats, grown, of decent stock, males and females” I said, “And we’ll pay you another ten if you deliver them to Hiland, and if a few of your men could stay and help teach us about them, we’d pay you another four each per moon.”

“Done!” He yelled surprising the hell out of me.

I took a drink of my beer and shook my head, “Next time I’ll try not to overpay.”

He laughed and nodded, “That would be wise.”

I had someone summon Second Carso, and we made the arrangements then, Carso would have someone escort them up to Hiland when they returned. Which would be about a month from now.

“What possessed you to buy so many of those... what are they called?”

“Wolats,” I said.

“What possessed you to buy them?”

I smiled, “How would you feel if a thousand of them, each with an armored man on its back, charged you?”

He stopped and looked at me in shock. “I’d feel like I was about to have a very bad day.”

“Exactly.”

#

I gathered up Felecia the day after, she was accompanied by a dozen acolytes and three more members of the clergy, two of whom I recognized from the fight at Tantrus’ temple.

Besides my two new wolats, and myself, I was taking a force of twenty soldiers along. The new clerics from the temple showed up the night before, and I was taking half of the accompanying force back with me. I wasn’t expecting trouble, but I didn’t want to take any chances.

“I see you bought two of those animals the tribes from the plains like,” Felecia said to me as we left the city.

I nodded, “I like to ride.”

“You know how to ride one of those?” She said looking surprised.

“Yes.”

“I did not know you were from the plains!” She said looking me over.

I laughed, "I'm not. But where I come from, we have something similar."

"And where is that?"

"Someplace very far from here. Tell me, where are you from?"

"Marland, I grew up there."

"So I have to ask, why did you pick Tradeson as a possible location to move the main temple to?"

Felecia shrugged, "I didn't think that they'd be bold enough to come that close to Hiland."

"Are Marland and Tradeson the only places you have temples now?"

She shook her head, "We have churches in Holden, Sancton, and Craighston, and a number of shrines in several cities further away."

"You know you probably shouldn't be telling me this," I chuckled.

"Fordessa knows you are very interested in some sort of alliance."

I nodded, "Yes, but the decision is not mine, it is Feliogustuses'. And I'm not sure how much my opinion counts with him."

"But you are his champion!"

"You should know it doesn't always work that way," I said.

Felecia sighed, "We don't have a champion."

I looked at her surprised. "Really? Why not?"

"Fordessa isn't yet strong enough. We may be spread out, but the number of her followers is not all that great."

"So, she's still pretty weak as a goddess then." I said nodding.

"It is frustrating at times," Felecia said nodding. "But we have come very far in the last few years, so I have faith."

The trip back was enjoyable, and without incident. In the evenings, Felecia and her group would play their instruments and sing, which was rather nice. During the day, I took turns taking each of the two Wolats out to ride, which I could tell they enjoyed. I don't think they were as fast as horses, but they did better going up embankments and steep hills.

When we got to Hiland city I showed Felecia and her people directly to the temple, where they would be quartered, then rode up to Rachel's Castle and got them to clear out one of the corrals for the wolats. Suzhen might be mean, but a wolat wouldn't hesitate to kill and eat one given the chance.

"So what in the world is that?" Rachel asked coming up to me and giving me a hug. I purred and kissed her back. Holse joined us as well, I had sent for

both to meet me as soon as I got to the castle.

“These are wolats. The tribesmen on the plains ride them. They hunt and sometimes fight from their backs while riding.”

“Well they are kind of cute,” Rachel said. “They friendly?”

“They have a bit of a temper, but I believe with a little training that won’t be too much of an issue.”

“So why did you buy two of them?” Rachel asked looking up at me.

“I bought one hundred of them, and will be hiring their trainers until ours know how to deal with them.”

Rachel turned and stared at me. “You bought one hundred of them?”

I nodded.

“And just how much is this going to cost us?”

“Around three hundred metal spear heads for their hunting spears.”

“Three hundred!” Rachel said shocked. I could hear Fel laughing in the back of my head.

“Oh don’t worry, Fel’s paying for half of them.” The laughing stopped rather suddenly.

“Is he now?” Rachel said looking cross at me.

I nodded, “Yup, and he knows better than to bitch about it, though I’m sure he’ll get even with me soon enough.”

“And just why is that?”

I smiled, “Cavalry,” I said. They had no word for it, so I just used the English word.

“What is Cavalry?” She said looking at me.

“Imagine a couple thousand soldiers, armed and armored, attacking infantry, or a town, or pretty much anything, from the backs of those animals.”

“It can’t be done,” Holse said, “They’d fall off! Assuming they could even hit anything. And the animals would be too hard to control!”

I smiled, “I know of a few things we can do to deal with all of those issues. And yes, it will take training. But just being able to move a couple thousand men across an area that takes five days in only two? Being able to run in and attack, then retreat back out before you can be counter-attacked?”

“We use Cavalry back where I’m from, done properly it can be devastating.”

Rachel looked angry, but Holse was looking thoughtful.

“Can people really fight from the backs of those things?” he asked.

“The tribesmen already do it, but they do it as singletons, to harass and pickoff a man or two. But you put a hundred or two of them in a line and charge an infantry line? Wolats have a nice set of teeth, and the soldier on their back is up too high to be easily hit, and has the advantage of attacking down.”

Holse nodded, “Just the thought of facing a long line of these attacking you probably would unnerve a lot of soldiers the first time they faced it.”

“We’ll need to find some of our better animal handlers, and get some volunteers from the army. They should show up in a few weeks with the hundred I’ve asked for. You may want to see about buying some more, but don’t pay as much as I did, I’m pretty sure I overpaid.”

“Why did you do *that*?” Rachel growled.

“Because I had to give them some incentive to come this far. But after they’ve seen our money once, they’ll want to deal again. Of course someone can trade with them closer to home, but before that can start, we need people who know how to handle them, train them, and ride them.”

“I’d like to see a demonstration first,” Holse told me.

I nodded, “I need to see the head smith of the armory, and the best leather worker we have, I need a few things made. Once that’s done, I think I can show you some things to make you think.”

Holse nodded and bowing to Rachel took his leave.

“I’m not very happy with you right now.” She fumed, “Do you have any idea how much this will cost?”

I nodded, “A lot. You’re going to need to build more corrals, stables, lay in food, special training.”

“Then what’s the advantage?”

“A cavalry soldier is worth at least ten infantry. In some cases more. You could put a group at Midway and in a day, they could react to almost anything in the area. You’ll be able to do more with a lot less, which means less money overall and a more effective fighting force.

“If we can get a couple thousand cavalry soldiers together before Barassa comes up the river, it will make a huge difference against them. And when we finally go to war with them, even though their army is bigger than ours, this will take away their advantage.”

Rachel sighed and nodded, “If you can convince Holse, I’ll be fine with it.”

I pulled her close and gave her a nice long kiss.

“So tell me about your run-ins with Barassa’s people,” she said leaning into me as we walked back to our rooms.

I told her about everything that had happened, about Felecia’s people, and our first suspicions, then their help when we figured out what happened.

“Do you think Feliogustus will work something out with them?” she asked as we got back to our rooms.

“I don’t know, I hope so, I think it would be good for all of us. But Fel knows a lot more about this than I do. So I’ll do whatever he tells me to do.”

“I’m impressed by all the places she’s gotten churches set up. I bet she has a wonderful intelligence network.”

I stopped and looked down at her, “You know, I never thought of that. I wonder if she has?”

“I guess I’ll have to talk to Narasamman tomorrow,” Rachel said thoughtfully.

“Why?”

“Because if Feliogustus doesn’t mind, I think I’ll extend the protection of the kingdom over their religion, *in return* for their people keeping us well informed on what’s going on in all the surrounding kingdoms.”

I laughed and gave her another kiss, “And that is why you’re the queen.”

“Damn right!” Rachel purred. “Now, how about coming here and showing some of your devotion to your queen?”

I smiled, “It would be my pleasure.”

Two days later I had the saddle altered to add stirrups, and had gotten one of the smiths to forge me a Cavalry saber. Saddling up Tom, the male wolat, I attacked a series of targets as Holse watched. First I used a modified spear, made in to a lance. Next, I rode by several wooden poles and took the tops off with the saber as I did so.

The final act was I had him put ten soldiers on the field, armed, and armored, and then I proceeded to chase them around the field using blunted weapons. They couldn’t get near me, because either Tom would snap at them, or I would whack them one.

“Impressive,” Holse said as I rode up to him.

“And I’m not that great at riding and fighting from wolat back,” I told him as I dismounted, panting.

“With training you can teach them to respond to commands from the pressure of your knees so you don’t even have to hold the reins.”

He nodded, "Well I'll see if I can round up a hundred men and we'll start training when the wolats get here."

"You're going to have to train them in new tactics, and train their commanders as well." I reminded him.

"You're going to have to train me," Holse said shaking his head. "This is beyond anything I've seen before. But the potential is obvious."

I nodded, "I'll do what I can to help."

Holse took his leave and I set about taking care of Tom, and then Tina. I'd been training several of the hands who worked around the corral with how to deal with the two Wolats, and surprisingly they'd all picked up on it rather quickly.

Or maybe not so surprising when I thought about it. They already had to deal with the nasty suzhen, and the wolats, while a handful at times, weren't really mean.

I was sitting in Fel's bar once more, looking at him across the table. My physical body was asleep in bed with Rachel, it had been several weeks since I'd returned from Tradeson with Felecia.

"So, having fun spending my money?" Fel asked smirking.

I grinned, "If you hadn't been laughing at me, I would never have thought of it."

"Which is of course why I was laughing at you. I've already told Narasamman that I want her to buy some and see some of our people trained."

"Really?" I said surprised.

He nodded, "I want to get missionaries out there among the tribesmen. They won't respect us if we can't ride; it's a big part of their culture. But if we send in people who can ride, they'll listen and I can start bringing them into the fold."

"Huh," I said thinking about it, it made sense. "Don't they have a god already?"

Fel shook his head, "They're still worshipping the forces of nature and their ancestors"

"Forces of nature?" I blinked.

"Life, death, the weather, the harvest, things like that. When you have a god, it's easier to influence those things. Without one, it's difficult, but it can be done. To be honest I'm surprised a god hasn't risen up among their own

kind yet, but they're still rather new, they only learned how to catch and ride wolats, in the last forty years."

I nodded at that.

"So when are we taking on Tantrus?" I asked moving on.

"Not for a while yet," Fel told me.

"But didn't we just deal him a major blow? Shouldn't we take advantage of that?"

Fel shook his head. "He is weakened with the loss of the temple, but he's still very strong, and I'm still recovering from what happened to me as well. There is much yet I still have to do, and that Rachel will have to do, to be ready for when that battle comes."

I nodded and took a drink of my beer, mostly out of habit; I knew it was a dream but still it tasted good. Just another sign that Fel was a god.

"Well at least the people and the nobles all know that Barassa is looking at us. Hopefully that will help everyone pull together."

Fel nodded, "It will. Exposing the advanced scouts really woke up a lot of people; no one had expected them to start nosing around for several years yet. The hidden temple in Tradeson was an even larger shock, and not just to our people."

My ears perked up. "Oh?"

Fel smiled a little craftily, "The other gods were surprised as well; they didn't think Tantus had the skill or the ability to do that. And as the story of what happened spreads among their faithful, I'm sure there will be quite a bit of searching for other hidden temples next year in their cities."

I was a bit surprised by that, "So Tantrus and Barassa may end up with a lot more enemies soon?"

"Most likely, yes. Tantrus is a greedy god. Even if he abandons what he has most likely started in other cities, which I am sure he won't, there will still remain enough traces of his work."

I smiled, "So does that mean they're not all mad at you anymore?"

Fel laughed, "They're still suspicious of me, but I've been playing my hand in the open, following very traditional rules. They've all just discovered that Tantrus is not."

I nodded, "You know, that idea of theirs, using priests as shock troops. Do we have anything like that?" I asked curious.

"A fighting order of priests?"

I nodded, "Yeah, something like that, and not suicidal as his seemed."

“We don’t, but I admit the idea is intriguing. However a thing like that would take a couple decades of work, and a fair bit of resources.”

“So I shouldn’t expect it soon,” I said laughing.

“Exactly.”

“So what happens next?”

“For the short term, we consolidate. I consolidate my hold over the new towns and cities, my priests and I increase the flock of the faithful, and tend to their needs. Rachel builds up her armies and her resources.”

I quirked an eyebrow, “She talk with you about this?”

Fel grinned, “You can’t see each other, but she’s sitting in here right now and I’m talking with her as well. You don’t think you’re the only one who I bring here, do you?”

I shook my head, “No, I didn’t. But it would be nice to all talk together at the same time.”

“No, then I wouldn’t be guaranteed your undivided attention,” Fel said smirking. “I know the both of you two well.”

“Guilty as charged I guess!” I said raising my mug in a salute. “So what’s on my plate?”

“Well nothing for the next few weeks, so enjoy some time with Rachel and your son Baron. Aryanna will be borrowing you for a little while, but that’s almost a month away.”

I sighed, “What am I going after this time?”

Fel shook his head, “Nothing. I think she’s going to have you scout out some recruits.”

I looked at Fel surprised. “Me? Look for recruits?”

“Don’t worry, I’m fairly sure she has them picked out already, she just needs someone to look them over, tell her your opinion, and perhaps give them a push in the right direction.”

I nodded.

“How are things going with Felecia and Fordessa?”

“About as well as I would expect.”

“Is that good?”

Fel smiled, “Don’t concern yourself with it. You did what I needed you to do. It’s Narasamman’s turn now.”

I nodded again. “I just think it’s a good idea.”

“Of course you do, I put it in your mind so that when Fordessa saw you in her temple she’d want to investigate it further.

I blinked. "You can do that?"

"Of course I can, I just need your permission."

I paused a moment. "I don't remember giving you that."

"You gave me permission to wipe that too," Fel said a little more seriously than his usual self. "I've known about Fordessa's group since they showed up, Joel and Kayryn alerted me to it. So I told you what I wanted you to do, and you agreed."

I thought about that a moment, it sounded like something I would do. I was committed after all. My wife and children depended on Fel's continued success. Plus I liked him.

"When did that happen?" I asked curious.

"That night that I talked with you for no apparent reason when you were in Tradeson and asked you to check out the musicians."

"Huh, well I guess it worked. Goodnight, Fel."

"Goodnight, Will."

Eleven

(Treow – New York)

I was standing in a dark alley as I waited for sunrise. I was in the sphere of Treow, which was Stephanie's and Joseph's home sphere, and it was rather disorientating. It wasn't so much the matriarchal society, though I was sure I'd run into issues with that soon enough, but that in some ways it was exactly like home.

The landmasses were all exactly alike. Much of Europe was the same country wise as well. But the United States was anything but united, the articles of Federation were all that was every written, and it was even weaker in some ways than the one back home had been. Needless to say, each of the States was more like its own country here.

So having some things be the same, but a lot of other things very different, was confusing. It almost lulled you into a false sense of security.

The tech level was also strange, some of it was ahead of what I had known, and some of it was not.

I hadn't personally experienced too much of it so far, Aryanna had gone over the important things when I stopped in at her temple as I transitioned through Hillshire to get to Treow. Interestingly it was not connected to Fel's sphere, or my home sphere, at all.

The gate I had come through was in the middle of Central Park, which had the same name, but a much different layout. It was more organized, with lighted walkways and a lot more restrooms and much better landscaping. There were also a lot more fountains for some reason.

As I waited, I saw someone finally show up and open up the business I had been watching. I needed some local money, identification, and more suitable clothing. The place across the street offered all of that, for a price.

This was another new thing I had just learned, a few portal jumpers got together many years ago, and decided to start a business. Over time, that business grew. They catered primarily to the locals, providing things that usually were not easily found in the local sphere, but they also catered to other portal jumpers and even the deities that they served. Apparently most high tech worlds had them and they had some method of communicating to one another.

I gave the woman opening up the place a few minutes to finish opening

up, and then I strolled across the street and into the shop.

“Good day, Master, Mist?” She said looking at me.

“Mist Will,” I said and gave a small bob of my head. “Are you Madam Pipes?”

She nodded, “Yes, that would be me. However I do not believe we have met, surely I would have remembered such a fine creature as yourself,” she said smiling and looking me over. Married men here were referred to as Master and single men as Mister, though it was often contracted to ‘Mist’. Aryanna had told me to expect to be hit on a lot. The equal rights movement had been stamped out here rather efficiently apparently.

“Aryanna sent me,” I said walking up to the counter.

She looked up at my face, “Aryanna? Where’s Stephanie?”

“Stephanie is unavailable, I was sent here to take care of some important matters that needed to be seen to.”

Madam Pipes nodded, “You’re not a champion then?” she said, and I got the feeling she was getting ideas.

“I am, I’m just not hers.”

Madam Pipes swore, “And here I was hoping I might entice you to stay a while and *visit*.” She gave me a look when she said ‘visit’ that made it pretty clear just what kind of visiting she wanted to do. I blushed, after the Sireens and all that mess I really wasn’t enjoying this as much as I might have.

“Madam Pipes, do you really proposition every man that walks in your shop?”

She winked at me, “Just the hot ones, and you are one well put together specimen. So what can I do for you, Sonny?”

“Identification, local currency, a map, a phone, and a place to stay.”

“Oh I got a place to stay alright,” she said with a smirk and I had to laugh at that.

“I was thinking more of a room I wouldn’t be sharing.” I told her.

She grinned at me, “There’s a Y down the street for young men from out of town. It’s a large bunkroom, but it’s clean, safe, and they don’t let predators like me in at all.”

“I guess that will do,” I said.

“Now, as for the other things, what do you have for me?”

I set the bag I had been carrying on the counter. She looked inside and went ‘ahhhh’ as she saw what was in there.

“Do you know what this is worth?” She asked looking up at me.

“To the penny,” I replied. “Aryanna was very clear on what I should expect back from you.”

“Aw, you’re no fun,” she groused.

“Well maybe when I’m done I will be,” I said and winked back at her.

“Oh ho! One of those are we?” She laughed.

I just sighed. I guess the stories my mother told me about the nineteen fifties *were* true.

I got the money I needed from her, a small suitcase, a couple of changes of clothes, some identification, and a few odds and ends. She gave me a pinch when I left and I just shook my head. I had the distinct impression by then that she was acting a bit more outrageous than she would have with a local.

Getting a bed at the ‘Y’ was pretty easy, and it was exactly what she had said it was, a large bunkhouse. It was clean, and a couple of old men who made it clear that if I didn’t behave, I’d be tossed out, oversaw it. Also, they only allowed young men of virtue to stay, so if I started coming in late, or drunk, I’d be tossed out.

Nodding as they explained the rules, I put my things in the locker assigned to me, then left for the day. I had two possible recruits Aryanna wanted me to check out, and I wanted to find where they were before I started. I wasn’t really sure how to go about this. Aryanna had given me some pointers, and told me the kinds of things she wanted to know. But it still felt rather strange.

Walking through the city was different. Almost all of the workers were men. Women did not work much in the service industries, or in any job that had physical labor involved, or a high risk of injury. Those were all jobs for ‘men’. Women were predominately in the white collar jobs. Not all women worked either, but all men certainly did.

The first woman worked at a recording studio, I didn’t know what she did there, just that she worked there, and had lunch nearby at a particular restaurant fairly often. I went by and scoped the place out, found the restaurant and went in to have breakfast as long as I was there.

The food was good and as I was walking out, I was surprised to see the woman I was supposed to be looking for walking in. She was nice looking, but the two with her were definitely better looking. But when she looked up and saw me, I felt embarrassed for a second, because I had been checking her out.

“Hi!” I said and smiled as we passed.

“Hi,” She said a little surprised.

“Whoa, he was hot!” I heard one of the girls say.

“Yeah, and did you see how embarrassed he got when Jane caught him looking at her? You should go chase him down Jane! I bet he’s hot for you!”

“Gals, we got work to do this morning. Let’s just get our coffee and leave....”

I picked up the pace and moved away for now, flashing back on how I had first met Stephanie. This just might be easier than I thought.

I took a subway next across town, rather than walk it. There was a dojo there and the other woman was a student at it.

Walking inside I saw the dojo’s Master and bowed to him.

“I would like to sign up for the advanced class please,” I told him.

“I haven’t seen you around here before, I’m Jim,” he said walking forward and extending his hand.

“Will,” I said and as soon as he had a grip on my hand, he attacked me.

I recognized the move; this style was thankfully almost exactly like the one I had studied back home. And with everything sped up it was rather easy to make the counter. He came back with a leg sweep and I jumped back out of range and took up a fighting stance.

He held up his hands, “Just checking. You have no idea how many greens try to sneak into advanced.”

I relaxed and nodded. “My instructor used to just set us up to spar with the ones who tried that. They learned pretty quickly not to lie.”

“I don’t think the women would appreciate that,” he said shaking his head.

“Well I never saw any women try and make it into the class that way, maybe he only let the guys take the beating.”

Jim laughed, “Oh, I like the sound of that. So, pretty impressive moves there. Where did you learn?”

“England, my mother is an exec with a trading company. She didn’t want me sitting idle reading books after school, so she sent me to a dojo there.”

He nodded, “That would explain your counter, we do it like this,” and he showed me a different grip break than the one I had used.

“That’s pretty slick,” I said.

“So when do you want to start?”

“Tonight?”

We made arrangements, I knew what class I wanted, and I enrolled in

that one.

Now all I needed was something to do during the day. If Madam Pipes hadn't been such a letch, I would have just asked for a job around the shop, so I'd have something to do, and to make it look like I worked there.

But I wasn't interested in the possible baggage that would come with that. So when I saw a 'help wanted' sign on the front of a bar a few blocks over as I was walking back to the subway, I figured I might as well check it out. The owner took one look at me as I walked in and smiled.

"You're hired!" She asked looking me over.

"What's the job Madam?" I asked looking around.

"Waiting tables."

"Sounds easy."

"Topless," She said still smiling.

"Still sounds easy."

"Oh, they're gonna love you!"

I sighed and shook my head, "Do I get to keep my tips?"

"Half are yours, the other half goes into a pool that we share out. This way if someone has a bad night, they still get something. Also it gives the cooks a share."

Just then, one of the waiters came out of the back; he was wearing skintight shorts with a short horsetail off of it, a detached white collar, detached white cuffs, dark sneakers, and not much else.

I almost laughed as I figured it out, the name of the place was 'The Stable', and I guess we were all the 'studs'.

I spent the rest of my afternoon getting trained on how they did things, and then went back to take my first class at the dojo.

Marti, the girl I was looking for was there. She started checking me out immediately, giving me rather aggressive looks. Most of the students were men; as I understood it, even though women ruled here men still did most of the fighting, and that most men were expected to be able to defend the women of their household. Women on the other hand did not fight, and most women didn't even bother to learn how. So I found it interesting that there were women in the class, especially as this was the advanced class. There were only three women, and of those three, only Marti had any muscles, to be honest she looked pretty ripped.

In martial arts, there are finesse fighters, and power fighters. I was a finesse fighter myself, because it was more challenging to learn to fight that

way. I suspected that Marti was a power fighter.

“Class!” Sensei Jim said as he walked into the room.

“Sensei!” We all responded and lined up. I noticed Marti lined up next to me.

“Before we start, I want to introduce Will,” he nodded towards me. “Will is from another school in London, some of what he has learned is different from what you have been taught. Learn from him those differences, you may find some of them useful. Then show him how we do things here.

“Stretches!” He called out then and led us through a fairly typical warm-up.

After that, he paired us up to work on one of the short forms. As Marti was next to me, I was paired with her.

“I’m Will,” I said and bowed to her.

“I’m Madam Marti,” she said a little harshly, “Mist Will.” And then gave a rather curt bow.

We went over the first form, and she was rather rough with me when it was her turn. When she actually made contact on a punch that was supposed to be pulled I looked at her.

“What?” She said with a smirk.

“Where I come from, it is customary to apologize when accidental contact is made, Madam Marti,” I said softly.

“Yeah well, you’re not there now, are you, Mist Will?” She smirked.

“Marti!” Sensei called out loudly.

Marti scowled, “I apologize for the strike,” she growled.

I smiled, “Accepted, Madam Marti.”

We switched partners then, and went over the next short form, until we had covered four of them. I noticed Marti was rather rough with the other men as well, but not the women in the class.

When class ended, I showered and left to head to my ‘job’. I didn’t see Marti on the way out, or anyone else really. But I was first out of the shower, having nifty cleaning spells did make it pretty easy to get clean.

Working at The Stable was a lot nicer then I would have thought. It was definitely upper class, and expensive. Patrons were *not* allowed to touch, pat, or fondle the waiters, and could be asked to leave if they did. During the day there were four guys waiting the tables, one bartender, and two cooks. At night, it went up to ten waiting tables, three bartenders, three cooks and three

helpers, plus bouncers and a few others.

Then there were the dancers on stage. Apparently, they had regular acts that performed here as well. I didn't pay too much attention to them, they didn't start until after ten, but from what little bit I saw they did seem to be rather good at holding the attention of the customers.

The night went very quick, learning how to wait tables wasn't too hard to do, but it was a lot of work. I hadn't worked so hard since I had a job with a landscaper in college. As staff, we got to eat there during our breaks and the food was amazing. I wouldn't have been surprised to find out that half the people there were more interested in the food than in the eye candy.

A lot of the women did ogle me and the other guys, and there were a lot of 'discreet' comments I heard that night, as well as a few phone numbers slipped to me with the check. The other guys laughed about it, and a few told me which ones I should consider calling. Apparently, most of them would take some of the women up on their offers, and enjoy a night or two of being a pampered man.

I suspected a couple of them were probably charging for their favors, but whether it was cash or gifts, I didn't really know, and didn't really care. My main reason for doing this was so if anyone asked, I had a job and could prove it. Also, it was a lot less boring than just sitting around all day.

When closing time came, I went back to the Y. I'd had my new boss, Madam Alice Smith, call them when I was hired so they'd know I was working and what time I'd be back. So I didn't get in trouble for coming in well after midnight.

The next morning I got up early and went to the same place for breakfast that I had gone to the day before. Jane didn't show up at all while I was there, but one of the two who had been with her was there and she noticed me.

I spent the rest of the morning looking around town, and getting a little familiar with it. Around two in the afternoon, I showed up at work and stayed until eleven. Martial arts class was only on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, so I could put in longer shifts on Tuesday and Thursday. The pay was rather good and the tips were even better.

Friday I didn't see Jane at breakfast, but the same friend was there, and I think she pulled out a cell phone as I left.

I worked the lunch shift at The Stables, and then left to do my martial arts class. Madam Smith approved of me taking the course when she found out and wished more of the waiters did. While there were two bouncers

working there every night, she told me that sometimes a customer, or her boyfriend, could get out of hand.

When I showed up for class, Marti singled me out again, still giving me the eye. I just smiled at her and nodded, "Hello Madam Marti."

Sensei came in then and called the class to order and we did our usual stretches. After that, he broke us up into two groups and one person from each group would spare a three minute round, in gear, but only light contact.

Sensei had put Marti in the same group as me, probably because she had lined up next to me. I got the impression that she wasn't happy with that, that she wanted to spare against me.

We each sparred four rounds, I sparred against one of the women in my second round and I enjoyed that probably more than the three guys, who were all power fighters, because she was a finesse fighter like I was. I of course got my usual speed advantage as we were fighting, but I did my best not to use it. As long as I had to be here doing this, I wanted to get the most out of it I could.

Marti was very definitely *not* a finesse fighter, though she was pretty fast. She got called a few times for hard hits, but three of the four guys she fought she proved to be quite a match for. She was pretty good all right. Guy number four she didn't beat, but he didn't win either. I had to wonder if they weren't pulling punches, who would have won. She was definitely driven.

When I left that night to go to work, I wasn't the first out of the showers. The woman I had fought was talking to Marti and I smiled and gave a little bow to each, "Madam White, Madam Marti."

I turned to Madam White, "Thank you for a most enjoyable sparring session tonight."

She smiled back, "Thank you too, Mist Will."

"I'll get you next time," Marti grumbled at me.

"Madam Marti, I won't protest if you ask Sensei to spar with me. You are quite skilled and I'm sure it would be an interesting experience."

Madam White giggled and Marti almost glared. "Are *you* calling *me* out?" She said rather surprised.

"Madam Marti, I'm just trying to accede to your wish to spar with me. Nothing more, nothing less. After all, we are all here to learn, are we not? I believe it would be a most educational experience."

I bowed to each of them again, as Marti glared at me some more, "Now if you will both excuse me, Madams, I must go."

“I think you may have just your match, Marti,” I heard Madam White say to Marti with a laugh as I went out the front door. I didn’t hear Marti’s reply, but I’m sure it wasn’t nice.

Friday nights at the club were a lot busier, and more boisterous than I had expected. There were four more waiters than the previous night, I suspected no one got Friday nights off, and we were run almost ragged by the constant orders.

There were a few minor incidents, customers who were patting the waiters on the butt, and getting told by either the manager, or a bouncer to stop or they would have to leave. I know I got a few pats when they thought no one was looking.

I didn’t mind really, I don’t think any of the guys did. But one woman did smack a waiter on the butt hard enough that you could hear it and he yelped in surprise.

She got escorted out the door without any further warnings.

What surprised me was how many of the women brought men with them. Husbands or boyfriends, I honestly couldn’t say. I don’t think all of them were pleased to be here, but one winked at me and commented ‘the more wound up we got his wife, the happier he’d be later tonight’.

But the biggest problem came after midnight, when the dancers had finished and one of the women was seriously flirting with one of the dancers when he came off the stage. She was a fairly attractive lady, but the man already with her was not happy about what she was doing and blindsided the dancer she was talking to, knocking him out cold.

I was close, so I yelled at him and moved to intercept as he looked like he was going to stomp on the poor guy he’d just cold cocked.

“Stupid faggot!” he said as he turned on me, “Shaking your ass like a gigolo! I’ll show you how a real man handles things!”

“By hitting a man when his back is turned?” I said a fair amount of snark, “And then stomping him while he’s out?”

He attacked me then, but I saw it coming at that point. I slipped inside the haymaker he threw, and kicked him in the balls. When my foot came in contact with a cup, I knew he had been planning this.

He tried to get me with a left hook, but with my speed, I ducked it, then hit him in the throat and kicked him in the balls with all of my enhanced strength. The cup shattered under that and as he bent over in pain, I rammed

my knee into his face breaking his nose.

I moved around him as he fell to the ground in pain, and went to help the dancer he'd knocked out. I used a healing spell when no one was looking, and then helped him get up and walk into the back. He was still pretty shaky and rather dazed.

I found him a seat and several of the others came back then to help him, so I went back to my station.

By the time I got back out front, there were several policemen there and Madam Smith was giving them a statement. One of the bouncers had put handcuffs on the attacker and he was still lying on the floor, curled up in pain. I suspected some of the pieces of plastic from the shattered cup were probably giving him a bit of trouble.

"How is he?" Madam Smith asked coming over to me as soon as she saw me.

"He's okay, just a bit dazed is all."

She nodded and went back to the officers. Surprisingly they didn't ask me any questions, just hauled the guy out. Madam Smith then bought everyone a round of drinks on the house and went in the back to check on the dancer.

"Hey, that was pretty righteous what you did to that guy," One of the bouncers, Bill was his name, said to me.

"Bastard was wearing a cup," I said shaking my head, "He came here to cause trouble. What happened to the lady he was with?"

"She left as soon as you put him down. Looked pretty upset."

I nodded.

"Maybe you should be working here with us!" He laughed.

I shook my head and held up my hands, "No thanks! Normally my job is a lot safer."

Things went back to normal after that, though I got a few high fives in the back from the other waiters. When my shift ended and it was time to go back to the Y, Madam Smith slipped me an extra couple hundred with the rest of my share of the tip money.

"You saved Daniel from getting seriously injured and showed everyone here what a real man does; protects those who can't protect themselves. Thank you very much, William."

I smiled and made a small bow. "Thank you, and thanks for the bonus."

She smiled at me. "Daniel is one of my household, if I thought you were

interested I'd offer you a spot as well. Again, thank you."

I smiled and bowed again and left. I wondered just how many of the guys working there were part of her household? She was a rather attractive woman, and rather successful. From what I'd heard, rich and powerful women having multiple men were not uncommon among the wealthier classes.

The trip back to the Y was quiet, and the weekend was rather uneventful.

Monday I was eating breakfast and Jane showed up. I knew she was there, but didn't acknowledge her until I 'accidentally' looked up and saw her as she walked by my table with her own food.

I smiled and she smiled back.

"Mind if we?" She asked nodding at the other chairs at the table.

"I don't mind at all," I said looking at her.

"So, new around here?" She asked taking the seat across from me, as her two companions joined us. I found it funny that they were eyeing me up pretty obviously.

I nodded, "Just been here a few weeks."

"I'm Jane," she said reaching over the table to lightly shake hands, "the two sizing you up are Melissa and Ria."

I laughed and the other two girls grinned at me.

"William," I said.

"So what brings you to New York?"

I tried not to look embarrassed, not that I was, but I wanted to look like I might be. "My mom thought I should go see the world, so she tossed me out." I grinned a little sheepishly.

"What a horrible thing!" Melissa said.

"Where is your mother at?" Jane asked.

"London. She's a financial trader. I think she really just didn't want any of her clients trying to prey on me."

"They would do that?" Jane said surprised.

I looked up at her and sighed, "Some women do not take no for an answer, especially the more wealthy and powerful ones. So she put me on a plane to New York and told me to call in a few months so she'd know I was still alive."

"So where do you live?"

"At the Y for now."

“Ugh, I hear that place is a like a kennel,” Ria interjected.

I turned to Ria and shrugged, “It’s not that bad,” and looked back at Jane.
“So what do you do?”

“I work in the recording studio next door,” she said.

“Oh! You’re a musician!” I said perking up a bit. I had no idea what she did, Aryanna never told me.

Jane laughed, “Yes, but I work there as a recording engineer.”

“Oh? What’s that like?”

“It’s pretty interesting. I set up all the microphones and feeds for the instruments, then mix them all together onto tape, for the artists we’re recording. I do any editing or other effects as well.”

“Don’t let her fool you into thinking it’s easy,” Melissa said. “There’s at least a dozen feeds, sometimes two or three times that, and she has to balance all of them in real time while they’re recording.”

“Wow, sounds hard!”

“It is, and Jane there is one of the best.”

I smiled, Ria was nodding and agreeing with her friend and Jane was looking a little embarrassed.

“So what do you do?” Jane said trying to change the subject.

“Oh, at the moment I just have a job waiting tables, until I decide what I want to do.”

“Where do you wait tables at?” Melissa asked.

I actually blushed and I saw the three of them perk up a little, curious.

“Erm, this little place called ‘The Stable’ over on Sixth.”

Rai started to cough and Melissa started to smirk. Jane just looked shocked.

“You’re a Stud?” Jane asked quietly.

“Umm, well,” I looked up at her, “you won’t hold it against me if I say yes, will you?”

“Of course not!” She said rather quickly.

“Well, yeah, I am.” I said a little sheepishly. “When I went looking for a job there I had no idea what it was like, but the pay is really good and the tips are as well.”

“Do they, umm, make you sleep with the customers?” Ria asked and then blushed.

I shook my head, “No, they’re actually pretty strict about how we behave. I mean I know some of the guys do run off after work with some of

the customers, they're always slipping us their phone numbers."

"What about you?"

I looked up at Jane, "I'm not really that kind of guy, though maybe there is one phone number I would call."

Jane blushed, "Well, urm, I really need to get back to work now." She stood up. "Ria, Melissa, let's go."

They started to say something and she gave them a look that could freeze water. Turning back to me then she smiled and extended her hand again, which I took.

"It's been a pleasure meeting you, William. Hopefully we'll meet again?"

I smiled and nodded. It was kind of funny, Melissa and Ria were both pretty hot, hotter than Jane was, not that Jane was bad looking, far from it.

But I found I liked looking at Jane a lot more than the other two, there was something about her that I found really attractive.

She retrieved her hand.

"Ria, Melissa," she said again and her two friends got up, quickly said their goodbyes, and followed Jane as she turned and left.

"He *wants* you," I heard Ria whisper.

I didn't hear Jane's reply but it did sound like Melissa was agreeing with Ria.

I wondered for a moment if this was how Stephanie felt about me? She didn't hesitate to drop a few hints the first time we met after all.

The next day I was back there for breakfast, but only Melissa showed up. I smiled and waved hello.

"Hi," She said coming over.

"Where's Jane?" I asked curious.

Melissa smiled, "You like her, don't you?"

I tried not to blush, this was definitely a different situation than what I was used to. "I wouldn't mind getting to know her better," I said. Then as I saw Melissa smirk, I really did blush, "That's not what I meant, and you know it, Madam Melissa!" I said softly.

"Uh-huh," she winked, "I'll be sure to drag her down here tomorrow."

Jane did show up the next day, and Thursday and Friday as well. Mostly we just made small talk, while we ate. I found her viewpoints on the things we talked about to be interesting. Working in the entertainment industry, she

had a broader view of a lot of topics, but she wasn't quite as liberal as her two friends seemed to be.

I think she found it interesting that I had been sent off on my own, I told her that I'd been sent off on tasks in the past for my mother, so that it wasn't really that big a deal for me.

"So would you like to go see a movie tonight?" She asked me that Friday.

I sighed, "I have to work tonight and I don't get off until midnight, so unless it's a really late show," I shrugged. "Tomorrow would be fine, I'm off this weekend."

Jane smiled, "Meet me here, around one?"

I smiled back, "Sure."

I saw Jane's two friends high five out of the corner of my eye and Jane looked a little embarrassed, but not too much.

The rest of the day went fine up until I got to the dojo for the lesson. Marti had lined up on the far side of the room away from me, and when we split up for sparring it was obvious to everybody that she wanted to fight me.

When Jim, our Sensei looked at me I just smiled and nodded. He sighed and set us up for the last match.

I had been watching Marti in her previous fights, so I knew what to expect, she liked to attack as soon as downward motion had stopped on the bow, and tended to attack rather explosively, coming up and coming forward hard and fast. I myself had just been taking a more laidback position at the start of a match.

This time however I didn't. I hop-shuffled left and forward, away from her power side, past her attack and tapped her right shoulder with my left hand. She tried to transition into a back kick with her left leg, pivoting on the now extended right, but I just stepped around it and she had to turn to face me. I could see that she was pissed, and she came at me hard then, left and right jabs, with the occasional snap kick thrown in.

Unfortunately, for her, she wasn't able to hit me. If I didn't have my champion's speed, I would have had to redirect or block most of her shots, but with it, I simply slipped out of the way of each strike. She was telegraphing a lot of her strikes, and the madder she got, the more she telegraphed. I simply retreated around the sparring space, bobbing and weaving, letting her punch herself out.

Our Sensei had to call time twice, and the second time he did, he stepped

between us, pushing Marti back and yelling 'time' at her. For a moment I thought she was going to take a swing at him, but I guess she realized that wouldn't be a good idea.

"Fucking faggot!" she grumbled.

Sensei stopped and looked at her, raising an eyebrow. "Oh? Who is panting and tired and sweating? Who is calm, cool, and barely breathing hard?"

Marti didn't say anything, but glared at the floor.

"Will had control of the fight, from the moment it started, until it ended. He let his opponent tire themselves, and chase him around the floor. He got one tap in early, then simply let Marti outfight herself. She never got a score on him, so all he had to do was wait it out."

"That would never work in a real fight!" Marti protested.

Sensei Jim turned and looked at her, "Once you were tired enough, he could either retreat or attack at his leisure. Or simply wait for the police to show up."

He looked around the room at the rest of the class, "Meditate on what you saw. Dismissed!"

I made a beeline for the locker room, I knew Marti would be looking for revenge, but I figured it could wait until next week. But I did enjoy the laughs and high fives of the other male students once we got inside. They were all pretty tired of Marti's antics, but they all knew better than to stop pulling punches and hit her back. Class or not, that could still get you in serious trouble.

That I had showed her up, without striking back, impressed and inspired them. Sometimes you can win a fight without ever throwing a punch. A lesson few of us ever really learn.

Business at the bar was hopping that night. There was a new act in town and they started their show at nine instead of ten. Madam Smith had the staff add several more tables to the floor, which made it a little more crowded, and those of us on the wait staff found ourselves getting a lot more discreet pats than normal as we squeezed through the tight spaces.

I was a little surprised, and embarrassed when Jane showed up, with Ria and Melissa and a few other women I didn't recognize at all. I had a table opening up, so I flagged the host who saw me and nodded and brought them over.

“William!” Ria said smiling as I brought them menu’s.

I smiled, “Ria, Melissa,” and then stopped by Jane’s seat and helped her sit, “Jane,” I said rather warmly.

The looks on the women that I didn’t know were priceless, as Ria and Melissa laughed and Jane blushed.

“May I take your drink orders Madams?” I asked, and then took their orders going around the table.

“Jane, you lucky...” I heard one of the women start to whisper as I went off to get their orders filled.

It was too busy to spend any real time at Jane’s table; I was being constantly pulled away by the other tables and the orders. But I did flirt with Jane a little bit and I could see she was enjoying it and the others were all rather envious.

“You still off at midnight?” Jane asked about ten minutes before my shift ended.

I nodded.

“Feel like going someplace quiet for a few drinks?”

I smiled, “After the night I’ve been having, that sounds like a great idea.”

“I’ll be waiting out front,” Jane said smiling.

Fifteen minutes later, I came out of the front in my street clothes and walked over to Jane I got about halfway there when someone grabbed me and everything slowed down as I was spun to face Marti, who was standing behind me.

“Show me up in class! You’re going to pay for that asshole!” She growled.

I took a step back and readied myself, “This isn’t the time or place, Madam Marti,” I growled.

“Hey! Take your hands off my boyfriend!” I heard Jane say as she walked up behind me.

“Boyfriend?” Marti said looking from Jane to me and back again. “I think your *boyfriend* here needs a lesson!”

“Jane, better let me...”

“Shush, Will, this is women’s work,” Jane said stepping up next to me. “You have three seconds to turn around and leave my boyfriend alone. After that, you’re going to be face down in the street. Understand?” Jane said in a loud, but calm, voice.

Marti laughed at her, “I’ll break you in half bitch!”

“Two seconds.” Jane said calmly.

Marti took a step forward and I heard a pop followed by a loud buzz and Marti’s body locked up and she fell over, face first.

I looked at Jane; she was holding a taser, the type that shot out a couple of probes with wires leading back to the unit in her hand.

“I warned you,” she said and shocked Marti two more times until she stopped trying to do anything more than twitch on the ground. Jane looked at me and smiled, “I know the type. Just another estrogen fueled misandrist.”

I just looked at her stunned as she popped the electrodes off the taser, reloaded it, grabbed my arm and steered me down the street and into a waiting taxi.

“Maybe we should have those drinks at my place,” she purred and leaned into me.

“You’re amazing,” I said and put an arm around her.

“Brains over brawn, works every time.”

I learned quite a bit about Jane over the weekend, her past was a lot more interesting than anyone would have suspected. She grew up an orphan and was in street gang by the time she was eleven, she’d actually been to juvenile detention twice having been arrested a number of times for petty crimes and even assault. What had turned her around was her musical ability, one of her parole officers had introduced her to her favorite recording artist, and at the age of seventeen she suddenly found herself adopted and moved to New York and involved in the music scene.

She’d learned better ways of dealing with problems than by force, but as she’d shown with Marti, she wasn’t afraid to use it when she needed to; she was just smart about it. But for all of her rough upbringing she was polite, and rather kind.

When Monday came I showed up at class early, and sure enough, Marti was there in the workout room. She came at me and took a swing. I caught it, which shocked her, then twisted her arm behind her back and slammed her up against the wall.

“Don’t you get it? I was sent here to test you, and you *failed*. It isn’t your physical condition, which is excellent, or your fighting skills, which are well above par.

“No, it’s your attitude. Instead of hating men, you should try loving them. You’re supposed to be our protector, our guide, our leader – not our

biggest fear or nightmare!”

She looked at me over her shoulder, confused. “Tested? For what?”

“For something you’re not ready for obviously,” I said. “I don’t know why you hate men, and I honestly don’t care. But you need to let go of that now, it’s holding you back. Goodbye Marti.”

Releasing her, I turned around and left.

I stuck around a few more weeks after that, but I didn’t go back to the school and I quit my waiter job after a week. I dated Jane quite a bit over those two weeks, I liked her, she was a nice woman and Aryanna did have a few more things she wanted me to find out. But eventually I told her I’d been summoned back to England and that I had to go.

“Well that was different than what I went through,” I told Fel. I was sitting in his bar and in the morning, I’d be leaving Treow and its version of New York.

“Different jobs, different people, different tests.”

I nodded, I hoped Marti didn’t get picked up by anybody, but I could definitely see where some would love her type of personality and hateful mindset. Jane was more the type person I would want to see as a champion, she seemed more compassionate, more level headed, and smart enough to win.

Fel nodded, “My sentiments exactly.”

I sighed. “You know I hate when you do that.”

Fel smiled, “Okay. So where are you off to next Will?”

I shook my head and sighed again, I knew he already knew. “Home to *my* New York for a week or two, being here made me a little homesick. So I thought I’d drop in for a short visit and see family. Then see Darlene for a while before picking up on the spring campaign.”

Fel nodded.

“I am curious however,” I said looking at him. “Was the whole reason for my checking out Marti, only to get her and Jane to have a confrontation and see what Jane would do?”

Fel shrugged, “I don’t have the ability to see the future like Aryanna does. It’s possible; you’d have to ask her.”

I nodded, but I wasn’t sure I wanted to know. Stephanie had told me that Aryanna played the game well and could manipulate us rather well, and I accepted that. It came with the job after all.

But sometimes not knowing really is best.

Twelve

(Earth – New York)

I pulled up in front of my parent's house in a rental car. I had called and told them I was in town and I'd be stopping by later to visit. It was nice to spend some time with them, and I got to see my siblings as well. My oldest brother had three kids now, the next oldest had two. My younger sister had just gotten out of the Army! She'd gone in after getting her two-year degree and thinking that college wasn't what she really wanted to do.

"How was the Army Nikki?" I asked giving her a hug.

"It was okay, but all the prohibitions on combat took a lot of the fun out of it. They let you take the courses, but even if you pass them, you still don't get the chance to use what you learn," she grumbled.

I nodded, "So what are your plans now?"

She shrugged, "I'm not really sure right now. My XO, well former XO now, has a friend that does bodyguards for celebrities and stuff like that. I've done a few jobs for them in the last month. Thinking if I want to make a career out of it."

I laughed and looked at my sister; she was about five eight, pretty trim and kind of cute. I could see a lot of guys discounting her, growing up all my friends had quickly learned not to do that. She had a right hook that could loosen your teeth and wasn't afraid to use it. Growing up in a family of boys, and being the youngest, she'd learned to fend for herself fairly quickly. She was actually the one that got me started in martial arts, because she needed a ride to the dojo.

"But?" I asked her. "There seems to be a 'but' on the end of that line."

She smiled at me, "But I'm not sure I want to spend the rest of my life babysitting spoiled rich kids with over inflated self-opinions."

I nodded.

"So what about you? Mom and Dad say you've been living out of the country with some gal you met?"

"Pretty much. It's pretty provincial there, and not exactly an easy place to get to."

"That doesn't tell me where it is you know," she said looking at me.

"Funny that," I smiled at her.

Nikki punched me in the arm, "Tell me."

I shook my head, "This isn't in one of those places where people can just show up."

"The only places in the world I know about that are like that are in Asia or Africa."

"Well it's not Africa," I grinned, "I hope that narrows it down."

"Idiot!" She said and punched my again. "So, how is she?"

"She's wonderful. Why do you think I left?"

"Because you hated working in an office?"

I looked at her surprised.

"Oh please Bro, I know you. You should have become a civil engineer, then at least you'd have been outside more."

"Yeah, you may be right on that. So what about your social life?"

"It's been pretty dead since I got out. By the way, have you come across anything strange in your travels of late?"

I laughed, "Strange is a pretty easy definition when you're traveling out of the country."

"I mean strange as in, *not of this world* strange."

"Tell me what you saw," I said looking at her seriously.

"Better yet, I'll show you," she said.

The next day found us out at Montauk Point on the far end of the island, near the old nuclear missile base that the Air Force had only recently decommission.

"I was out here about a year ago; the Army borrowed the facility for a few specialist exercises, seeing as it was mostly abandoned at that point."

I nodded; I could feel the portal already.

Nikki parked the car off the road and struck off into the trees, I followed her. "Anyway, while I was playing opposing force for the trainees I came across something, I'm curious if you've seen anything like it. I asked a few guys in the unit if they saw something funny when I brought them by, but they thought I was crazy."

"Okay."

"You know what it is, don't you?"

I looked at her, "What makes you say that?"

"Because when I start to head away from it, you track back towards it."

I laughed, "Guilty as charged."

"So what is it?"

“Exactly what you think it is. Now let’s take a closer look at it.”

We walked another ten minutes and we were there. I went up to it and put my hand on it.

“What are you doing?”

“All portals have a feeling to them. The feeling is unique to what’s on the other side, and if it feels bad, don’t go through, cause you’ll probably die.”

“So where do they go?”

“Different places. Did you go through this one?”

Nikki nodded, “Yeah.”

I nodded, “Well this doesn’t feel like anyplace I’ve ever been, so let’s take a look,” and I stepped through.

I looked around, we were closer to the shore now, and the trees were a lot shorter, smaller, and stunted here. The wind was also stronger and I could see the ocean if I peered between the trees.

Nikki stepped through behind me.

“So where are we?” She asked looking around.

“No idea. There are hundreds, if not thousands of these all over the Earth. They lead to different realities. All of which have more portals that lead to other places. All interconnected in an infinite series of different spheres.”

“Why?”

I shrugged, “No idea. The gods call it ‘The Infinite’, well at least those I’ve met.”

“You’ve met gods?” Nikki laughed.

“And goddesses. If I get the chance I’ll introduce you.” I looked around. I couldn’t really see or hear anything, and I didn’t see any signs of civilization, though that didn’t mean much. “Well let’s go back.”

“Don’t you want to explore?” She asked looking around.

“Not without weapons and supplies. Besides, we told Mom we’d be home for dinner and it’s a two hour drive back to the house.”

Nikki nodded and I had her check the portal from this side, then we went back through and walked back to the car.

“So, why could I see it, but not any of the others I brought by it?”

“Well I was told only a very small percentage of the population can, and that it’s an inherited ability.”

“So does that mean Rob and Kev could see it?”

“Probably, and either Mom or Dad, maybe both. But I wouldn’t go telling them about it.”

“Dangerous?”

“Yeah, a lot of it is. Though sometimes that’s just because everything is different.”

“Different how?” She asked looking at me curious.

“A medieval type world with goddesses and magic? A place a lot like this, only women run everything and men aren’t even allowed to vote? Or maybe a place where the dominate race is that of large two legged cats?” I shrugged. “Take your pick; if you can think of it, I’m sure it’s out there somewhere.”

“Oh, tell me more about the one where women rule!” She laughed.

“You probably wouldn’t like it,” I told her.

“Why’s that?”

“Because only the men are supposed to fight,” I grinned.

“Ah, spoilsport. So I take it that’s where your girlfriend is?”

“Wife, we’re married. Two kids, an inn,” I told her.

“Whoa. Two kids? Does mom know?”

“I can’t very well take pictures; at least I don’t think I can. Plus it’s not like I can bring them here or vice-versa, it would be too shocking an experience.”

Nikki nodded and thought about it a while as we got into the car and drove back, eventually we talked about other things for the rest of the trip home and later that evening as well.

I was getting ready to go to bed in the guest room, which was my old bedroom when Nikki popped open the door.

“I want to go with you when you leave,” she told me.

I thought about it a moment, anyone else I’d refuse, but Nikki wasn’t the type to take no for an answer, plus she was probably a lot better prepared for this sort of thing than I was the first time.

“Okay. Tomorrow we can do some shopping, then on Sunday we’ll head out. Expect to be gone a while.”

Nikki nodded and closed the door, so I went to bed.

The next day I took her out and found a place that sold old-fashioned cloaks, then some clothing that wouldn’t stand out. Then I picked up two dozen of the bows I had traded before, a couple rolls of silver dimes and had

her turn a bunch of her money into gold and silver rings and showed her how to tie them up in a scarf.

“Do you know how to use a sword?” I asked her.

“No.”

“Dagger? Knives?”

“I’m pretty deadly with a knife, and they taught us basic quarterstaff in the army.”

“Really?” I said looking at her surprised.

“A rifle with a bayonet is a pike, so yeah, the same basic rules apply.”

“Huh, okay. Let’s get you a nice staff then.”

I spent some time filling her in on the basic rules of the portals and traveling, though I didn’t tell her about my being a champion. I figured that could wait.

Saturday night we said our goodbyes to everyone and Sunday morning we got up around four and left, taking my rental car up to Pennsylvania. I parked it at the country store that I had frequented in the past and called the rental company and told them to come pick it up. Then the two of us hitched a ride with a local, there was snow on the ground up here now that it was winter and I really didn’t want to spend any more time trudging through the snow than I had to. I had them drop us off when we were near the portal.

After that, we had about a half-hour hike and we were there.

“Feel it first,” I told Nikki.

She nodded and checked it out. “I can feel the difference.”

“Now, let’s go through.”

We did and I had her check it again.

“This feels like the other one did!”

I nodded, “That’s how Earth feels. As far as I know, every sphere is unique, but then I’ve only been though about a dozen, so I couldn’t say for sure.

“Well let’s get changed, I said and dropping my pack onto the snow covered ground I started to get my gear out.

“Here?” She said looking around.

“Yup,” I spread my nice half moon cloak out on the ground. “Feel free to sit on that or set your clothes on it while you change.”

Nikki looked at me; I was already stripping down to change clothes. She shrugged and changed as well.

When we finally made the road, I had her memorize the spot, and then

we started down it towards Riverhead.

“How far is it?” she asked.

I thought about that, “This time of the year, it’ll be dark before we get there.”

“How are we supposed to see once it gets dark?”

“Let me worry about that.”

She shrugged, “okay.”

We made pretty good time, as a soldier Nikki was used to marching, and I was in far better shape than the first time I’d been here in the rain.

When night fell, I stopped and took off my boots.

“What are you doing?” Nikki asked, she couldn’t see me, it was a moonless night and with the trees, there was no light at all.

“Taking my boots off.”

“Why?” she asked.

“So I don’t ruin them.”

I strapped them to the top of my pack which I took off and loosened the straps. I loosened my belt, and the ties around my neck on the shirt and the cloak. I could shift to my champion form in these clothes; they were loose enough fit until I shifted. Then they’d be snug.

“Okay, I’m going to do something, my voice is going to change a lot when I do, so don’t panic. And if you see anything else different about me, just ignore it for now.”

“Why? What are you going to do?”

“Nikki?”

“Yes?”

“Not now. It’s cold and I want to go home. So just grab the end of your staff and stick it out, and I’ll lead you along.”

“But what’s going on?”

“Magic,” I said and shifted.

I picked my pack up, put it on my now larger body, grabbed the other end of the staff and we set off again.

“So, how does your voice sound now?” She asked teasing.

“Hush,” I growled and she started for a moment, but kept following me and holding on to the end of her staff.

“Yeah, that’s creepy alright.”

We went on for quite a few more hours like that when I finally saw the lights for Riverhead as we rounded a bend.

“Will?”

“Yes?”

“I think I can see you now.”

“Good.” I stopped and dropping the pack I shifted back and after rearranging my clothes I put my boots back on.

“What are you?” She asked curious, she didn’t sound scared.

“Your older brother,” I grumbled. At this point I was thinking of the nice warm bed that was less than an hour away.

“Ha ha. You know what I meant.”

“I’ll explain it to you later. Let’s go.”

Nikki sighed, “Okay, let’s go.”

Twenty minutes later we were standing outside the gate, I recognized the sergeant in charge of the detail on the wall, and fortunately he recognized me as well.

“Will! As I live and breath, what are ye’ doing out so late at night? And in this weather too?”

“Trying not to freeze to death Jonas. Can you open up for us?”

“Certainly! Just a minute!”

It took him a few minutes, but the smaller passage in the large gate opened and we were ushered through. I thanked Jonas, tipped his men a few coppers so they could send someone off to get a warm drink to thank them for their trouble, and led Nikki through the streets to my inn.

“Wow,” Nikki said behind me.

“Just remember, this isn’t home. Things are different here, especially the culture. Anything happens; you let people know I’m your brother. Tell them I own the White Swann if they don’t recognize the name.”

“Does that mean you’re an important man here bro?” Nikki asked curious.

“Yes,” I stopped and looked up; the inn was still open, though they were probably getting ready to close for the night. “Home at last,” I sighed and went inside with Nikki behind me.

I stepped inside, dropped my pack that had the bundle of bows attached to it, dropped my cloak and caught my wife.

“Will!” Darlene said and wrapped herself around me and started kissing me rather happily. For my part I kissed her back rather warmly.

Eventually I heard my sister cough behind me, and we both came up for air. I set Darlene down and she looked at Nikki.

“Is this your sister?” She said noticing the family resemblance.

I nodded, “Darlene, this is my sister Nikki. Nikki, this is my wife Darlene.”

“Hi, pleased to...” Nikki found herself being hugged rather warmly by Darlene, “Welcome to our home Nikki! My husband’s family is my family! Please, take off your cloak; let me get your things! I’ll get you a room made up right away!”

“Hon, I’ll get her things. You go get a room ready, then we can all settle down and relax.” I told her.

Darlene nodded and gave Nikki a kiss on the cheek and then hustled into the back room.

I looked around the bar; the room was mostly empty at this point, two customers were finishing up their beers. Sarah waved, she was sweeping up the room, I waved back.

“That’s Sarah, Darlene’s younger sister.” I told Nikki and gathering our things, I led her into the family quarters of the inn.

“This is a pretty nice place,” She told me looking around.

“I’ll introduce you to the original owners later; I suspect they’ve already gone to bed.”

“Original owners?”

“I bought them out, but they stay on to help Darlene since she is the one running it.”

“Nice to see you didn’t leave her hanging,” Nikki said as Darlene came out to show Nikki to her room.

“What can I say? I love her,” I said and smiled at Darlene who smiled back. “Now go to bed, I’m going to lock the front door and go to bed myself.”

“Yeah, just don’t get too noisy,” Nikki said and yawned.

“Oh don’t worry, I put you in a room on the end of the hallway,” Darlene said, her smile becoming more of a smirk. “I plan to keep my husband up much, much, later than this.”

Nikki blushed and quickly followed Darlene to her room as I went to lock up.

Nikki was a bit surprised when we went to the baths the next day; I didn’t warn her because I was listening to Darlene catch me up on our kids and pretty much forgot.

“This is different,” Nikki said to me while I was washing Darlene’s back.

I laughed, “Yeah, sorry. Forgot to tell you, communal bathing. Not much of a public nudity taboo here.”

“Yeah, I noticed. What else?”

I shrugged, “Women outnumber men by more than two to one I think. So social mores are a bit different in that regards.”

“How so?”

“What William is trying to say,” Darlene spoke up turning around and smiling at me, motioning for me to turn around so she could scrub my back, “is that it is not uncommon for men to have a second wife, or a concubine, somewhere else.”

“And women put up with that?” Nikki said surprised.

“If you want a family, you don’t have much of a choice. Of course some of us had only hoped to be concubines, not end up married to a wealthy and successful man who has the favor of the goddess as well as the crown.”

Nikki looked at me, “Is that true?”

I blushed, “I don’t know that I have the favor of the royal family, but I do know Duke Lias.”

Nikki shook her head, “All this from trading bows?”

“Well I also spent some time up in the mountains collecting bounties on criminals, that helped.”

Nikki shook her head, “This is going to take a while to get used to.”

“Well I told you it was different here.”

“Not that,” She smirked, “you being rich and important!”

“Yes, she is your sister all right,” Darlene said with a giggle.

I shrugged and we moved to the rinsing pools to finish up.

We went back to the inn and had breakfast, during which I introduced Nikki to Harold, his wife Emma, and Sergeant Chaucer, Sarah’s husband, and my two children.

After we ate I took her aside to tell her what our family ‘history’ was here, so there wouldn’t be any mistakes.

“Now what?”

“Now I have to go talk to Aryanna about a job I just finished for her.”

“Aryanna?”

I nodded, “The goddess? I know I told you about her.”

“Umm, I just find it hard to believe is all.”

I laughed, “She doesn’t talk to everyone, well in her main temple she

might, I wouldn't know. But you have no idea how shocked I was the first time she talked to me."

"Mind if I come along?"

I shook my head, "Not at all."

We walked down to the local temple, I pointed out some of the local landmarks and attractions as we did.

"So do you follow this Aryanna?" She asked curious once we were away from the others.

"Not exactly."

"And you're not kidding me about her being real, are you?"

I shook my head, "I've met her Nikki, and more than once. I actually like her quite a lot."

"You've met a goddess? And honest to goodness goddess?" Nikki shook her head. "I find that hard to believe."

"Trust me, stay here long enough and you'll believe."

We got to the temple, I bowed to the head priest and he smiled and nodded to me as we went inside and I headed to one of the smaller shrines in the back that I liked to use.

"So are we going to meet her now?"

I shook my head. "No, a god or goddess can usually only materialize in a major temple, normally just their primary one. But they can talk to people in any major temple, or if you're interesting to them they can pretty much talk to you inside your head no matter where you are."

"You're kidding right?"

"No, *he's not kidding*," Aryanna's voice came out in both of our heads. Nikki stopped and looked around.

"Scary isn't it?" I laughed and put a few silver coins on the altar.

"Can, can she hear me?"

"*Of course I can hear you, you're in my temple*," Aryanna said rather humorously.

"Actually, she can *always* hear you," I said. "But you're not guaranteed her attention. I really don't have to come here to talk to her, but I respect Aryanna tremendously and I like her. So I make sure that I pay my respects when I'm here and go to services every week. And I would advise you to do the same Sis."

Nikki nodded and glanced around, looking a bit stunned.

"You're still talking to her, aren't you?" I sighed looking up.

“Yes, she’s rather interesting, not unlike you.” Aryanna told me.

“Well, I’m sure Fel told you about my opinions of the two women you had me check out. If Marti ever gets over her hate, I think she might be a good candidate, she definitely has the ego.

“Jane just impressed the hell out of me.”

“I have a few more tests for Jane, then we will see.”

“More tests?”

“Don’t worry, I won’t take you away from your time with Darlene, or Fel. Someone else will handle it for me.”

“Thanks,” I smiled, “I do want to spend some time with Darlene.”

“And she with you. It wouldn’t be fair to her either and she is a devoted and devout follower.”

“Thank you, Aryanna.” I said and gave a small bow to the Altar and grabbing Nikki I steered her out of the small shrine we were in and out of the temple.

“That, that was interesting,” Nikki said glancing over at me.

“Aryanna is one of the best I’ve met to date, and I honestly don’t think I’ll meet better.”

“So do you often do work for her?” Nikki asked giving me another glance as we walked.

“Only when my god loans me out to her.”

“Your god?”

“Every god can have a champion if they want, champions get certain powers and benefits, but they have to do the tasks that their god assigns them. I’m Feliogustus’ champion.”

“Feliogustus?” Nikki said looking around. “Where is his temple?”

“In another sphere, a different reality.”

“If he’s there, why are you here?”

“It’s a long story, the short of it is, I had already married Darlene and bought her the inn....”

Nikki interrupted me, “You *bought* her that inn?”

“Yes I bought her the inn,” I laughed, “don’t interrupt. Aryanna recruited me to work for Fel, Feliogustus that is, and I accepted the job. So I come here when I can and spend time with Darlene.”

“Wow, I can’t wait to hear the rest of this story,” Nikki said shaking her head. “It sounds like you’ve been pretty busy, Will.”

“Yeah, the last four years have been something of a rush, but I’m not

complaining.”

“So where are we going now?”

“I’m taking you to Master Burdon; he’s the best sword trainer I know.”

“Sword trainer?”

“Yup, and I’m going to teach you the basics on shooting a bow. If you’re going to be traveling around here, you need to know how to defend yourself.”

“I already know how to defend myself.”

“Yeah, with a gun or a knife. Trust me, Sis, you’ll be happy you learned them once you have. Besides, I’m paying for it!”

Nikki laughed. “Well in that case.”

Master Burdon was a little skeptical about training a woman, but said he’d do it as a favor to me, and promised he wouldn’t go easy on her either. So I left her to his tender mercies and went back to the inn to enjoy the rest of the day with Darlene and the others.

I stayed until March, leaving Darlene pregnant with number three, her idea of course, but I wasn’t about to complain! But I had work to do, and I wanted to see Rachel.

Nikki had taken to the sword rather quickly and was working at it rather hard now. She was also continuing with the bow, Chaucer told me he’d help with her lessons.

“So, where are you off to now, Will?” Nikki asked me after I had told everyone I’d be leaving in the morning.

“I have to go to Saladin where my god Fel is and get back to work.”

“Is that all?” She asked giving me a sly look.

“Yes, I have a second wife, and yes I have a child with her.”

“Ah ha! So, buy her an inn too?”

I laughed, “Hardly, she’s the queen.”

“You married a queen?” Nikki looked surprised.

I nodded, “Yup. Make sure you stick with your lessons, don’t let anyone follow you if you decide to take the portal back home. If you want a real adventure, ask Chaucer if you can travel with one of the Caravans to Kingstown in the late spring or summer. It’s a lovely city.”

“Can’t I come with you?”

I shook my head, “Not this time, things are happening over there right now, and I have too much on my mind to add anything else to it.”

“I’m trained for combat, Bro, I can handle it.”

“The last place I want to see you is in combat Nikki. It’s pretty damn brutal, and there’s a lot more nasty stuff involved with what I’ll be facing. Plus you still haven’t mastered the sword or the bow yet.”

“Spoilsport. Maybe I’ll just follow you.”

I laughed, “You won’t be able to, trust me. But spend some time here and check it out. This is a pretty nice place with a lot to see.”

“Is there anyway I can keep in touch with you?”

“Well if it’s important, go down to the temple, make a donation, and pray.”

Nikki looked at me sideways, “You serious?”

I nodded, “Aryanna is friends with my god Feliogustus. They talk.”

“So why can’t I just ask her?”

I smiled, “Because first of all, she is a goddess, and she’s got better things to do than just ferry messages for you or me. Also there are rules, if you make a donation and say a sincere prayer, there’s a decent chance that she’ll grant your request.”

“So go to church, treat Aryanna with respect, and don’t forget she’s a goddess. Sounds easy enough,” she smiled.

“And feel free to sell the rest of those bows for me if you want. You can keep the money if you need it.”

“Thanks!” she said and gave me a hug.

I hugged her back then went off to find my wife, I was leaving before sunrise, and I was planning on spending my remaining time with her.

Thirteen

(Saladin – Highland City)

It was cold in Hiland city, and there was snow, quite a bit of it, being up in the hills probably had a lot to do with that.

Rachel looked rather sexy, felinoids did get winter coats and I liked the way she looked in hers, and as long as I was willing to brush it out for her, she didn't complain.

Baron was a cute little ball of fluff running around the room and that gave us both ideas about increasing the size of the family.

Also, the council hadn't been too shy with the hints they were dropping now that I was back for a while.

"So, has Diamant been behaving himself?" I asked after I'd been home a few nights.

"For the most part, yes," Rachel said and snuggled against me as we lay on the floor by the fire.

"What do you mean by 'for the most part'?" I inquired.

"Oh, occasionally he'll act up a little in the council and give me a little grief, but nothing serious. I'm sure he knows I'm keeping an eye on him. Sometimes I think he just does it to prove that he's still able to, that he's behaving because he wants to, not because he's afraid of me or you."

"Oh? What do you think?"

Rachel shrugged a little, "I think he's starting to regret what he tried to do. I just grew the kingdom by thirty percent this last summer without a single war. And now King Charles of Holden wants to talk about a Royal wedding between Baron and his daughter Leiss."

I nodded and gave a little grunt of acknowledgement. Baron was turning three and Holden's King Charles had a daughter that had just turned two. Rachel had spent the fall and the winter sending missives back and forth to King Charles discussing the possibilities of a royal wedding.

King Charles was fairly old, well past his prime, and his two sons had died fighting the Mulanders. He'd been able to sire one last child, and had a daughter. I don't know if he was unhappy that he didn't have a son, or just happy that he had a child. In either case Rachel was fairly sure he'd go for the idea of his kingdom joining hers, as it would be his grandchildren as well as ours, ruling a much larger kingdom.

Barassa was starting to look to the west according to Rachel's spies, they'd never come up here before, but their army was big enough that it would be a very tough fight for the small kingdom of Holden.

The only thing I wasn't happy about was that we would have to travel there to start the process.

"So when do you want to go?" I asked.

"The end of next month should be a good time."

I converted that in my head, that would make it around May back home.

"Why then?" I asked.

"The worst of the rains should be over by then, but they won't lessen in the lowlands for several weeks after that. By the time they do, if Barassa decides to try anything, like launch an attack to try and catch me in Holden's Capitol, they'll be fighting vicious waters on the rivers, and heavy mud on the trails."

I nodded, I wasn't sure that they'd try anything, yet, but I couldn't fault Rachel for her caution. She would be outside her kingdom, and away from the safety of the hills that offered the Hilanders so much protection.

"I'll talk to Holse about the troops we'll take with us."

"How many are you going to take?" She asked curious.

"Oh, I don't know, at least ten thousand."

Rachel coughed and turned and looked up at me.

"What? Not enough?" I grinned.

"I was thinking a thousand. That many and Charles will think we're going to invade!"

"We'll leave most of them at the border; it'll be a good exercise for them."

Rachel nodded and smiled, "Okay."

The next day I attended council with her; I hadn't been to any yet since I'd been back, my duties to Fel had dictated that I had to put in several appearances at the main temple, as well as a few day trips out to the environs with the high priestess who was looking very pregnant at this point.

Plus general decency, as well as my own feelings, dictated that I spend some quality time with her and my daughter by her as well.

Council seemed different, and it took me quite a while to put my finger on what had changed. It was Wreth; he was no longer following everything that Diament said and did, but was at times doing something different, he

even disagreed with Diamant once! Oh, it was nothing major, just a minor point, but it surprised me and I suspect it annoyed Diamant quite a bit that Wreth was finally coming out of Diamant's shadow and becoming his own man.

He also didn't seem quite as afraid of me as he had in the past, but then if he was finally going to act like an adult male, I supposed it was only natural that he'd get some control over his fears.

When council was over, I went and cornered Holse.

"General!" I said and we touched hands and then clasped each other's right forearm, which was the military version of the handshake here. Regular handshakes didn't work because you'd jab each other with your claws that would come out when you squeezed each other's hands during a regular shake, no matter how light the pressure.

"Ah, Will! What can I do for you?"

"I was wondering how the training of the new cavalry was coming along?"

Holse smiled, "Fairly well overall, most of them can't fight from their mounts yet, but they all can ride very well. Those tribesmen you hired were most effective teachers; their punishments for poor performance were quite ingenious."

I laughed at that, I could just imagine.

"Good, I want to take all of them with us when we go to Holden for the Royal meeting."

"I'm not sure how well they'll do, Will," he warned.

"It'll be good experience for them," I said, "Plus if we need to return in a hurry, the queen would make a lot better time on the back of one, then in the royal wagon."

Holse nodded, "Too bad we can't use the wolats to pull the wagons or the carts, they're so much faster than the oxen we use."

I blinked, "Why can't you use them?"

"The wooden yokes do a number on them, damn near had one strangle itself."

"Huh," I thought about that, I remembered then that I had meant to talk to someone up here about fixing that last fall. "Tell them to try making the yokes out of leather, put some wood or metal inside to stiffen it up, but make them wider and well padded."

"If you have an idea that might work, stop by the leatherworker's shop

and tell him. It's not really something I know anything about, Will."

I nodded and added that to the list of things I needed to do.

"Also I'm going to want to take about ten companies with us on the trip."

Holse looked surprised, "You expecting trouble?"

"I'm expecting to discourage the idea," I said with a grim smile. "We'll only take one company into Holden with us. But if we need them, well it's only a day's march to the Capitol from the border."

Holse nodded, "I'll see to it, Will."

I smiled and we clasped arms again and I went off to talk to the leatherworker.

The next month and a half until we left wasn't remarkable really. Wreth continued to become more independent, actually arguing with Diamant once on something, leaving Diamant looking rather surprised. There were some of the usual issues, someone pilfered a bunch of clothing from the castle laundry, leaving a few of the servants and the guards rather annoyed.

Next, some of the food stores and wine were pilfered, which left the kitchen staff annoyed. So the captain of the guard doubled the number of guards on duty, and put a few extra around in a few places as well.

I got the impression from him that he was taking it as a personal insult that these things had happened under his nose. At least the thefts stopped.

When the time came to leave, Rachel installed her aunt Reese in the castle to watch over our son, and we headed out for the nearly two-week trip to Holden's Capitol city, Erlis.

It rained the entire way there, which led to a lot of complaints from the troops of course. The Wolats didn't really seem to care, and I took them off on a few exercises during the trip, more because I wanted an idea of what they could do, and what I might be able to do with them.

We dropped the troops off in a number of spots on the day before we crossed the border, then we took one company, as we had all decided, as well as our small cavalry, into Holden and to their city.

King Charles' seneschal didn't even blink when we rode up to his castle; he just told us where to bivouac the troops, and then showed us inside to our rooms.

It took a while for us to get settled; we had a dozen guards, six servants, and the luggage of a traveling queen. There were even some nice outfits for me in there somewhere as well.

Several hours later, we were escorted down to the great hall for dinner.

When we got to the entrance, I could see that all of the guests were standing by their seats at the table. The steward announced Rachel first.

“Queen Rachel of the Hilands!” He called out, and everyone politely clapped their hands.

“The Royal Consort: William the Godslayer!” He called out next, making me wince as I heard the name yet again. But the sound of the applause was shocking. Even the King stood up and clapped his hands.

“Gods this is embarrassing,” I whispered to Rachel who looked surprised as well.

“And to think, I married you only because you have such a nice ass under that tail.” She whispered back making me almost miss a step as we walked down the stairs. I looked at her and she was smirking at me.

“You gave me a city as a wedding present,” she giggled, “what woman could say no to that?”

When we reached the main table, Rachel and the King sat and I bowed to the King, then sat.

“You are too kind, Your Highness,” I said to the King.

“Hardly, you did everyone a service. Even the King of Marland breaths easier and sleeps better at night now.”

“Well in all fairness,” I said, “my god Feliogustus should be thanked as well, he did make me his champion after all, and put me in the place so that I could right those many wrongs.”

The King nodded, “That is also true, and I have decreed that the priests and priestess of Feliogustus shall be welcomed into our land, and our house.”

I could tell from that spot in my mind that Fel was rather pleased, so I nodded to the King again, “Thank you, Your Highness.”

Dinner started then, and Rachel and King Charles began to talk at that point, so I mostly sat back and just watched and listened. The woman seated on my right tried to strike up a conversation a few times, but I wasn’t all that interested in small talk.

As the dinner progressed, their conversation got more involved in the business of their respective kingdoms. King Charles knew an impressive amount about Hilands, but Rachel also knew an equally impressive amount about Holden.

Over the next several days Charles and Rachel met several times,

Charles was basically telling Rachel his vision for the lands he ruled, and Rachel was telling him her plans for Hiland, and her hopes for what Baron and his daughter would do once they ruled together.

I think it was mostly Charles feeling Rachel out, to make sure that this was the alliance he did want.

It was the fifth night of our stay; we'd be leaving in a two days, when King Charles came up to me alone. It was late at night and I was standing outside along one of the walls looking out over the city.

"King Charles," I said and gave a small bow.

"Ah, William, at last I get you alone."

I looked at him, "I had no idea you wanted to speak with me, Your Highness."

He smiled, "You can knock off the honors, it's just you and me, Son."

I nodded, "So, what did you want to talk about?"

"Is it true champions are immortal?" He asked looking out over his city.

"Not really," I said, "I've been told that eventually I'll tire of the job, that I'll miss the company of my wife, my family, my friends, and that I'll retire."

"But you will live a long time, won't you?"

I wondered where he was going with all of this. "Yes, for the most part I'll live as long as I want to."

"That's what I wanted to know," he said turning towards me.

"Why?"

"Because I'm holding *you* responsible for the welfare of my people, my kingdom. I know you love your wife; I can see it in your eyes. I know you have faith in your god; I can hear it in your words when you speak of him.

"You've heard me talk of my hopes and my dreams, and I'm sure you know of your queen's as well. Well the truth is, we are mortal, we shall pass. Our children are mortal as well, they too shall pass. But you, William, you will be here long after we are all gone. Who better to be a steward to all of this," he waved his arm out at the town lying outside the walls, "than you?"

I nodded and sighed, "As soon as I held my son for the first time I felt it. You want your children to have more, to be more, to do more. I will always be there for him; I will be there for his children, and his children's children. It's a strange and scary thing, Charles."

"Perhaps to you, William, but to me it is a wonderful thing. You can tell Rachel I will sign the Marriage Banns with her in the morning. I know she wishes to leave soon, you may depart as soon we've concluded."

I nodded, "Thank you, I do appreciate it."

"Just do an old man one favor if you could."

"What would that be?"

"Punch King Stivik in the nose for me."

I laughed, King Stivik was the king of Barassa.

"I will do my best."

"I believe that will be more than enough. Good night, William."

"Good night, King Charles."

I watched as he walked away, and then turning to walk back to our rooms I felt something, something strange. It seemed like Fel had just increased somehow. I couldn't explain it at all, and it was followed by a feeling from him that I needed to sleep.

I hurried up and getting into bed with Rachel, I pulled her sleeping form close and quickly closed my eyes.

"Yes, Fel?" I asked looking around the bar. I noticed it immediately, there was a stage in the bar now, and there were instruments upon that stage.

"Will, I have good news, bad news, and good news." Fel said, looking a little serious, but he did not seem upset.

"What's the bad news?" I said looking around.

"I must tell this in order, so you understand it."

I nodded, rules stuff I guessed.

"Partially. Now, I have joined with Fordessa, she is now a member of my Pantheon."

He held up a hand to forestall any congratulations. "Her position will be that of the faithful friend and lover, who brings light and joy to the people by the way of her songs and her music. So you could think of her as a junior partner.

"Now I gained some power, because of her followers, but she just gained a lot of power because of mine. And that's important."

"Why?" I asked curious as to where all of this is going.

"Because she immediately qualified for a champion, which she now has."

I cocked my head, "She got a champion immediately?"

Fel nodded, "A series of events were coming, Aryanna saw them, not unlike she saw when I would need you. Fordessa and I agreed on the Pantheon months ago, we just held off to give our priests and priestesses time

to lay the groundwork. When the time was right, we joined together, she took on her champion, and we acted.”

I shivered. “What happened, Fel?” I growled.

“The main temple was attacked by one of those suicide groups we’ve come to know and hate,” he said. “However, because we suddenly had Fordessa’s champion in the midst of the temple, they failed immediately.”

I stopped a moment and thought about Fel’s temple, “Why would they attack the main temple? You can strike down anyone inside it!”

“With opposing priests and champions it’s a bit harder, but yes I can. They were sent there purely as a diversion.”

“A diversion for what?”

“First of all, your son Baron is safe. He’s with your wife Darlene.”

When Fel mentioned Baron I almost lost it, but I calmed down immediately once he told me Baron was safe.

“What happened, Fel?” I growled it out, I was livid.

“Tantrus’ champion launched an attack on the Castle in an attempt to kidnap or kill your son. They had a force of sixty fighters and priests with them. They even had some outside help....”

“Diamant?” I growled interrupting him.

“No, Diamant is dead actually. He attacked Tantrus’ champion himself, personally leading a group of guards when they assaulted the living quarters. He actually sacrificed himself to save your son, Will.”

I looked at Fel shocked.

“While that was happening, Aryanna’s new champion, along with Dezba led the rest of the Castle’s forces in a counter attack and wiped them all out while Joseph took your son to your inn, for safekeeping.”

“If they killed them all, why does he need to be with Darlene?”

“They had inside help, William.”

I stopped and thought about that. “From whom?” I growled.

“I can not say.”

“Can not, or will not?” I said still growling.

“Rules, William, rules.”

“Dammit, Fel! This isn’t anytime for fucking rules!”

Fel put a finger on my nose and I froze. My anger froze with it. “I know you’re upset, William, so I won’t punish you for that. I can’t break the rules, Will, even if I want to, *I cannot. You however can.*”

That stopped me. When he took his finger off my nose, I prostrated

myself before him, "I apologize, Feliogustus, I am sorry I doubted you."

Fel smiled, "I appreciate the gesture, especially as I know the thought is sincere. Now, what can I do for you?"

"Do any of the others know who was helping them?"

"Which others?"

"Dezba, Aryanna's new champion, Joseph?"

Fel shook his head. "No, they don't know any of the people who were there."

"Does Ramert know?"

"No, he is up at the Castle now with his men however, making sure it is secure."

"Can I talk to the men who died?"

Fel nodded, "Of course, just go outside." He nodded to the door that led to the alternate version of Hiland, where the recently dead stayed until they passed on to their reward.

I got up and walked out of the bar. When I was in Fel's realm waiting to be put back together and resurrected this was just like the real world to me. When I'm visiting it in a dream, it's not quite as real. It's clearer than a dream normally would be, but there is still a slight dream like quality to it.

Diament was outside the door, almost as if he was waiting for me.

"Ah! There you are! Fel told me you would probably visit before I moved on."

I revised my thoughts.

"Diament, do you know who did this?"

He nodded, "Of course I do, though I didn't know until the last minute, that slimy little worm! Oh I wish I could have made him pay! To try and kill a child! Barbaric!"

"Diament, who was it?" I growled.

"Wreth, that little bastard Wreth. He sold us out and has gone over to Barassa's side. I'd bet he even has a shrine to Tantrus in his house now!"

I nodded, "Thank you, Diament, thank you for that, and thank you for your sacrifice. I sorry you're dead; I honestly wanted to see you build that dam. It was a great idea."

Diament smiled at me, "And now that I'm dead I can see that you really were impressed by my work. I'm sorry we were at odds there, William. I guess I was too much my father's son."

I nodded and we clasped arms. It felt a little strange, being in a dream

state.

“One last thing,” he said as I turned to go.

“Anything,” I said looking back at him.

“Talk to my son, tell him I want him to build the dam, all of the drawings, all of the formulas, everything, is written in a couple of books in the false bottom of the bottom drawer of the dresser in my office.”

I nodded, “I’ll do that.”

“And please, make sure he understands that I did this willingly, for my queen, and my country. It was a sacrifice that had to be made. Better to die a man than to live a coward.”

“I will see to it myself, Diament. I will make sure that your house is honored.”

Diament bowed to me, “I know you are a man of your word. Thank you, Champion.”

I went back inside with Fel.

“Thanks, Fel, now when can I expect the others to show up?”

“Aryanna’s champion, and Dezba, along with Fordessa’s champion should all be there by morning. Get your rest, there is nothing you can do right now.”

“Do you know... wait, strike that. Can you tell me if Tantrus’ agents are going to attack us on the way back to Hiland?”

“I don’t know, Will. I can’t track priests, and not all of that is in my sphere of influence. I would advise caution.”

I nodded, “Tell Aryanna thank you, for watching Baron. When can we get him back?”

“Joseph will bring him back to the castle as soon as you or Rachel are back there.”

I nodded and fell back asleep.

Fourteen

(Saladin – Erlis)

I woke Rachel up an hour before dawn. I had alerted the guards to tell all of our troops to get ready, I'd even sent out a runner to the troops on the border to inform them of the change in our plans.

"Is it still dark out?" she grumbled and looked at me.

"Yes, I've asked someone to wake up Charles. He told me last night he would sign the Banns with you this morning, we need to get them signed and we need to get you out of here."

Rachel's expression became deadly serious, "What happened?"

"Baron is safe." I held up a hand to stop her interrupting me, "The castle was attacked last night by Tantrus' minions with the help of Wreth. Some friends of mine showed up and one of them took Baron to my other wife and is staying with him to protect him."

"*Friends?*" She asked carefully.

"Champions, like me. Feliogustus has allies, some are fairly powerful too. Three of them should be showing up rather soon."

"So why do we need to get up early? It's still a long trip to get home."

"Because I'm afraid they'll come after you next, that's why."

"I guess they found out about the proposed marriage and really don't like the idea," she sighed.

I nodded.

"So what are you going to do about it hon?" she said looking at me.

"I hadn't thought that far ahead yet," I confessed.

"I'm going to get dressed, go find your friends. After I sign the Marriage Banns with King Charles we will all sit down and plot our revenge."

"*Our* revenge?" I said smiling.

"I want them to *hurt*; I want their god to *hurt*!" She growled. "Now, go, I have things to do."

I felt them before I saw them; they were all smiling at me as I came around the corner, three women, armed to the teeth and ready for war. And I actually knew all of them. The interesting part was even though they weren't human, that they were all now felinoid's like me, I still recognized them immediately.

“Dezba!” I said sweeping her up into a hug that surprised her. “Thank you for saving my son!”

“Anytime, Will, anytime.”

I went over to the one that had Fordessa’s symbol on her breastplate. “Jane,” I smiled, “I must say I am surprised to see you here. I thought you were being recruited for someone else.”

Jane just stood and starred at me a moment, “*You’re* Feliogustus’s champion?” she said looking up at me, “And when did you get so damn tall?”

“Fel did it to me. Actually I kind of like it.” I gave her a hug, “Welcome to the family. Fordessa seems like a nice goddess, I hope you’ll be happy.”

I turned to my sister then, “I should never have introduced you to Aryanna, should I?” I sighed.

Nikki laughed, “Hell no! She started telling me about the job the same day you left! She knew you’d be pissed, but she told me she wanted me for her champion the moment you took me to her temple.”

I shook my head, “Well, welcome to my world, I’ll introduce you all to my wife in a few minutes. She wants to talk about what we’re going to do about this.”

“Really?” Dezba said surprised.

“She’s a queen Dez, a queen of a bunch of tough buggers who live up in the mountains. Trust me; she’s a bloodthirsty little minx. You and Nikki will just love her. Hell, Jane will probably like her too.”

I led them inside, where we found Rachel sitting in our room at the table; she was rolling up a document and putting it inside a carrier.

She looked up at me, “You just missed King Charles; he said he was going back to bed and he understood that if there were issues back home, that of course we had to leave early.”

She looked at the other women and sighed, shaking her head while smiling. “It figures. Okay, introductions please, dear?”

I smiled back, “This is Dezba, you’ve heard me talk of her before. Dezba, this is my wife, Queen Rachel of the Hilands.”

Dezba came up and touched hands, “It’s nice to meet you, Queen Rachel, but how he got to marry someone like you however is still a mystery to me,” Dezba said with a laugh.

“He conquered an entire country for me and destroyed their god; do you think I’d be dumb enough to let that go?” Rachel said with a smirk.

They all looked at me and my ears went flat as I blushed, my tail curling

and facial fur puffing out.

Nikki laughed, "He didn't!"

"They don't call him William the Godslayer without reason. And you would be?"

I jumped back in, "This is my sister Nikki, Nikki, Queen Rachel, ruler of all she tells me to go out and get for her."

Nikki giggled and touched hands. "Pleasure to meet you, Sis!"

"I had no idea your sister was a champion, Will, why didn't you tell me?"

"Cause he just found out," Nikki said still giggling.

"And last of all," I said, "this is, Jane, she is Fordessa's champion here."

"And where do you know Will from?" Rachel asked as they touched fingers.

"Apparently he was sent to evaluate me for this job by another goddess," Jane said turning to glare at me.

"Well you can yell at him later," Rachel said. "Right now we have to decide just what we're going to do about this attack."

"Well what can we do?" Dezba asked.

"Take the fight to them!" Nikki said.

"Exactly," Rachel agreed nodding, "Let's be proactive instead of reactive."

"Well we can't go to Barassa, Tantrus is too powerful, and Barassa's army is too big." I replied.

"Doesn't Tantrus have a temple in Marland?"

"Ohhh," I said smiling, "Yeah that would be perfect."

"What?" Jane asked.

"Taking out a major temple like that would hit Tantrus with a pretty serious backlash, it would mess him up for weeks."

"Jane?" Rachel said.

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"Rachel will work just fine in private, dear," Rachel said and smiled sweetly. "Now, could you talk to your priests around here, see if any of them know if there is a church to Tantrus in this kingdom as well?"

Jane nodded, "Sure, if someone can tell me where my goddess's local temple is."

"Just relax and open up your senses," I told her, "You'll feel it."

Jane blinked, "Really? Oh wait, yeah, there it is. That's something!"

“You get used to it,” Dezba said. “I’ll go with you,” and getting up she followed Jane out of the room.

“So now we have some targets, how do we get there?” Nikki asked looking at me.

“Oh you’re gonna love this,” I laughed, “The horse analog here is a wolf like animal.”

Nikki looked surprised, “Really?”

I nodded.

Rachel sighed, “I’d ask what you’re talking about, but I don’t think I want to know.”

I nodded and went over to sit by Rachel.

“Do you think your sister and Jane will be able to do much? From the sound of it they’re both new to being champions,” Rachel said to me softly.

“Well my sister was a sergeant in the military back home, and she was a pretty good one, she knows how to fight. As for Jane, well she was in what we call a ‘street gang’ which basically means she ran with a group of thugs as a child, and spent her childhood years beating up other thugs.”

“Well she’s certainly going to be beating up a bunch more before today is through,” Rachel growled.

I nodded, “The only thing that worries me right now is Tantrus’s champion, I’d love to know where he is right now.”

“Oh I wouldn’t be worrying about *him*,” Nikki laughed.

“Why not?” Rachel asked.

“I killed him!” Nikki said grinning. “Unfortunately we didn’t get there soon enough to save everyone, a few people did die.”

“Who died?” Rachel asked.

“Diament died defending Baron,” I told her.

Rachel sighed, “I guess he really did change his ways.”

I nodded, “I talked to him last night, and I made a few promises.”

“You *talked* to him?” Rachel asked surprised.

I nodded, “As Fel’s champion I can talk to the recently deceased before they pass on to the next world. I promised to make sure his son didn’t make the same mistakes he had, and to build his dam.”

Rachel nodded. “So with their champion dead, how long until he comes back?”

“Three days,” I said. “Which is a huge advantage.”

“But we now have four champions.”

“Taking out that temple will be tough. And if it takes us more than three days to get there, odds are we’ll be facing their champion as well.”

“Well, once Jane gets back with some information, we can make our plans.

#

We were sitting on our wolats just outside of Erich, a rather large town that was a few hours ride from the Capitol. I had put Rachel on one, and brought her with us. I would leave fifty of our riders with her here, to protect her, as we rode in to attack. I’d also brought one of Fel’s priests, and Jane had brought one of Fordessa’s, who was showing us the way.

“Okay, real simple,” I said to those going with the four of us. “We ride into the church, right in through the doors, Dezba will attack the altar, everyone else kill clerics and anyone that looks like they might be one. As soon as the altar is destroyed, kill everyone and anyone that isn’t one of us in the room, set the place on fire, then we leave. Okay?”

Everyone nodded.

“Let’s ride!”

We raced into town, and as soon as we saw the church, we all drew our weapons and just rode up the stairs and into the building, making straight for the main hall. It was a fairly large building, big enough that we got forty of the wolats we were riding inside and the carnage began immediately.

We had forgotten, or at least I had forgotten, that the wolats had claws and a nice set of canines that they weren’t afraid to use. As soon as we attacked, I guess the ‘pack’ instinct kicked in, because they attacked just as hard as we did. Even after we jumped off our mounts and started to slaughter everyone in the building, the wolats didn’t relent.

Dezba attacked the altar with a large sledgehammer that we had brought, while Jane and Nikki protected her, and I went after the one remaining priest that we hadn’t killed in the initial onslaught.

I don’t think we were in there five minutes when I heard the altar break and felt the affect as Tantrus’ power suddenly broke and receded. You could see the fight go out of them right away and we cleaned up the rest in very short order.

Both of our priests blessed the remains of the altar as we herded the wolats out, and then set fire to the place. I was amazed that we hadn’t lost

anyone, though several of our soldiers and a couple of our wolats were injured.

When we linked back up with our forces in the woods, we turned and rode to join our bivouacked forces, getting there just as the troops returning from Erlis arrived.

“First Samuels,” I said as we rode up, I could see he had the men ready to move, from the message I had sent that morning. “Strip down everything to only what you need to make a best time run to Hiland. Stop for nothing, if attacked leave a force to delay the attackers, but keep going until the queen is safe.”

“Yes, Champion,” he nodded, “We can leave immediately; I anticipated that you would want to make a hasty return.”

I smiled, Samuels was obviously a First for a good reason.

“Leave us some rations; I’ll be taking the cavalry off on another task.”

“We’ll be leaving one of the stores wagons, help yourself, Sir.”

I nodded and walked Rachel over to one of the small wagons that were going to be pulled by a team of soldiers, so it would make far better time than the oxen could.

“You behave,” I said and kissed her. “Make straight for home, and don’t let anyone mislead you.”

Rachel nodded and gave me a hug. “I don’t think I’ll run into any troubles, they are sure to realize you’re going after Tantrus’s temple in Marland next. He’ll be pulling everyone back to defend it that they can muster.”

“I hope so.”

“So *you* be careful love.”

I smiled, “I will. Now go!”

She hugged me and jumped up into the cart, along with one of her maids and the entire column took off rather quickly. They left one company behind to deal with the slower wagons and those retainers and others who couldn’t keep up. I did notice, with approval, that they took all of the priests but one.

I walked over to the others who were getting what provisions they could.

“How long a ride is it from here to Marland?” Nikki asked.

“Depends on how hard we can push our mounts, thought I really want to arrive with them in fighting shape.”

“How many days is it walking?” Dezba asked.

“About seven.”

She nodded, "Leave it to me; I'll make sure we arrive in good time, with healthy mounts ready to fight."

I looked at her, "You can do that?"

Dezba laughed, "I'm an Indian, Will, I know all about dealing with mounts on long rides."

"But these aren't horses," Nikki said.

"That's less of an issue then you realize," Dezba said smiling.

#

I looked around; I was in Fel's bar of course. Only this time Jane was sitting next to me and Fordessa was there as well. Jane and I looked at each other in surprise, then back at our respective gods. Four days of hard riding had gone by; we were now just outside Marland City, the Capitol of Marland.

"We thought it would be easier this way," Fel said to me.

"I have instructed all of my clerics in the town to converge on the temple at sunrise," Fordessa said to us. "They will bring as many of the faithful as they can. They will not enter the temple, but they will make things difficult for any followers of Tantrus who show up."

"I have also instructed my clerics to do the same," Fel said.

"We have clerics here?" I asked surprised.

Fel nodded, "I started sending missionaries in last year. While Fordessa has a few shrines and her main temple, I had nothing. Now that we are joined together, I can make use of her temples and she mine.

"As I said before, we had been planning this awhile now, this attack on Tantrus's temple here is sooner than we had planned, but Queen Rachel is right to strike now."

"What about the local rulers?" Jane asked, "What will their response to this be?"

"King Ruusolf has his own problems right now," Fordessa said. "He is being pressured by Barassa to allow them to station troops here. He fears what that could lead to and has been strengthening his eastern border. The destruction of this temple will remove those applying the most pressure."

"There are other factors at play as well," Fel picked up. "Just be sure that you are successful, this will be an important victory."

We both nodded.

"Do we know how many people are inside the temple?" Jane asked.

“No,” Fordessa replied, “but it has not been re-enforced by any significant numbers, or my priests would have seen it.”

“So go, and wreak havoc,” Fel said. “Destroy everything.”

We both nodded and fell back asleep.

We looked at the city from just inside the trees as the light of the false dawn began to light up the sky. Marland City was in two sections, the old town, which was walled, and the new town, which wasn't. Marland was a fairly old city, one of the oldest in the region. A number of both wise and clever rulers had kept the city whole for a very long time, though its rule had changed hands once about a hundred years ago.

“Anyone got any bright ideas?” I asked, as we got ready to go.

“Yeah, lets not go in through the front door,” my sister said as she checked her weapons.

“Why not?” Jane asked.

“Because I'm sure they'll be expecting it.”

“I don't think the back door will be any better,” I said.

“That's why you have me here,” She said smiling. “Hey, Dezba, how high do you think these guys can jump?”

Dezba shrugged, “Four, maybe six feet, depends on how heavy the rider is.”

Nikki nodded, “We have a few people draw attention at the front door, and the rest of us go in through the windows.”

“Assuming there are any windows,” I said.

“Oh I'm sure there are. Though I'm sure we'll have to break them first so the Wolats will be willing to jump through them. We may even have to build up something like a ramp under them.”

“They'll see you doing that,” Jane said.

“Not if you keep them distracted.”

I pointed to an element leader, “Take your men and attack the front doors, but don't go in through them unless you're positive there aren't any defenses.”

He nodded and saluted.

I pointed to another element leader, “Detail a few of your men to grab a couple of wagons when we get close to the temple. Empty if they can, we can push those up under the windows.”

He nodded and saluted.

“Other than that, I guess we just play it by ear. Mount up! Let’s go.”

We rode in at what I guess would be a canter. As we got to the outskirts the guards saw us coming, and when we didn’t stop, they quickly realized that the six of them were no match for the hundred of us and wisely decided to step aside.

We picked up speed then, I was sure an alarm would be sounded soon enough, and I wasn’t wrong. As we turned down the street that led to the square the Temple faced, I heard it go off behind us.

As we drew closer, I took in the scene that presented itself before us. The front door of the temple was well defended, there was a series of pikes facing outwards, twenty men behind it, and I think two priests behind two overturned wagons for cover. But the sides were undefended. And there were windows about six feet off the ground.

Nice Big Windows. They were made of colored glass and had designs in them. Very extravagant, a sign of the wealth and power of Tantrus.

I looked over at Nikki and smiled as I got a truly insane idea.

I urged my mount to full speed, to run straight at one of the windows in the middle of the building. It balked a moment, but I gave it a hard kick and a slap on the rump and it lowered its head and charged.

We started to take fire, there were archers on the roof, and everything slowed down as I sped up. Keeping my left hand on the reins, I pushed up off the saddle and stood on top of it, bending my knees. I’m sure my mount thought I was trying to kill it, and I know the others must have thought I was crazy, but just as my mount balked and stopped, its butt coming up as it splayed out its front paws to stop from hitting the wall, I leapt.

I had timed it just right and I went through the window dead center, shattering all of it.

My armor took most of the damage, but I still had to use a couple of healing spells to repair the damage. Looking around as my momentum carried me through the air I could see a lot of heads turning in surprise to look at what the noise was. Lucky for me I landed right on top of one of them, as he broke my fall.

I rolled twice, knocking down several more of them, then leapt to my feet and turning left I started to run for the altar. It was a big one, and there was a priest up there. Unfortunately for me I saw Benjiman on the steps.

“Well, well, well,” he said as I attacked. “Bet you didn’t expect to see me here!”

I heard another crash behind me, but I didn't turn to look. Obviously, someone else had decided to try what I did, and I'd be getting some help soon. But I couldn't look away as I had my hands full fighting Benjiman as well as the others who were drawing near, weapons at the ready.

I had to start giving ground almost immediately. I couldn't press Benjiman and still deal with the others who were getting organized and starting to attack me from the sides and from behind, and with the priest up there healing people as quickly as I was wounding them, it wasn't looking good.

"This time I'll get you, you self-righteous bastard!" He growled.

I was so busy fighting for my life that it took me a minute to realize that the screams I was hearing weren't just from the men I was wounding. When I heard a wolat's snarl I realized that others were starting to make it in.

Dodging back and turning to strike at the soldier behind me, I stepped away from Benjiman then spun back around to block his attack as he tried to get me from behind. I had no idea how many more were inside, but when Benjiman slowed his advance to look around I guessed that there must have been several.

"You won't win!" He yelled, "I will have my revenge!"

"You may kill me, but you won't kill all of them," I snarled and took a step forward and cut him. He cut me as well in the exchange, but I could tell it surprised him.

"I can heal myself all day William!" He laughed, "But can you?"

I didn't heal the cut he had laid on me, it wasn't that bad and I knew I'd have to ration my healing. I could hear more swordplay behind me, and when I dodged to the right to impale the soldier over there I turned briefly to check my back, there were at least a dozen men inside and almost as many wolats.

I saw my sister.

"Nikki! To me!" I called and she turned and started to fight her way towards me.

"Desperate for help are you?" Benjiman snickered.

"I have someone I want you to meet," I growled and knocking his sword aside, I jumped in and snapped at his nose with my mouth. He jumped back momentarily surprised, then growled and came back at me.

"You won't get me with that again!" He said swearing.

We fenced back and forth for another minute, I was still giving ground. But much slower now. I had managed to take the heads off of two of the

soldiers fighting with him, and their priests couldn't heal that.

"Hey, Bro! What's up?" Nikki said letting me know she was coming up besides me.

"Nikki," I said trying not to pant, "I believe you know Benjamin."

Benjamin laughed, "I'll kill you both! My god reigns here! You will both die!"

Nikki laughed and rather smoothly took the head off the man to her left.

"Didn't you say that the *last* time we met?" Nikki teased.

"Benjamin, allow me to introduce my *sister*!" I growled then and jumped forward, and Nikki followed my lead, we almost had him for a moment there, and I saw his eyes widen as he continued to give ground.

"There are *two* of you?!" He yelled out shocked, looking back and forth and noticing the similarities in our faces, our color, and our fur markings.

"Hey Dez!" Nikki yelled out, "Come join the fun! Only fair you get to kill him next!"

"Whatthehellisthis? A family reunion!" Benjamin screamed.

I could see the fear in his eyes suddenly, and then, he turned and ran.

"To hell with this! I *quit*!" He yelled.

Nikki laughed and I could see the soldiers and others around us looked stunned as their champion suddenly ran out on them.

We pressed in immediately to take advantage of our position and quickly running through several more, and then taking off their heads while they were staggered from their wounds.

We started to work our way towards the altar at that point. Dezba was teamed up with Jane from what I could see, and had killed a number of the soldiers and priests that were behind us. There were a lot of wolats running around, but even more down on the floor, dead or wounded. Ten of our men surrounded Dezba and Jane, fighting with them. Another dozen or so were protecting two archers who were slowly picking off the priests.

It was a tough fight and by the time we got within ten feet of the altar I had used up all of my healing and was bleeding from a half dozen wounds. I wasn't sure I was going to make it to the end of this fight, the priest behind the altar was healing them as fast as we could wound them, only taking off a limb or their head had any effect at all.

My sister was rather impressive, she was using two short swords and moving so fast that the only word I could come up with to describe it was 'cuisinart'. I could only guess that after four plus years of non-stop training,

and never once being allowed to take place in any combat ever, was that she was letting it all out now.

I got stuck in the shoulder from one of the three I was fighting, so I flung a sword at the priest behind the altar, switched the one from my now useless arm to the other one and made a bull rush at the three in front of me that I was fighting. Yeah, dying would suck, but I was pretty sure that Nikki would be able to take advantage of my action and finally get that damned priest behind the altar.

I got stabbed again then by the one directly in front of me as I tripped him up I figured I'd hamstring the ones by my sister when I hit the floor on top of him when suddenly the one on the left sprouted an arrow from his head, and the one on the right got his head cleaved in half.

"Stop trying to be a hero," Dezba yelled from behind me, and as I hit the floor killing the one beneath me I watched Jane ran by, and vaulting the altar she destroyed the cleric's head with a sledgehammer.

Gasping for breath I tried to regain my feet, there were a dozen of our men left standing, who helped Nikki and Dezba made quick work of the remaining six defenders.

I stopped trying to stand and dropped to my butt on the stairs, and started to look for something to stop the bleeding. I heard Jane start in on the altar with the sledgehammer then, and I would have sworn I heard screaming as well, when she hit it. After a moment, I heard a second scream, as she hit it again, and then third.

Turning to look back at the altar the other two started on the altar as well and the sound of screaming was getting louder. The doors blew open, and I saw the two priests from outside come running in with some men behind them, but they were too late. I heard a cracking noise as Jane screamed out Fordessa's name and then there was a loud explosion and I was picked up and tossed forward. Hitting the floor, I slid across it until I hit a dead body and stopped, stunned.

I lost track of time, but someone, Jane I realized quickly, propped me up as I regained my wits. I realized she bandaging the worst of my wounds.

"What happened?" I asked.

"The altar exploded when it broke in two," she told me.

I looked at her; she was covered in blood and had a nice gash on her face that was slowly bleeding. I guess she had run out of spells as well.

“How is my sister? Dezba?”

“Dezba is helping Nikki; she’s beat up almost as bad as you are.”

I nodded, “Help me up.”

“Just rest here.”

“I need to take a piss,” I growled.

She looked at me, “At a time like this?”

I laughed weakly, “It’s the best time,” and I looked over at the broken altar.

Jane made a silent ‘oh’ with her mouth and then she laughed. “Sure, why not.”

She helped me over and I did my business, and then looked around. There were at least twenty dead wolats, probably more, and a lot of wounded ones as well. I didn’t see any of my men who were alive.

“Did all our men die?” I asked shocked.

“No, but a lot of them did. The rest are outside getting healed. The priests don’t want to come in here.”

I nodded and started to hobble over towards my sister, who Dezba was helping up.

“And I thought *you* were the crazy one!” Dezba said to me as she got Nikki to her feet and then we all turned and started to head for the door.

“I’m not, not crazy, just deter... determined,” Nikki said still a bit stunned.

“All I know is I don’t ever want to fight her,” I said and let Jane help me.

“So what next, Will?”

“Get everyone healed up, including the Wolats. Pull our dead out of there, and burn it down I guess. If it won’t set the town on fire that is.”

“Then?”

“Then I think we should get the hell out of here before good King Ruusolf decides we’ve overstayed our welcome.”

Dezba nodded and set about gathering everyone up and putting things in order. Once we got outside I leaned back against a wall and closed my eyes. I hurt everywhere, but I’d live, and there were others who needed healing more than I did at this point.

“That was a pretty fool stunt you did,” Jane said to me.

“Yeah, but it worked. Who was the idiot that came in next?”

“Who do you think?” Nikki said laughing weakly. “I think I broke my nose....”

“So what happened after that?” I asked Jane.

“Well both of your mounts went in through the broken windows not long after, then the troops you sent off to get the wagons, came up with several. So with those under the windows a bunch of us just followed you in. After that?” She shrugged, “Mayhem.”

“That priest behind the altar was pretty powerful,” I said and yawned. “How many were up by the front doors?”

“Seven and we had a pretty hard time with them, but most of the fighters went off to protect the one you and Nikki were after. Which was pretty stupid. It allowed us to pick the seven off a lot easier than if they had stayed.”

I shrugged. “I’m going to take a nap. Wake me when we leave.”

“Sure, just don’t die on us, okay?”

“I’ll try,” I said with a grunt.

I was in the bar, and Fel was looking very pleased.

“I didn’t die, did I?” I asked Fel looking around. Things seemed more real than they normally did when I was dreaming.

“No, you just passed out from lack of blood.”

“Oh. Well, we got the Temple. Where’s Fordessa?”

“Celebrating, but then I am too.”

I smiled weakly at Fel, “So did Benjiman really quit?”

Fel laughed, “He most certainly did. He’s heading for a portal out of here; he’ll be off the plane and out of this sphere by nightfall.”

“Think anyone will pick him up?”

“No, he’s done as a champion, he not only abandoned his god, in his biggest time of need, but he abandoned his high priest.”

I blinked, “What?”

“That was Tantrus’s high priest you killed!” Fel laughed.

“What the... why was the high priest there? That’s not the main temple!”

“Tantrus couldn’t afford to lose that temple, especially not after losing that church the other day, two shocks in a short period of time would do too much damage.

“You see, the neighboring kingdoms have started to get wise to what’s going on, and they already have established religions within their borders. The other gods have now discovered that Tantrus was playing a stealth game against them, he was sneaking underground churches into their territory.

“But most of them couldn’t do anything right away, as Tantrus and

Barassa had become too powerful. What Tantrus didn't know was that you'd get here before his re-enforcements showed up. They're still two days march from there. I also don't think he knew that there would be four champions attacking."

"He had to know about Nikki and Dezba," I said confused.

"Nikki yes, but Benjiman never saw Dezba. I think that's why he panicked when Nikki called her over; he's lost to you every time he's faced you. He lost to your sister just the other week, and she was rather vicious when she killed him. If the high priest hadn't been there, the defense would have caved completely when he ran away."

"I wonder if we would have won if he hadn't run off?"

Fel shook his head, "I don't know, too many variables with so many champions and priests involved."

"So what happens to Tantrus now?" I asked curious.

"His priests are all powerless until he appoints a new high priest."

"Well that should be easy, shouldn't it?"

"Normally yes, but he just lost a church, a major temple, and his champion. It'll be a few days before he can make his needs known to the clergy, and then they have to appoint one themselves, because he can't tell them who he wants and there isn't someone in a position to pick."

I nodded.

"And while that's going on, all of his temples, shrines, and churches will be easy pickings."

"And I take it the other gods are going to be picking?"

Fel laughed, "Rather gleefully picking. If Barassa's army wasn't so large, I'd almost expect someone to try and invade."

"Well at least they're out of our hair for a while. What happens next?"

"You go home and spend some time with your queen. It's best if we just sit back and let the other gods go after the followers who no longer have a place to worship."

"Just like you intend to do here, I'm sure."

Fel smirked, "Of course, and because Fordessa is now in my pantheon, this territory is now considered to be fair game for me, so it only makes sense that I try to convert whoever that I can."

I nodded, "Well home is definitely in order, I want to be sure Rachel is safe and our son is back home. Then I can see about dealing with Wreth."

Fel nodded, "He's currently heading for Tradeson, though I doubt he'll

stay there long.”

I looked at him surprised. “You can tell me where he is?”

Fel nodded, “He’s not a priest or a champion, and Tantrus has no further use for him.”

I nodded, “Thanks.”

I woke up when one of the priests healed me. I got up and went to look for the others, and found my second in command. I could see that our dead had all been brought out of the temple, and several people were setting it on fire while others dug up the wards.

“How many men do we have left?” I asked looking around.

“Forty one, Sir.”

I shook my head and sighed, “Mounts?”

“Thirty seven fit to carry riders, twenty nine that aren’t.”

“Mount up the worst of the wounded who can ride, let those in the best shape walk, they can lead the wounded wolats, and get going. I’ll catch up in a few minutes; we’ll let the local priests deal with burying the dead.”

“Yessir. Beggin’ your pardon, sir, but you look like you should be riding and not walking, you sure you can catch up?”

I sighed and shook my head. Even with the healing I felt like crap and completely worn out. “Once you get out of town, and out of sight, wait until I catch up.”

He nodded and saluted, “Yessir!” And went off to gather up the men.

I went and found Nikki and the others; they were with Jane who was talking with Felecia interestingly enough. Of course, their main temple was here, so I guess I should have expected it.

“So now what?” Nikki asked looking at me, she looked pretty beat up as well, but then we all did.

“Well I’m heading home for now, you and Dez can either go home, come with me, or I guess do whatever you want.”

“I’m going home,” Dezba said giving me a hug. “I’ve got things to deal with.”

I hugged her back, “Thanks Dez, I owe you one.”

“Oh don’t worry, I plan on collecting!” She laughed.

“I’m going to go visit with my new sister,” Nikki said. She gave Dezba and Jane each a hug and said goodbye.

“Jane?” I asked, “What are you doing?”

“I’ll be staying here; the high priestess here tells me she needs me.”

“Hi Felecia,” I said and gave her a hug, “First time meeting?”

Felecia nodded, “Fordessa likes her.”

I smiled, “I think you two will get along. She’s a musician too.”

“Oh really?” Felecia smiled and looked over at Jane.

“You two haven’t...” Jane asked looking back and forth between us.

Felecia laughed, “No, not ever.”

Jane smiled, “Good.”

I shook my head grinning. “I guess I have just been dismissed. Thanks Jane, you were the Hero of this battle, without you we would never have won. You got the high priest *and* the altar.” I gave her a hug, “Thanks for the help, thanks for becoming Fordessa’s champion. If you ever need me, just tell Fel.”

I turned to Nikki, “Time to go,” and we followed our troops who were already on the move.

Fifteen

(Saladin – Outside Hiland City)

I sat there with Rachel by my side and a platoon of guards behind us as we watched Wreth's estate burn. Tomorrow I would visit Diamant's son and tell him his father's wishes, and show him where his dad had kept the drawings for the dam, along with all the other engineering documents.

Rachel had already let it be known to all that Diamant's family would be honored for his sacrifice to the crown.

"I would never have expected Wreth to do this," Rachel sighed shaking her head, "Not in all my years. He was never a brave man, never a risk taker. He was always the last to venture on anything, always taking the cautious path."

"Greed does strange things to people, Hon," I said. "I suspect Barassa offered him a lot of power, probably promised to make him the ruler of your kingdom."

"Under them of course."

"Oh of course, though I doubt they would have honored their agreement, after all you can't trust someone who's already turned traitor once. I'm surprised he never thought of that."

"Well I guess we're at war with Barassa now."

"I wouldn't worry about it too much yet, Hon," I said and pulled her close.

"Oh? You know something I don't know?"

I nodded, "I was talking with Fel. He told me that all of Barassa's neighbors that had gone looking for churches in their realms found and destroyed quite a few. Tantrus just lost a *lot* of power and probably followers as well. Add to that a rather severe backlash from losing a major temple and a half dozen or so churches and he's got to be reeling pretty bad right now. I still don't think he has a new high priest yet either.

"On top of that Barassa's King Stivik is facing a lot of very disgruntled neighbors. I suspect a large part of his armies will be getting chewed up over the next year, in border disputes as his neighbors voice their displeasure."

Rachel purred, "Well that's good. Maybe we'll be lucky and we won't have to go down there and finish them off."

I shrugged, "Time will tell. But at least the pressure is off for a while

now.”

We watched a while longer in silence as the roof finally caved in. Treason against the royal family carried a stiff price in Hiland. Wreth’s entire family had been put to death; even some of the servants had been killed. I was left out of that thankfully; it was more of a job for the crown, and not Feliogustus’s champion. And while I might not have approved of it, I kept my mouth shut. Even if Rachel hadn’t ordered them put to death, the people of the city would have killed them, they were incensed that Wreth had not only turned traitor, but that he had thrown in with the Barassains.

“So what do you think of Nikki?” I asked as we headed back to the castle.

“It’s interesting that she’s a champion as well, but I can see it in her. She’s more of a soldier than you are,” Rachel teased.

“Yeah, well to be honest, I should have figured she would become one once she found out she could. As a fighter she scares even me!” I laughed.

Rachel laughed with me, “Yeah, I think Holse is in love with her. I know all of his officers are.”

I laughed.

“So when are you going after Wreth?” Rachel asked turning serious.

“As soon as we get back to the castle. Now that things here are safe I can go deal with him.”

Rachel smiled, “Good.”

Wreth had about a three-week lead when I set out after him, but I was going mounted and I had the advantage of Fel telling me where he was, and what direction he was heading.

It took me almost two weeks to catch up with him, and the whole time I just went over how I was going to kill him, make him suffer, and make him pay. When you can heal someone’s wounds, you can come up with some pretty nasty and creative ideas. But as I rode after him, my anger cooled and I started to look at myself.

Some of the things I had thought of doing to him didn’t really sit well with me, once I wasn’t so angry anymore, and I thought back to Steph and her ‘Rule Two’ about not loving anyone but yourself, and if you did, making sure no one else knew about it. Suddenly I could understand why. This was a pretty nasty job, and people were going to die. Even if you kept them perfectly safe, eventually they’d die anyway.

And here I was with two wives, both of whom I loved deeply and would do anything to protect. I had several children now that I loved as well, and would do the same for; hell I even had two 'girlfriends' now that I felt pretty strongly about. I wondered if the reason that all of the champions I had met so far catted around so much was so they wouldn't develop feelings for anyone? To avoid making those bonds that would break, no matter how hard you tried?

Maybe that was what Steph had meant when she stabbed me, it wasn't the sleeping around that would hurt me, it was the falling in love with every woman I met. Or at least falling in lust, I thought with a sigh. It was time perhaps to start growing up, and start thinking things through a little more, rather than just going with the flow. Not letting myself be distracted by every pretty face, and maybe paying more attention to the political maneuverings of those around me. And maybe even asking Fel more for his council and opinion.

While he couldn't always tell me everything, obviously he could drop hints. I needed to become more perceptive as well.

Overall, this had been a pretty easy year, and mostly I'd just been along for the ride. I'd let myself be too easily distracted in Tradeson, and not paid attention to the situation back at home. People had died in both cases because I really hadn't bothered to make sure nothing was going on behind my back, when I should have expected it. Rachel was the queen and our son would be the king! Of course someone would try something when we weren't there.

Looking back it should have been obvious that things at Tradeson would get worse, once I was gone. If it hadn't been for Fel's watching out, and the help of Nikki, Dezba, Jane, and Joseph, I'd be pretty well screwed right now. Not to mention Rachel, and perhaps even Fel. Worse, our son would be dead.

Not a pleasant thought.

When I finally caught up to Wreth, I watched him for a few minutes. He didn't look happy, that was for sure. But he wasn't crying about his situation either from what I could tell. He was just hiking along with a heavy pack on his back.

I figured his plan was to find a nice small town where he'd never be found, use whatever wealth he had brought with him to set up a new life, and forget all about Hiland. But I wasn't about to ask him.

I got off my wolat and strung my bow, he was probably a hundred yards

away, and I was behind a rise, he hadn't seen me yet. I took my time aiming at him, and when I let fly my arrow hit him in the back of the head. I doubt he even knew what killed him.

I buried him there in an unmarked grave, took the gold to bring back for Rachel and burned the rest. It started to rain then, it had been steadily getting warmer, spring was in the air.

I opened a gate back to Fel's temple, and grabbing my wolat's reins, we went home. Tonight Rachel and I would celebrate that worm's death, but tomorrow, tomorrow I'd have to stop thinking of this as a game.

End Book 3

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