

Demon's Angel

Author: Lancer Zero

Part 1: A Gate to Get There

Prologue

[614ad, villa near Melchior's hut]

Schala smoothed her flowing, violet tresses as she stepped outside of her seven-year old son's room and into the short hall leading to the front door. She did not shut the door, knowing that her son's inherited telepathy would detect it; then he'd cry out for her. Much as Schala's younger brother, Janus, had done as a boy when he'd had prescient nightmares. It made the former Zealian princess wonder if there was something more to her little Aeron's dreams. . . The front door of the villa creaked open, interrupting her train of thought. She didn't need the dim candlelight to know it was her husband; she could sense his presence as easily as she could sense Aeron's. "Hello, Glenn," she whispered as he embraced her.

"How slumb'reth our son this night?" he asked, removing the legendary sword Masamune, sheathe and all, from his belt and placing it on a nearby table reserved for the purpose.

"He sleeps well – so far. He hasn't been asleep for long."

"How have his studies been progressing?"

Schala chuckled softly, and Glenn smiled. "About as well as when you left early this afternoon to investigate Melchior's reports of imps stealing apples from his orchard."

"Ha! The man hast but a single apple tree, and he bestows upon it the title of orchard? Alas, but I could not find the imps, though I wiled away the afternoon in their pursuit. Didst our child levitate his pencil to write again?"

"That was last week. Now he levitates his textbooks. While reading them, no less," Schala responded with a slight roll of her eyes.

"Thou shouldst not stifle the boy. He possesses great talent and potential!"

"I know," the sorceress sighed. "But I couldn't levitate objects like that until I was ten, and my control wasn't nearly as good then as his is now. I should never have used so much shadow magic while trapped onboard the Black Omen; then perhaps he'd have had more time to grow into his powers. . ."

"As thy brother did in his youth?" Glenn replied, quirking an eyebrow to show her he meant no rancor. "Nay, 'tis better that he learn magic and the responsibility it brings from a young age. And, my dear Schala," Glenn comforted, "Thou didst naught but what was required to defend thyself. 'Twould scarcely have mattered to him, regardless. His ears would still have points, his mouth would still hold fangs, and his eyes would still glow red. He would still have had the power, as well, latent though 'twould have been."

"Precisely! The Mystic War's over, but looking so much like my brother did in his younger years, I fear Aeron will have a hard time of it wherever he goes. . . where is my little brother? Didn't he go with you?"

The Guardian knight's eyebrows went up at the alarm in her voice. "Janus resideth out of doors this night. He bade me leave him, insisting that he wished to keep a nightlong vigil near Heckran Cave. I chose not to interfere." At just that moment, none other than Janus rushed in through the still-open

door. His leather armor and scythe were covered in blood that was not his, and his cape bore scorchmarks. Schala gasped.

"The mystics are all in a frenzy, thirsty for blood," the wizard hissed between breaths, "And I don't think even I have ever seen so many in one place. I can't control them, and we've got just a few minutes until they get here."

"It's a machine in the sky," explained the voice of a little boy. Schala turned and saw Aeron standing in the doorway to his room. "Hi, Uncle Jan. Are you okay? You look like you were fighting! Did you see the big red light, like an eye in the sky?"

"How did you know there was a red light? What else did you see?" Janus asked Aeron. He'd always taken the boy's visions and dreams seriously.

"A scary-looking pale man with a white beard. He looked sorta like one of the ro-bots you and Daddy told me about, with a red gemstone heart. And there was a wizard like you, but he had a monkey tail and white hair. I don't like him. It was really weird. Did you see them, too?"

"Never thee mind," Glenn answered for his brother-in-law. "My sword and thine uncle's scythe have a task to perform. Now to bed with thee, lest the morrow be marred by thy fatigue." Glenn kissed his son on the forehead, grabbed the Masamune, and led the man once known as Magus out the front door. It was the last time Aeron saw his father or uncle alive.

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Schala tried to flee exactly four centuries into the future, to a time in which her husband's former companions might still recognize her from their journeys. Unfortunately, something fooled with her Gate - perhaps whatever had caused the Mystics' insanity? - and they wound up in 992ad. They could not, of course, visit Glenn's old friends before they could have met him; so mother and son went back to live with her old mentor, Melchior. Old beyond old though he was, the former Guru of Zeal knew how to keep a secret.

The death of not only her beloved husband, but her troubled brother as well did much to quash the qualms that Schala had about using her power - and about teaching Aeron how to use his. For ten years Schala taught her son the vagaries of Shadow, and the intricacies of ancient Zealian technology. He was a frightfully quick learner, but much of his non-telekinetic Shadow abilities went unused - mostly due to his mother's urgings. She didn't want her son to have to deal with the horrible voices her brother had eventually conquered . . . she encouraged him to practice with his father's inhabited broadsword instead, and after a scant few years of practice he could have rivaled his father.

Aeron stayed there for ten years - until 1002ad, over a year after the defeat of Lavos - before he was allowed to leave the continent. In the forests of his first chosen destination - the island nation of Choras - he freed from limbo a soul his uncle had cursed while still a youngster four centuries before. That soul's body, however, had also been cursed by Magus: it was in the form of a demon and had roamed the countryside like a werewolf in the throes of a centuries-long full moon, a rude insult indeed for the soul of a knight. That was something that even Aeron hadn't the power to change. Though he couldn't change him back to a human, Aeron was determined to do what he could for the man that reminded him so much of his dead father . . .

The young wizard had insisted on helping the man, securing transport for both of them all the way to the nation his father had once served: the kingdom of Guardia, the largest dominion on all of Elosia. The former knight, who had since taken up the name of Crimson, stayed only a few months before he left. Rumors were all Aeron heard of him for some time after that, stories of a demon vigilante roaming the Road south to Porre.

Though the wizard's visions of the kingdom falling under the blades of mystics went unheeded by the populace, the king and queen listened, and allowed him to help bring the technology of ancient Zeal to their nation's military. The visions became more and more urgent, and the rogue magic-

wielding creatures known as mystics continued to do things more and more out of character: they expanded their settlements to islands not a part of Medina, even building a navy. This from a race that had built nothing more advanced than a rowboat in centuries. Such oddities that Crimson returned from his travels with disturbing news of strange activity deep within Heckran mountain . . . Aeron and those that believed in him prepared for the worst, and were not disappointed. Troubles came, both expected and not, and even the prepared would have been overcome had it not been for a series of freak coincidences.

Chapter One

"On second thought, maybe I'd better send three of your friends with you. After all, no one likes to fight themselves! Wahahahaha!" Zidane had no idea what Kuja meant by that last comment, but he was glad that he'd get to bring some friends. "Speak their names when you've decided."

Dammit, I still can't believe he trapped us. Or that I'm actually helping him. But it's that or certain death. . . I'll just play along for now, and watch for opportunities. Zidane had to think for a moment. The lives of six others hung on him choosing his companions wisely. He wanted to bring Eiko or Dagger (especially Dagger), but their ability to summon eidolons and use white magic to help others in their party would be made useless by the magic barrier at their destination. As would Vivi's powerful black magic. That anti-magic barrier's really making my choice simple. Zidane decided he'd rather not depend on Quina's freakishly large "combat fork" to carry the day, and that made the choice for him. He definitely wanted Amarant, with his metal claws and razor-sharp throwing discs. His rat-like Nezumi friend Freya's spear would also be good to have at his side. The Dragoon Knight had as much reason to hate Kuja as Zidane himself did, and she probably wouldn't like the idea of running an errand for him; but, like Zidane, she'd do it for the sake of the others. And, though Zidane's pride was reluctant to admit it, Steiner's broadsword would be nice to bring along. The Knight Captain had disliked and distrusted Zidane from the moment they'd met, and had constantly tried to create a wedge between him and his charge, Dagger. A hated voice cut into his thoughts.

"If you can't decide, I'll have to choose for you."

"I want Freya, Amarant, and Steiner."

"Very well. I shall summon them." Kuja closed his eyes momentarily as he telepathically summoned Zidane's companions. A moment later, they appeared on a platform in between two black mages. As soon as they saw Kuja, the three of them dashed forward a few steps and went into their respective fighting stances. Freya and Steiner had both lost their kingdoms to Kuja, and it showed in the fury of their expressions, and the frenzied thrashing of Freya's whiplike tail. Amarant looked eager for a good fight, as he always was. "Please, spare me the emotional reunion scene," Kuja sneered. "Zidane, go stand by your friends." Scowling, the monkey-tailed thief went and stood in front of his three chosen companions. He was about to say something, but was interrupted by a flash of light on the platform as Quina, Vivi, Dagger, and Eiko appeared between the raised hands of two black mages. Kuja laughed at that, seeming to enjoy hearing his own cruel mirth. "Do you foolish mages actually think that even the seven of them stand a chance against me? If so, you are sadly mistaken."

"N-no, they don't stand a chance yet. But someday they will, and then we'll have our vengeance." A sphere of the darkest black zipped through a nearby wall and floated to a stop in between Zidane and Kuja. It expanded, and a small horde of almost comical-looking creatures poured from it. It was impossible to count them as they jostled about in momentary confusion, but it looked to Zidane like about twenty or thirty. They were dazed and confused for only as long as it took for one of them to spot Kuja.

"Hey! It's Magus!" one of them yelled.

"But he's dressed funny. . . "

"Look at the hair! Feel the power!"

That seemed to convince the rest of the horde, who then shrieked as one, "Magus! Traitor! Time to DIE!" The small army rushed at the surprised wizard, brandishing claws, blades, and magic of all types. As the first black sphere faded, another came hurtling into the room, sucking in everything in its path. It stopped in front of Zidane, who struggled mightily not to get sucked in.

"Jump in! It's a Gate to another world, where you can build up your strength and be safe until you're ready! Hurry! The monsters won't hold Kuja for long!" urged the black mage. Zidane looked over to the battle taking place on the other side of the room, and saw that the mage was right. In between flashes of Kuja's magic, he could see the man's unblooded face smiling.

"Come on, everyone! Let's go!" With that, Zidane stopped struggling and allowed himself to get sucked in.

At the same time as he, Quina was sucked in, squealing with delight. "New place! New foods!"

Freya, Amarant, and Steiner were next closest to the gate. The three fighters looked at each other, shrugged, and leapt in. Little purple-haired Eiko led the third group, and though Vivi and Dagger had to rush to catch up with her before she jumped in, they managed it.

The three groups found themselves in a strange place, full of swirling colors rushing past them at unfathomable speeds. Though they could move, they could make no perceptible progress towards any of their companions; nor could they be heard by any but themselves when they spoke. None could quite tell how much time had passed when they saw in the distance a trio of black spheres. One was moving directly towards each group, and the Gates formed an eerily beautiful equilateral triangle around a swirl of color moving towards them rather than away.

The three spheres arrived at staggered intervals, and the first to be dumped into the world beyond the spheres were the three mages, followed in short order by Zidane & Quina, then the three fighters.

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Dagger heard a loud thump, and a yelp that was not hers. She grunted as two weights (Eiko and Vivi) slammed into her torso and rolled off. Dagger pulled herself to her feet and saw who had produced the yelp. She had landed on a beautiful young woman with orange hair, elfin features, a billowing white sleeveless bodysuit, and a glowing pendant around her neck. Hey, that pendant looks a little like mine. . . where is it? Dagger thought to herself. Oh, Zidane is holding it for me. Where are we? It looks like we're on a seafaring vessel. . . She reached for the woman who lay on the deck, wincing slightly as she tried to get up, but was stopped short by an exceptionally sharp-looking many-hued blade inches in front of her face. From beside her came a man's voice.

"I don't take too kindly to other people jumping on my wife like that. How did you get here? And who are you?" Cautiously, Dagger turned to face the man. He was somewhat tall, with long, wildly spiked pink hair and piercing green eyes. His blade was of a type she was unfamiliar with, but judging from his stance and his air of sheer competence, he knew how to use it effectively. His expression softened and his blade lowered as the floored woman spoke.

"I'm fine, Crono. You can sheathe your katana, too; they didn't mean to hurt me." Her voice was high pitched, with a cheery, singsong quality to it. Though Crono's sword lowered, it remained unsheathed.

"How can you be sure? They look harmless enough, but looks can be deceiving."

"If they wanted to hurt me, they'd have done it already! Besides, it's just a teenage girl and two kids. What could they do?"

"What could we do at her age? Quite a bit, I'd say. Who'd have thought that a commoner boy with crazy hair, a tomboy princess with a pretty necklace, a dorky girl with huge glasses and a gun could

destroy a being powerful enough to threaten time itself?" Crono paused to take a deep breath before continuing, addressing the intruders this time. "There's something funny about you three. I can sense the magic in you, and that's rare. You're almost as powerful as we are, which is especially odd because we were sure we knew all the magic-using humans in this age. Maybe you don't want to hurt us, but until I know what you are, where you came from, and why you're here, I'm holding my sword."

Dagger was surprised by these two as she put together some of Crono's inferences. He was a commoner, she was a princess, but they were married? Where were their royal guards? And mages were hardly so rare that any one or two people could possibly know them all. Of course, Dagger was still unable to speak. Eiko noticed her struggle and spoke for her.

"I'm Eiko. The boy with the pointy hat is Vivi, and she's Dagger. She can't talk right now."

"Why not?" asked the orange-haired woman.

"I dunno. . . she went mute about the same time as the fall of the Mist Continent's four kingdoms-" Eiko was cut off by Crono.

"Hold on! Did you say four kingdoms?" Eiko nodded.

Finally rising from the floor, the woman frowned, and Crono whistled. "Maybe you'd better tell us a lot more about these four kingdoms and how and when they fell."

"Ok," Eiko replied, "But only if you put your sword away."

"Deal." True to his word, the punk-haired prince sheathed his blade.

"Actually, I don't know much about them, 'cuz I grew up in Madain Sari. It's on a different continent."

"Now, wait just a minute. . ." Crono began warningly. He was stopped by Dagger's finger tapping his shoulder, followed by her hands making writing motions.

"I think Dagger wants to write the answers to your questions," the horned little summoner clarified. The mute princess nodded.

"I'll just swipe some blank sheets from Aeron's nav log," remarked Crono, quickly producing the promised paper and pen from a nearby map table. "Knock yourself out."

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Finally finished, Dagger wrung out her freshly cramped wrists. After a moment or so of sitting slack-jawed and saucer-eyed, Marle spoke.

"Wow. . .uh, Crono, now I know why my pendant started glowing when they got here. It only glows if I'm using it or if there's a Gate or something nearby. And I wasn't using it, so it must have been a Gate!" Crono nodded in agreement, the spikes of his hair bouncing slightly as he did so.

"That would explain their sudden appearance, the tearing sound, and their totally different world. They must be from somewhen else." Crono paused for a moment, deep in thought. "But it doesn't sound a bit like any time period I'm familiar with. Do you recognize anything, Marle? You've had royal tutoring since birth."

"And I've been a royal goof-off since birth, you know that! I don't recognize a bit of it. But because they mentioned a telepod, I think they're from the future."

"Right." Turning back towards the three strangers, he continued, "Say, you guys never did tell us what year you're from. If you could tell us, it'd help."

"The 1800s," piped Eiko. Crono frowned and scrunched up his eyebrows.

"Ok, now I'm confused. All magic users were gone by then; they said so when we visited 2300. What happened to mark the beginning of the new era where you're from?"

"Do you know, Dagger?" inquired Eiko. The black-haired girl shook her head. "Vivi?" He shook his head as well and straightened his floppy, pointy hat. Eiko shrugged her little shoulders and gave her final answer. "I don't know either. Sorry, guys."

"I dunno either. If anyone can figure out when you're from and get your pals back, it'll be our friends Aeron and Lucca. So you know what? Forget Medina, Marle. We're going back."

"Back? Back where?" demanded Eiko, jumping up and down in agitation.

"Oh, yeah. Crono, I think we've got a history lesson to give. . ."

Chapter two

Zidane had an arrival somewhat similar to Dagger's. He landed hard on somebody, knocking them to the ground. They rolled away from each other with the speed of fighting instinct just before Quina thudded down on the spot they had just vacated. Zidane got up to see whom he'd landed on and saw a young man with short, spiked teal hair and yellow eyes, with a scar running vertically down one side of his face, over (but not through) his left eye. He wore loose-fitting olive-green many-pocketed pants and a green cloak, with a black shirt and leather vest underneath. But to Zidane, only one part of his attire was relevant at that moment: his drawn broadsword, black with energy that chilled Zidane's spine merely from its proximity.

"Hey, take it easy!" Zidane urged. "Look, I'm sorry about, er, dropping in like that. No need to get upset." The man didn't change his fighting stance a bit, but he did at least say something.

"Crimson, Lucca, hold on. Something's not as it seems . . ."

Then a woman's voice came from behind Zidane. "Like what?"

A deep rumble came next, also from behind the thief. "They look like mystics. . . but the manner of their appearance suggests shadow wizardry. "

"I'll say!" replied the scar-faced man facing Zidane. "I know Gates, and that was no ordinary Gate."

"Not ordinary in what way?" queried the girl behind Zidane as she scooted around him. She had chin-length purple hair, green eyes, and an outfit identical in style to the one the man wore. And her right arm held a strange looking weapon that resembled a small cannon with a handle.

"I dunno, but no ordinary Shadow wizard created it." This excited the girl, who seemed to (like the man) have momentarily forgotten about Zidane and Quina.

"Really? What do you think it was?" The unfamiliar surroundings finally cut through Zidane's hesitation.

"Who are you guys? Where are we? What's going on?"

"You must excuse my exuberant friends," the one voice still behind Zidane rumbled. "They have had an interesting day, and it has made them excitable." Zidane turned towards the voice, gasped, and took a step back in surprise. The creature standing behind him was at least seven feet tall, had dark crimson skin, two notched and painted horns on his head, two bat-like wings on his back, two four-toed clawed feet, heavy brown pants, and a large, empty sheathe hanging from his belt. And an enormous shiny red scimitar firmly in his right hand.

"You're a . . ." The creature didn't let him finish.

"Demon. Yes, I do resemble one; but rest assured, such is not my nature. I think you truly mean us no harm." He sheathed his blade and continued, "I am known as Crimson. That is not my name, but 'twill suffice for now. My comrades would, I believe, prefer to introduce themselves."

The scar-faced man, having shortly discussed whatever-it-had-been with the girl, spoke next. "Hi. I'm Aeron Zeal." He and Zidane cautiously shook hands once Aeron's broadsword was back in its sheathe. "I'm the captain and owner of the ship you're on: the New Zealian Corvette Aquilae."

"He means the privateer corvette Aquilae," the girl corrected with a lopsided grin. Aeron shrugged. "I'm also the impromptu leader. . ." with a quick glance at the girl at his side he corrected himself. ". . . co-leader of our little band of inventors, adventurers, miscreants, and various other unsavory characters." He opened his mouth to say something else, but shut it and gestured towards the girl. Taking the cue, she holstered her weapon and stepped forward to shake hands.

"Howdy. My name's Lucca Ashtear, but I prefer that the suffix of 'the great' be added to my name to reflect my incredible god-like mental abilities." Aeron gave her a funny look, and she continued, "Oh, fine. Just 'Lucca' will do." Zidane wondered about the extent of her "mental abilities."

"I'm Zidane, and that thing over there's Quina. Can you read minds?" he asked her.

"Of course I can." Her eyes rolled back, and then all around, out of sync, never focusing. Her face looked blank as she stepped close to him. "I see. . . a beautiful princess. . . strange companions. . . and a terrible dragon trying to take the princess from you. . ." Her eyes suddenly focused directly on his shocked expression, and she smiled hugely. "Gotcha." Crimson chuckled, and Aeron chortled. Zidane, however, scratched his head.

"I thought you were trying to read my thoughts, not my memories." Lucca's grin faded.

"Huh? Memories?"

"Except that the one trying to take the princess rides a dragon."

"Marle never said anything about a guy riding a dragon. . ."

"But I did," Aeron interjected. "Remember? What's the name of your enemy, Zidane?"

"Kuja," the thief supplied.

"What do you know about him?"

"That he was behind the destruction of four kingdoms and a major settlement. What else do I need to know?"

"What's the name of your world?"

"What the – are you slow or something? Gaia."

The three exchanged looks, and Aeron said, "I'm not slow. Welcome to the chaotic little world known as Elosia."

"Whatever," Zidane replied. "We're . . ." he cut himself off as he remembered what the mages said.

"Not where you might have guessed?" Crimson supplied.

Zidane gasped. "We're not on Gaia?"

Aeron smirked, though he still looked angry. "Not last I checked."

"So you guys are aliens? Sweet!" exclaimed a voice from behind Lucca. Zidane bobbed his head to peer around her, and saw two soldiers. The one that had spoken was a short, bear-like man with green skin, a huge multi-barreled gun slung over his shoulder, and bulging pockets all over his dark brown vest and pants. His thick black goatee and deep, gruff voice added to the impression of a bear. The woman next to him wore similar clothing, but had a long-barreled rifle slung over her back. She was also not at all like the man beside her. She was a demihuman that resembled a Siamese cat, slender, with green eyes and dark hair haphazardly arranged in drooping spikes. Lucca gave the man a look, to which the woman laughed.

"It's not going to work. He loves sneaking up on people too much to quit because of an ugly stare. So, is it true? You two are from Gaia?"

"Looks like it," Zidane replied. "Who're you two?"

"My name's Seratna, but everyone except Kabra calls me Sera. He calls me Rat, so you get to call him Kab."

"Why do you have to call me a taxi?"

"Would you prefer I use the last part of your name and call you lingerie? I didn't think so." Turning back to Zidane, she asked, "How is it you look pretty much human and speak the same language as we do? It doesn't make sense."

"You really must excuse them," Crimson quietly told Zidane. "They are not quite right in the head, I'm afraid, though you will find few of us that are."

"Then we'll fit right in."

"Would you mind telling us about what Kuja's been doing lately on Gaia?" inquired Aeron.

"Why do you want to know?"

"Because he killed my father and uncle and has generally been troubling me as much as he can. And that's not to mention the assistance we suspect he's been giving humanity's former - and possibly future - enemies, the Mystics."

Zidane shrugged. "Good enough for me. It's a long story, but if you really wanna hear it. . ." They nodded, and sat down either on the couch or at the table. Crimson stood guard near the hatch to the deck, massive arms crossed casually over his chest. Zidane felt sure the giant demi-human could change that casual stance in an instant. "Ok, first you need to know more about the Mist Continent. . ."

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Steiner, Freya and Amarant landed on a stone platform at the north end of what appeared to be a market square. The platform was covered with vines and rusted-out machinery, and few people occupied the nearby market so near to sunset. Freya spoke first, asking the obvious question.

"Where are we?" Of course, neither of her companions knew any more than she. A nearby vegetable stand caught Steiner's attention.

"Perhaps an entrepreneur would be willing to tell us." He clanked over to the stand, and Freya and Amarant followed. Bowing slightly to the vendor, he humbly said, "I beg your pardon, Madame, but would you be so kind as to inform me as to the name of this place?"

"How polite!" the woman replied, looking up from her work. "It's . . . Oh my! Look out behind you!" She turned towards the middle of the square and yelled, "Guards! Guards! Armed Mystics!" Steiner looked behind him, ready to tackle a threat. All he saw, however, was Freya and Amarant checking behind themselves as well, ready to draw their weapons if anything presented itself. Nothing did, and they were as puzzled as the Captain of the Pluto Knights was.

"Madame, it is but my two companions and I. There is nothing to be. . ." he was interrupted by a firm voice to his left.

"I'm going to have to ask the three of you to come with me." The three turned to see who it was, and saw a man in uniform, obviously the guard that the frightened shopkeeper had called for. Freya unslung her mythrill triblade spear to its full six-foot length. As it extended, the two secondary blades snicked into place on either side of the main blade, pointed about twenty-five degrees off-axis and making for a rather intimidating-looking weapon. Amarant quietly extended his metal claws from their storage strap on his left wrist.

Leveling her triblade at the guard, Freya told him in a low voice, "We'll not be captured again."

"Sorry, miss, but if you don't come with me, that nice lady over there is going to alert the barracks. The soldiers have been very antsy in regard to mystics lately, and they're not real likely to be nice to you. So, if you'll put that thing away before you hurt someone, we'll go elsewhere and discuss this

like civilized beings. Ok?"

For tense moment, Freya continued to hold her spear ready to strike. Finally, the two secondary blades snapped back into the handle, which then retracted to its travelling length of three feet. She slung it over her back again, but patted her side briefly to reassure herself of the presence of the short sword she carried as a backup weapon. The guard breathed a sigh of relief, obviously not recognizing her patting motion's significance. Nor did he react when the dragoon cupped her left hand, touching the spot on her wrist where a throwing dagger would be unsheathed if she moved just so. Mollified by the presence of her backup weapons, Freya nodded her readiness to follow. Amarant just pulled his claws back in, and Steiner continued to be confused.

"Follow me, please." The guard led them out of the market square and towards a nearby seaside village. "We're going to one of the few places around here where a couple of well-armed mystics won't be too suspicious; I don't want for people to worry any more than they already are."

"What are mystics, and what have they done to make those people so fearful of them?" asked Steiner. The guard gave him a curious frown as they entered the town.

"You're joking, right? Your two friends aren't human. That makes them demi-human or mystic, and demis make it their business to stay away from humans. That makes your pals mystics. Aren't you guys from Medina?"

Steiner was indignant. "I am Sir Adelbert Steiner, captain of the Knights of Pluto of the kingdom of Alexandria!" Their escort frowned.

"Alexandria? Never heard of it. But I never said I knew everything. What about you two?" He gestured towards Freya and Amarant as the four of them approached the docks.

"I am the Lady Freya, a Dragon Knight of the kingdom of Burmecia." Amarant was silent. The guard gestured at him, though, and the bright red-haired giant finally spoke.

"If you have to know, I'm from Treno, a city in Alexandria." The guard frowned again, a habit that was starting to grate on everyone's nerves.

"I haven't heard of any of those places. How'd you get here? Where's your ship?" In panic, Steiner looked at the docks, quickly picking out a simple but speedy-looking boat. He pointed to it.

"That is our ship." The guard put his hands on his hips, looking annoyed.

"Really? Are you sure? Because that's actually my ship. Bought her last month. Now, suppose you tell me how you really got here before I get the three of you in trouble?" Amarant extended the claws attached to his left wrist again.

"You're the one who'd get the trouble, punk," he challenged. The guard started to say something, but Freya cut him off sharply.

"That will be unnecessary, Amarant. No, that's not our ship."

"Then how'd you get here?"

"I don't suppose you would believe me if I said we were teleported here?"

"Of course! I should've guessed," exclaimed the guard in a mixture of relief and anger as he slapped his forehead. "Lucca and her damned inventions! I thought she dismantled her Telepod." Steiner scratched his chin thoughtfully.

"We were traveling with others," the dragoon informed the guard. Amarant groaned, but Freya continued. "Might this 'Lucca' woman know where to find them?"

"If anyone knows where your friends are, it'll be her and her crazy shadow wizard boyfriend."

"Shadow wizard? Do you mean that he's a black mage?"

"I guess that's another way of putting it, yeah. They're both troublemakers. Lucca blew a hole in the

countryside with one of her inventions just under two years ago. And one of Aeron's ancestors started a war that nearly destroyed this kingdom, even humanity itself. . . and we've got reason to think he's continuing the tradition. He's built a small private navy, more advanced than anything on the planet; and he's been yakking about some guy from another planet coming to kill everyone. No one believes him, 'cept for the king and queen. Sheesh, he says his dad's a knight that died in the 600's, and his mother's some weird sorcoress out of legend. We think he's actually just Magus' bastard child. Anyway, his corvette left port this morning, and engaged a Mystic destroyer on patrol near Lucca's manor. We were getting along ok with the Mystics, but now we have to treat them like enemies, 'cuz that destroyer's totaled. So're a group of Mystics that tried to investigate the fate of their ship. King and queen took another of Aeron's ships to find them and talk some sense into 'em, but I don't think it'll work. They're alone. Poor Crono. . . Lucca was his best friend as a kid. For her to betray him like that. . . "

"If they are as you say, we will stop them!" Freya interrupted, her statement backed by Steiner's solemn nod. "Do you know where they are?"

"You obviously don't know who you're dealing with. They won't be pushovers; Lucca's got fire magic that's not to be trifled with, and she's a genius to boot. She's got guns of all kinds, and knows how to use them. If Aeron's anything like his warlock ancestor, he's got fire, lightning, water or ice, and shadow. The insidious Magus could raise the dead to do his bidding, and while Aeron's not been known to do that, there's no telling what tricks he's got up his sleeve."

Amarant grunted and grinned. "Sounds like my idea of a good time. I'm in."

Freya nodded. "I, too, will come. We have faced difficult opponents before."

Steiner stepped forward. "A Pluto Knight never backs down from a challenge!"

"I was hoping you'd agree. Are you ready? Then let's get in my boat and go!" Steiner was flabbergasted.

"You would simply abandon your post?"

"No; it's almost dark, so I was about to leave anyway. That weirdo lady's the only one open this late, and some other poor sucker gets to look after her. So, I'm ready to go if you are."

"Is it a long trip?" asked Freya.

"What's the matter, you get seasick?" The Burmecian shook her head. "Good, 'cause we'll be pushing twenty-five knots, and the sea's not smooth. It'll be pretty quick; less than an hour once we get going."

Chapter three

After Zidane had finished his story, Quina had brought them some treats s/he had made in the Aquilae's small galley. Everyone had been impressed; especially Lucca, who had devoured an entire bowl full of the sticky things. While she munched, Aeron complimented the chef.

"I pride myself on my cooking, but these are very good. You can cook meals sometimes, but if and only if," he wagged a finger, "you give me your recipes. I'll give you some of mine in return."

"Really really?" asked Quina excitedly, his/her massive tongue wagging. Aeron smiled.

"Really really. Now, Lucca. . . what do you think?"

"Skyways?"

"Similar, maybe. Our theory?"

"Dreamstone?"

"Maybe. . . " They went on like that for several minutes, during which they managed to confuse and disorient everyone. Even Zidane.

"Why can't those two talk like normal people?" Zidane inquired of no one in particular.

"Because, as Lucca tells me, 'normal is boring,'" Kabra replied.

"They often talk like this," Sera added. "If I didn't know better, I'd say they take the parts of the conversation that would make it sensible directly from each other's minds." Crimson grunted at that. At last, the two eccentric scientists stopped their mostly incomprehensible pseudo-gibberish and turned back towards the others.

Lucca smiled wryly. "I'm going to let my pal Aeron explain because this is all his fault. Isn't it, hon?" she asked sweetly.

"Uh, yeah, sorta. Now, here's what we came up with: first of all, when my Black Hole spell is cast on an enemy or four, they get sucked in and deposited somewhere off-world. Even the Gurus of Zeal weren't sure if there was a distance limit, but we know we've never seen anyone on this planet from a magic hole. And one of its effects is to weaken the distance between two points."

Sera scowled. "'Weaken distance'? That sounds absurd."

Lucca decided then that her tongue was needed. "Look, do you want a week-long dissertation? 'Cuz that's about how long it'd take to explain it. Or, we can tell you in the shortest and simplest terms possible so we can actually finish sometime before morning. We're going to do the latter, because it's been a long day. Okay?"

"Anyways, Lucca and I have thought for quite a while that the people of the floating Kingdom of Zeal used that effect to teleport themselves from their floating castles to the ground and back." He shrugged. "Their 'skyways.' The problem was figuring out how they got the other end of the hole where they wanted it to be. Dreamstone, especially charged dreamstone, seems to do some pretty funny stuff with Gate energy. My dreamstone pendant has energy, and so does my dreamstone sword. If your Dagger's pendant is made up of similar stuff, that could explain why the other end of my black hole appeared there. Doubly so if Eiko's pendant is dreamstone. And it also means that we know where one of your other two groups of friends are: Marle's got a fully charged pendant, and she's on my destroyer, the Akula. At our present course and speed, we'll meet up in about a week or so, depending on whether or not the storm season decides to start on time this year. Also assuming they can find the spot on the Medinan coast I marked for them; but I'm not too worried about that. Heckran mountain's hard to miss."

"And the other group?" inquired Zidane.

"We aren't sure. Possibly one of the places where the time gates used to be, maybe even where Lucca's first Telepod was, in the Leene's Square market. We'll figure it out after we get to the Akula. Who knows? Maybe they're all on the ship."

"That's great, but how do we get back to Gaia?"

"We've got some ideas on how to do that, as well. I can perform the Black Hole spell; I should be able to make Gates. But I'll have to practice and do some research. So, in the meantime I'll tell you about Elosia."

* * * * *

Freya sat alone in the bow, ignoring the bumps and jolts as the fleet little vessel crashed over swells and through the occasional wave, alone with her thoughts. We still don't know where we are. In all my travels, I never heard of the Kingdom of Guardia or Choras. I heard of Elosia only in legends of other worlds. . . But this place is not so different that it could be another planet. Is it? She was thinking about how pointless the whole exercise they were undertaking likely was when she received a tap on the shoulder. Freya whirled and was unsurprised to see that it was Amarant. He knew she wasn't generally one for physical contact, and he liked doing things to get on her nerves.

"Time for you to do your thing." Having given her the message, the red-haired giant turned and

walked back to the stern.

Freya nodded a farewell to the guard, Amarant, and Steiner; then crouched and jumped the twenty-foot gap in a fluid, practiced motion. The two ships' relative movement (and her timing of the speedboats pitching bow) put her only a few feet off target; she was still practically in the middle of the open space on the deck she had designated. Without stopping to see if the guard's vessel was already closing the distance, she stepped quietly up to the cabin hatch. No guards on deck. . . something is not as it seems.

The dragoon paused as she realized that she recognized one of the voices coming from inside: Zidane! They must have been captured. . . perhaps this man is one of Kuja's minions, meaning to catch us all again. Since Zidane and the others were here, she could simply slay the kidnappers, a much easier task than interrogating them.

When she threw the hatch open, the first person she saw was a man with teal spiked hair and a scar running over, but not through, his left eye. Combined with the man's yellow eyes, he perfectly fit Aeron's physical description. Leveling her triblade, Freya charged before he could draw his sword, or even react.

But not before someone else could. The dragoon let out a yelp of surprise as a large red hand closed around the shaft of her spear just below the blades. She heard a grunt of effort as she was lifted into the air by her spear and swung by it. As abruptly as it had begun, the spin stopped; but the hand held on, its owner expecting to send the Nezumi flying. But the owner of the hand had underestimated Freya's tenacity, and she held on, using momentum built up by the spin to swing her feet into her now off-balance target's abdomen.

As she knocked him to the ground, she got her first good look at her opponent: a demon, complete with painted horns, wings, a goatee, and fangs. The strangely out-of-place blue eyes threatened to captivate her without trying; she had fought demons of all kinds, but never had Freya seen such kind, human eyes on one. Something is definitely not as it seems. . . Sudden movement broke through her second-long hesitation: a great, flaming scimitar coming in for a deathblow on her left. Freya swung her triblade spear around to the demon's neck. . .

"Both of you, STOP!" Zidane and Aeron screamed in panic, as they saw two of their friends about to kill each other. Freya was skeptical of Aeron (to say the least), but had trusted Zidane with her life before, and he'd not let her down. The tip of her mythril spear stopped just inches short of her opponent's neck. She felt heat on her left side, and risked a glance. Whoever this not-a-demon was, he apparently trusted Aeron as much as she trusted Zidane; his flaming sword was stopped as close to her bosom as her spear was to his neck. Noticing the same thing, the creature spoke in a deep, clear voice that suited his form.

"We'd have joined each other in death." The flames on his blade flickered and died as he lowered it.

"He's not a demon, and Aeron's not the enemy! Put away your spear, okay?" Zidane pleaded. She lowered it, but kept it extended. Freya was still unsure of these people, though they seemed to mean her no harm. Despite the twitching of their hands, the other occupants of the room did not ready their weapons.

Propping himself up on his elbows, the demi-demon requested, "Would you please step off of me? I could rise nonetheless, but seeing as your claws are still poking my belly, it could prove bloody and painful." This surprised Freya nearly as much as the eyes had. Though his voice was deep, its tone was no longer menacing. It was actually polite, and sounded almost embarrassed. In any case, he was no demon; Freya had met enough of them to recognize one easily. She stepped off of him and retracted her spear. The red being got up, and surprised Freya still more by what he said and did next. "Zidane, do you know this woman? You act as though you do, yet I can recall you describing none such as she."

"Yes, I did. Crimson, this is Freya. Freya, meet Crimson."

"So you aren't being held captive? Where are the others?" Freya asked.

"Nope. Just popped into existence on top of Scarface over there," Zidane pointed at Aeron, "and we've been discussing our situations and eating good food ever since. And the others are on their way here." While Zidane spoke Crimson looked Freya over several times, then turned back towards Zidane.

"You said that the Lady Freya resembled a rat. Though she indeed has fur and a tail, rat is hardly a fitting description. It's insulting." He frowned his disapproval on Zidane, then looked back at Freya, his frown fading a bit as he did so. Again, the dragoon found herself drawn into those eyes. . . she had always believed that the eyes were one of the most revealing parts of the body, and she'd met with considerable success 'reading' people's eyes.

If that is so, then I should like to learn more about the person behind those eyes. . .

"I must apologize for your friend's unjust words, and my own. . . ah, rudeness in not greeting you in a manner that befits a Lady of a foreign realm." As he held out his right hand in greeting, Freya hesitantly extended her own. Crimson succeeded in surprising the normally unflappable dragoon by kneeling and kissing her proffered hand in a single, smooth motion. After releasing her hand, he remained bowed for a moment before rising again to his feet. "Though I no longer consider myself a knight, I do still remember my manners," he softly explained.

"Indeed . . . Well met, Crimson." A knight? Freya wondered to herself. Curious. . . "So you aren't being held captive, Zidane?"

"No. Best part is, they've heard of Kuja and want to help us." Zidane paused to scratch the top of his head. Turning to Lucca, he asked, "Hey, didn't you say the Akula wouldn't get here with the others until tomorrow morning?" Lucca responded instantly.

"That means this is the third group! Now we know where everyone is!"

Aeron frowned. "So where're the other two?"

"I'm confused," the dragoon remarked.

"They have a penchant for doing that to people." Freya turned back to Crimson, who had spoken to her. "Although I have known them for but a few hours longer than your friend, Zidane, they have succeeded in doing it to me several times already." Freya was wondering if she might get used to being surprised by Crimson. Here he is, talking amicably to one he tried his utmost to kill not a moment ago! And here I stand, listening to such a one.

There was a commotion at the hatch, and Freya and Crimson turned to see Amarant and Steiner entering the cabin, weapons drawn. A crackle of energy was heard as Aeron readied a ball of lightning, and the others readied their guns.

"Stay your blades!" bellowed Crimson. There was command in that voice, a tone that compelled all to obey. And they did, stopping their mad rush for long enough for Quina to yell, "No fight! These friends!"

Zidane's exasperated cry followed. "Geez, how many times tonight is this gonna happen? Put your weapons away, guys, and welcome to our home for the night."

"But. . ." Steiner protested, "There's a demon! And other evildoers!"

Crimson sighed to himself. "I do so tire of explaining," muttered the demon-knight in a voice low enough that Freya alone heard.

"Hey, are you insulting my new friends?" Zidane challenged Steiner. "And remember, I'm a dirty, rotten scoundrel, too."

"For the young queen's sake, I have forgiven your thievery. But such company as this is not something I can condone!"

"Maybe you'll change your mind once you know more about them," Zidane suggested. "They've given us some interesting info on Kuja, and our current location. I know you'll find it hard to believe, but you need to. They've got me convinced." So Zidane told Steiner, Amarant, and Freya what he had learned thus far. They were a bit skeptical at first, but they ended up believers. Then came the hard part.

"Alright, folks," announced Zidane. "Now it's time for Aeron to tell us exactly why Kuja wants him so bad." Aeron groaned.

"I spent all afternoon telling that story to Crimson. Lucca, could. . . "

". . . I tell it?" she finished for him. "Yeah, I'll do it." Turning her attention back to the three newcomers, she continued, "In order to explain that, I'm going to have to tell you all a bit more about this little planet's history and how we know it. It's a long story, but I'll make it as short as I can. Five years ago, I was ready to show my new teleportation device, the Telepod, to the public. My friend Crono was kind enough to be the first to try it - it worked fine for him. But then Marle tried it, and her Dreamstone pendant somehow made a Gate. We're still not quite sure how that happened - my device shouldn't have caused it - but happen it did, creating a Gate back to the same location in 600ad. Yup, that's right: 600ad, at the height of the human/mystic war. Queen Leene had been kidnapped, but when the searchers found Marle - a distant descendant of the queen - they thought their search was over. So Marle disappeared because Leene didn't get found. To get her back, Crono and I joined a demihuman frog knight (Aeron's father) and went searching . . . we found her alright, and bade Frog goodbye, but other problems surfaced and we found ourselves in 2300ad. It was a total wasteland. After over a month of searching the ruins and questioning the scattered survivors of humanity, we found out what had caused the devastation: an enormous being called Lavos, who'd risen up from Elosia's core one day in 1999ad. Of course, once we found out about that we couldn't just go home; we had to set things right. We ended up visiting the distant past, where cavemen and women somehow knew English, and the height of the Kingdom of Zeal, with all of its castles in the sky. Aeron's mother's from Zeal; she was the princess when it fell, consumed by her mother's greed for a taste of Lavos' power. It took awhile - nearly a year and a half - but in the end, we did it. We went to 1999ad and destroyed Lavos before he could destroy the world.

"So that's history. We all know that Kuja's a total power-whore, right? And that he doesn't like competition? That's why he took out the Summoner Tribe twenty years ago, and why his boss tried to take out Aeron's family about three hundred-eighty years ago. He's very interested in Aeron's ancestral Shadow magic, which originated from Lavos. Probably he's interested more in the necromantic aspects of Shadow than anything else. Now he knows that Aeron, at least, is still around. But now there's more than just Aeron - there's also Crono, Marle, and I. And Schala, still a very powerful sorcoress, is still in hiding. We don't think he knows about her yet. We're also not sure if he knows much about Crim, here . . . "

* * * * *

Commander Sheridan of the Guardian Police (actually the peacetime Army) fervently wished he were flexible enough to kick himself. He had been foolish enough to trust those three, those three that were now chatting quite happily with the others. Though Sheridan was decent with a sabre, he knew he was outnumbered and outclassed. Gunning the engine on his boat, he rushed back to Truce harbor. The King had to know of this. Perhaps then Sheridan could redeem himself by taking the message to the major ports and towns.

* * * * *

As the story neared its end, Freya finally got to hear about Crimson. A little, anyway. Aeron was now asleep, his head lolled over on Lucca's shoulder, and he was the one to whom Crimson had opened up. A knight that fought in a foreign war, and returned only to find his beloved kingdom under attack. He was unable to stop it, in spite of challenging the commander of the enemy army to

a duel. The victor - Magus - then turned him into a demon, and separated his body from his mind so that he'd roam his homeland in a feral state, killing anyone that approached him . . . I can scarcely imagine a more terrible fate.

Freya looked towards the knight and noted his expression, much of which was revealed by his eyes. He seemed to see nothing, looking beyond everything in the room at something only he could see. Freya recognized the expression, for she had seen it on others, and on occasion even wore it herself. It was the look of despair, the kind of despair one feels when there is little left to gain and nothing left to lose. She looked quickly at the other faces in the cabin, but no one seemed to notice how Crimson obviously felt. As the story ended and they started discussing what to do next, still he was ignored. Even when bedding arrangements were discussed and Crimson volunteered to keep watch throughout the night, no one seemed to notice. They talked to him, but didn't notice.

He is their comrade! Do they not care? Or can it really be that I am the only one to notice? As Crimson left the cabin and people started to fall asleep, Freya decided that it was probably the latter. Which didn't mean that she could just leave him be. Though his kingdom was long gone, he still behaved and fought as a knight. It is wrong that he should suffer alone, and if no one else wants to help him, I will. As she got up and strode towards the cabin's hatch, she was stopped by Zidane's sleepy voice.

"Where you goin', Freya?"

"I think that the red knight could use some company."

"Oh. Ok. You two have fun." When he was silent, she continued to the hatch, opened it, and stepped out on deck.

Part 2: Divergence

Chapter four

Shutting the cabin hatch gently behind her, Freya walked aft, towards the small staircase leading to the Aquilae's open bridge. Before she reached the staircase, however, she spotted the giant sitting in the 20-foot launch that hung out over the ship's stern. His head was turned aft, and Freya guessed that he'd probably sit like that all night if she left him alone.

Before she approached him, she considered her words. What can I say to a man that, only two or so years ago, woke up to find himself a hated demon 400 years after his last memory? What a terrible shock it must have been! All of his friends, his family, even his enemy, long dead. And he has had, from then 'till now, no one to talk to. No one to trust, to confide in. And only hours earlier he and I held blades to each others' throats. Yet here I am, after a long, hard day, leaving the warm, cozy cabin to comfort him.

Freya shook her head at herself as she again thought about what she was doing, murmuring wryly to herself, "My heart will be the end of me." Freya did not think that Crimson could have heard her gentle whisper, but apparently his hearing was more acute than she had guessed. He lifted his horned head from his clawed hand and turned to look at her, an almost comic expression of surprise on his face.

"Oh! Hello, Lady Freya. What is it that brings you out at such an hour, and on such a chill night? Do you, too, gaze at the stars?"

"On occasion. But that is not what brings me out tonight." With her left hand, she indicated a seat across from Crimson. "May I join you?"

He nodded in response, and looked up at the sky. "If you wish. Though I fear I may be poor company tonight."

She took the seat across from him to which he had gestured, and examined his face once more.

Though the person beneath the terrible face was still a near-complete stranger to her, she was sure that he was not at all what his form would suggest. She looked away so as not to be caught staring, and as she did so, he spoke again.

"So. . . you still have not told me why you are here."

"You looked as though you could use some company."

Crimson grunted. "Indeed I could. But out of curiosity, how did you know? I thought my expression was guarded."

"Not well enough. You'd be a terrible poker player – your eyes give you away."

"So I was told, even as a human. But I doubt you came to talk about my eyes; they are not what troubles me." Still he watched the sky intently, avoiding looking at her.

"Then tell me. . . what does?"

"I do not believe it to be anything that anyone here can help me with. . . but if you truly wish to hear it, you shall hear it." Shifting his position slightly, he turned to look at Freya. "You understand, of course, the effect that this form has on humans. Everywhere I go, I am plagued by demon hunters, exorcists, and young fools out to make a name for themselves by killing the infamous Forest Demon. And the mystics are no better. Most of them don't trust demihumans, fearing an uprising. And those that do trust me do so only because they worship me as a Demonlord." He laughed bitterly. "Ridiculous! But they believe it nonetheless. And then there are the demihumans. Their reactions are little different than those of humans. The only difference is that their hatred of Mystics lead them to hail me as a sort of savior. Which I am not. So you see, I have some difficulty finding friends."

"What about Aeron and Lucca?" Freya suggested. "They seem to like you well enough."

Crimson nodded. "They do, but they are already being chased. I'll not make their already tragic lives more difficult by adding my pursuers to theirs." Crimson sighed softly, and his head sank further into his hands. "All of which lays the foundation for my other problem: what to do with the rest of my life. Magus told me that I would live at least a millennium in this form, and I've no reason to doubt him; after more than 400 years of life I see no sign of age. I ought to be middle-aged, but I feel as young as my twenty-five years of memory. I do not wish to spend six centuries being hunted as I now am, yet see no alternative. My life will become meaningless as soon as the particular mess in which we now find ourselves is over. I will have no one to live for, and nothing to die for; I shall merely exist, and I fear that more than death." Crimson pulled his head out of his hands, and lifted it to gaze at the stars again. "And that, Lady Freya, is my true problem: though I would give my centuries to this world, it will not take them. It has nothing left for me."

"Which is why you look at the stars," Freya explained.

Crimson gave her a wry grin. "Actually, I look at the stars to admire their beauty. But perhaps there is a little of that, as well."

The sadness in his eyes, the longing for purpose and meaning, touched Freya. We have both lived our lives full of purpose: as youths, to learn how to be knights; and as knights, to defend our respective kingdoms. Now, I have the killing of Kuja, and the reconstruction of Burmecia. Crimson has the killing of Kuja, and nothing else.

He had said that there was nothing left for him on this world; so Freya reasoned that maybe another world was in order for him. Her heart was driving her again, the same that had led her to fight alongside General Beatrix, the leader of the forces that had destroyed her homeland, to cover Dagger's escape. Though she couldn't speak for Alexandria, Lindblum, or Cleyra, there was still one thing she could do. With the king dead and the prince missing, the dual tasks of rebuilding Burmecia and restoring order fell to the Dragoons, at least until a new ruler was chosen. And part of these tasks included enlisting whatever help was deemed necessary for their completion.

"Crimson," she began. Her formal tone caught the demon-knight off-guard, and he involuntarily raised an eyebrow as he whirled to regard her.

"Yes?"

"Our king is dead, our soldiers have fallen, and our kingdom has been all but destroyed. On behalf of what is left of the kingdom of Burmecia, I humbly request your assistance, and offer you such rank as I can provide. Will you accept the title of man-at-arms until such time as your proper rank and title can be determined by one in a position of greater authority?"

Despite the seriousness of what they were doing, Freya had to stifle a smile as the expression on Crimson's face changed; that still-raised eyebrow was raised further still as the eye beneath it widened.

"'Twould be the utmost honor."

* * * * *

The chancellor of Guardia held his quill over a document. If he signed it, lethal force would be authorized in the apprehension of Aeron and Lucca. The paranoia that made him so good for his job now worked against him, as he stood in for the deathly ill King. His paranoia made him want to bring the quill to paper, but his mind told him otherwise. He had heard of the framing of Crono and the King by the beast that had locked him away: Yakkra VIII. In spite of his occasional tendencies to the contrary, the chancellor was a kind and just man at heart. He wanted for justice to be done, and that couldn't happen if the people who deserved punishment were dead.

Besides, he didn't quite believe the evidence that had been presented. Or more correctly, he didn't quite believe that the evidence pointed to Aeron and Lucca. Those two were odd, he'd admit, but they had been Crono & Marle's friends for years, and had no motivation to do what they were supposedly doing.

Nonetheless, he couldn't ignore the possibility that maybe, just maybe, they really were guilty. But if they weren't, and he signed this document, and they died as a result. . . he wouldn't be able to forgive himself. And neither would the Prince and Princess.

"I won't sign it," he firmly stated to the scribe that had presented it to him. "Not like this. Please rewrite it. No lethal force without provocation. If they're to die, it will only be after they either shoot at our forces or after a fair trial and conviction."

"Yes, sir." The scribe took the rejected document from the chancellor's hands and left the room.

* * * * *

"So, Crimson, what rank were you while in Choras?"

"Ranks were undoubtedly somewhat different than those that you are used to. The answer to your question is Knight Commander, and I had under my command twelve lieutenants of various specialties; a unit of organization called a 'pod.' The only larger unit of organization was the hexapod, consisting of six pods and commanded by the Knight Captain."

"You commanded knights?" asked Freya, incredulous at the tremendous reduction in rank he had accepted just moments earlier.

"Yes. But then, the Choran Army was always unorthodox. Virtually the entire army was composed of knights. And a much wider variety of weaponry was used than broadswords and longbows."

"I'm sorry I can't give you a rank that suits your level of experience and ability."

"It's quite alright; I understand your reasons." Without waiting for Freya to ask him to, he continued, "First, simply because you haven't the authority to enlist me as anything other than your attendant. Second, being your own man-at-arms gives me an excellent excuse to stay near you, the better to enable you to make right any misunderstandings my appearance may cause. And third,

perhaps when your fellow soldiers and Dragoons see that you trust me enough to guard your flanks and accompany you into battle, they may be less likely to christen me a messenger of Hades to be purged from the world of the living. Or at least less likely to distrust me. Am I close?"

Freya had to think about this for a moment. He is truly willing to be little more than my bodyguard and weapons-bearer? Even so, that is not what I have in mind. . . "You led knights into battle; that speaks of skill. You survived in the wild, being hunted, for 400 years on nothing but your subconscious fighting instincts, which speaks volumes for them. I'm not going to insult you by treating you like a common man-at-arms. Instead, I'll treat you according to your abilities and intentions: as a fellow knight sworn to defend the kingdom with his life."

Crimson's wings fluttered in surprise as he tried to think of something eloquent to say, but nothing came to mind. "I am honored," he simply replied. They sat for awhile in silence, until Crimson grunted amusedly and spoke again. "Had someone told me this morning what the day would bring, I'd have dismissed them as utterly mad. Who could have imagined that I would pledge my allegiance to a kingdom that I have seen only in visions?"

"Do you already regret your decision?" asked Freya with a note of worry.

"I do not in any way regret my decision. It's merely that I am amazed at how much things have changed in such a short span of time."

"I've just hired a man that I first met and fought only a few hours ago. I, too, would have considered it madness."

For nearly half an hour after that, they sat in a slightly awkward silence. After that, Freya became restless and gazed at Crimson to see if he looked like he had anything to say. He didn't, but he noticed her staring at him and stared back with a questioning expression. The dragoon suddenly felt compelled to say something to explain the fact that she had been looking at him, so she said the first thing that popped into her head.

"Do your wings work?" Crimson cocked his head to one side, and his face took on a thoughtful expression.

"Would you believe that I have never tried? I've no idea, but now you have made me curious." He stretched his wings experimentally, flapping them several times. Then he crouched and leapt as high into the air as he could, which was only a few feet, and flapped his wings furiously. The demon knight actually managed to hover for nearly a full second before crashing back into the launch.

Upon his landing, three things happened in rapid succession: first, the davit that had been damaged in the flight from the mystic destroyer, which held the bow of the launch (where Freya sat) snapped. Crimson and Freya both lost their balance and tumbled into the bow, ending up in a heap as the launch's bow finished its three-foot fall to the sea. This stressed the other davit in a way that it wasn't intended to cope with, and it broke off as well. The twenty-foot boat rocked in the privateer corvette's wake as it pulled rapidly away, fading into the night. By the time the two knights disentangled themselves, they could scarcely even see it, but they could tell that it was much too far a jump for even Freya to attempt. For about two pregnant seconds they stared in shock at the fading shape of the Aquilae, knowing they could never catch it in their little launch. Crimson broke their stunned silence with a glaring understatement.

"Well. That can't have been good."

Chapter five

Based on the mystics' recent behavior and the possibility of war with them, the chancellor had consulted the king and, with his permission, ordered the Guardian Police to a war footing. Cloth uniforms were exchanged for suits of mail with Guardia's royal crest, and heavy warships were dusted off to be brought into service. Most were already in service; but the vanguard of the Navy, its behemoth battleships and dreadnoughts, would practically need overhauls to be battleworthy again.

Years of little maintenance or use had taken their toll. Thus, the Guardian Navy commander had a problem: not enough available ships.

Aeron's little aircraft, the Procyon, was armed with only two Light Bolt Cannons and had still managed to devastate a Medinan destroyer before getting shot down. The Aquilae was known to have two deck-mounted LBC's, and the Akula was known to have many times more than that. There was no way a desperate man and woman with that much destructive force at their fingertips were going to surrender to a group of coastal patrol boats.

Of the two active battleship squadrons, one was on exercise off the southern continent's coast and the other was in overhaul, repair, and overdue crew rest. The cruiser squadrons were doing what they always did: patrolling the open seas, mostly between Medina and Guardia's vulnerable western shore. There was, in fact, only one viable option.

It was only a destroyer squadron, but it was a next-generation squadron, using many technologies pioneered by no others than Aeron and Lucca. These ships had replaced the powder-fired, smoothbore muzzle-loaders of old with rifled breech-loaders using shells produced at one of the new factories. The new weapons had greater range, accuracy, hitting power, and rate of fire. And the coal-fired steam piston engines had been replaced by far more powerful and efficient oil-fired steam turbines. Not to mention the new armor plating, hydraulic turrets, or wing-like stabilizers below the waterline. If any group of ships could intimidate and, if necessary, take down the Akula and Aquilae, it would be Destroyer Squadron 34.

* * * * *

By now they could no longer discern the ghostly shape of the Aquilae. Freya and Crimson both realized that it was highly unlikely that their absence would even be noticed before morning, and by then they would be too far away to spot the little boat. In fact, thanks to contrary currents they would be nearly one hundred miles away; but the exact number was beside the point.

"What are we going to do now?" Freya wondered.

A voice from the darkness answered her. "Beg your pardon?"

"This is your world, your ocean. I know precious little of it, so you're my guide. The only thing I must insist upon is that our end destination be Melchior's hut, because that's where everyone else is going. I leave how we get there to you; I won't argue." Crimson's eyebrows rose slightly; a gesture that went unseen in the night. Her ready faith in him was a refreshing change from the near constant lack of trust he'd been given by virtually everyone else he'd met. Crimson found himself rather liking this woman, this fell dragoon with a heart. And he found himself looking forward to journeying with her and fighting by her side. Then, Crimson realized something of more immediate import: he was taking an inordinate amount of time to reply.

"For the moment, I think that we should go to sleep. When we wake tomorrow, we shall want to go west by any means necessary; by sail if the wind favors, by oar if it does not. The reason, of course, is to get and stay as close to the shore as possible; it is cyclone season, and this is hardly a good vessel in which to be caught by a storm. I already have some idea of what to do after that, but I think that it would be best discussed and decided upon after a good night's sleep."

"That sounds reasonable to me," his new comrade replied. Crimson heard a faint rustling of cloth as Freya tried to get comfortable. Crimson followed suit, and was soon asleep. Freya, however, remained awake for a while, lost in thought. One of the thoughts occupying her mind was just how much time she would be spending with Crimson. Until they reached Melchior's hut (a journey which, Freya guessed, might take a month), they would be alone together. He would then accompany her, Zidane, and everyone else on the hunt for Kuja, and she had no idea how long that might take. Afterwards, when they returned to Burmecia, she was sure there would be no shortage of work for the two of them to do. Being one of the last surviving dragoons, she would draw from amongst the most difficult tasks. And she would be accompanied by Crimson on all of them.

Though I have known him less than a day, I will be spending much of the next several years of my life with, near, or around this neglected knight.

Not that she was sure that was necessarily an entirely bad thing. Because of something beyond his control, the world had mistreated, distrusted, hated and rejected Crimson. Yet he still ached to serve it, and to protect it from harm. That drive, that instinct for duty was at the core of what made a good knight an exceptional one. Perhaps my trust is better-placed than I had feared. She curled herself into a nice, warm ball to sleep, her last thought before she drifted off being I wonder how a giant demon with a scimitar will fit in with lanky Nezumi soldiers?

* * * * *

The Slash was one of the MN's finest warships, built using technology bought from a mysterious, otherworldly man who seemed to have no end of surprises. He'd given them the same advances (though they didn't know it) as Guardia's DS.34, with the exception of the fact that the Slash was a thoroughly overpowered ship with less armor and armament than its size would suggest. Like all MN ships, it had an overly large crew, including flying scouts.

But Slash had something that set it apart from most other warships, even those of DS.34: it had not one radio, but many, and those were small enough to be carried by the flying scouts. That way, they could report enemy sightings immediately and even direct fire from the ship's cannon. And the flyers had excellent vision, even at night. It was they that had kept tabs on the Aquilae and Akula, allowing the Slash to remain out of sight until the moment was right. With a nasty cyclone approaching from the northwest, they would have to move tonight in order to accomplish their mission. And so they did, easily overtaking the Aquilae from behind. There were no guards on deck, and they could easily have destroyed the little ship, then gone after the Akula. But, oddly enough, destruction was not their mission. Nor did their orders include it. In fact, their orders precluded the possibility of it. They were to ignore the Aquilae and provoke the Akula, baiting it to follow them to Medina.

The mystic crew was proud of their shiny new warship, and wished to use it as it was meant to be used: as an armored gauntlet, to crush the enemy. But they would, as always, follow their orders. No matter how odd they seemed.

* * * * *

Freya, always an early riser, wasn't surprised to see that the sun had not risen before her. She was, however, somewhat surprised to see another early riser in the predawn light: Crimson. He looked up from the map he had been examining by the light of a fireball in his hand and nodded a greeting to the dragoon.

"Good morning. I believe that I know where we are. But before we discuss either that or our plans, would you help me raise and rig the mast? The darkening sky to the northeast tells me that speed is of the essence." Freya got to her feet and stretched a few times before replying.

"Alright."

Crimson had been of the impression that Freya wasn't one who would know much about sailing, but she surprised him by doing her parts of the task correctly the first time. Not as quickly or efficiently as Crimson did his, but he was impressed that she seemed to know what to do at all; he'd been told that Freya wasn't keen on sea travel. By the time the first tendrils of sunlight appeared over the eastern horizon, the launch was under full sail. They could only just see the dawn's light touch their destination: a rocky shore in the distant haze. As they sped west with a stiff breeze at their backs, Crimson told Freya of his master plan.

"Would you like to hear all of our options?"

Freya shook her head. "Just your recommendation will do. I trust you."

Apparently, those last three words still had an effect on him; a small, sad smile touched his mouth

as he replied, "It's not been often that I've heard those words spoken sincerely of late." He paused for a moment to collect his thoughts. "A cyclone is headed our way. Our first goal is merely to get ashore as quickly as possible. From the direction of the wind, I believe that this storm will blow us ashore if we do not arrive there first."

Freya looked first at the shore and then at the storm before pronouncing, "We won't make it." She wasn't being defeatist; she was merely stating a fact. Crimson nodded.

"I know; my plans take that into account. The sharp rocks that lie beneath the cliffs of this shore have destroyed more than their share of ships. Thus, I do not particularly expect that this little boat will survive our landing. So we shall have to travel over land to find a new one. According to the chart I was examining earlier, there is a merchant port just south of the forest on the eastern coast. If we can get there quickly enough, before descriptions of us and our 'misdeeds' penetrate the forest, then we will simply buy a vessel capable of following the current all the way to the strait. If we are too late, then we will have to do something I don't relish. We would have to travel to the foot of the mountains in the northwestern corner of the forest, to the demihuman settlement there."

"I thought you said you didn't like them."

"I said that I did not wish to stay with them; other than their bitterness towards the Mystics, most are decent enough folk. We would lead a troop of them south to Porre where they would create a distraction by engaging the IMN contingent there. This would also occupy any Royal Guardian Navy forces in the area, giving us time to, ah, appropriate a suitable vessel and escape."

"Would they not object to being used in such a way?"

"I think not. In fact, if these demihumans at all resemble the others I've met, they will jump at even the slightest excuse to kill mystics. If anything, we will have a surplus of volunteers."

"I'm sorry to play the devil's advocate-" Freya began; but she was interrupted by a grimace and a word from Crimson.

"Ouch." Suddenly the dragoon realized her terrible pun, and was unable to hold back a slightly pained smile.

Crimson smiled back as she continued, "But what if there is no MN presence there?"

"Ah, but there will be!" He paused and frowned slightly at the mast as a gust of wind made it creak. His frown faded as he turned back to Freya and continued, "You see, demihumans tell me things that they are unwilling to tell any other. I have on several good authorities, in fact, that the MN has a repair facility in Porre. Though commercial in origin, its purpose is military." The creaking of the mast had already become continuous, even when the wind was not gusting.

"I think we should take down the mast now," remarked Freya in an offhand sort of way.

"Excellent idea."

Chapter six

[GNS DD-548 Denadaro]

Captain Sheridan cursed for the third time in a minute. He didn't think not to get so upset in from of his crew; they knew his moods, and knew that this one, like all the others, would be over quickly. The could not, for the life of them, figure out what had him so upset; sure, their targets were in a nasty cyclone, but that was no big deal. All the captain had to do was order his ships to stay seaward of the storm and wait for the targets to either sink or come out of the maelstrom.

It ought to have been easy. Or so Sheridan had thought. After all, his DS.34 was the most advanced group of ships in any navy. Even those uppity Chorans had nothing to compete. Besides his own destroyer, Sheridan had under his command no less than two other destroyers, four frigates, and a full half-dozen corvettes. All of which failed to mention the destroyer tender, ammunition ship, and

fueler that supported him. Or the fact that the little replenishment detachment was protected by two more frigates.

As to what he was cursing about, Sheridan knew he had no choice. Not that he had to like it, of course. Trying to keep his little fleet organized in that storm would have been an impossible task, not to mention the idea of trying to actually intimidate Aeron into surrendering.

So it was that, after several straight minutes of sulking, he finally gave the order that the entire crew had already known was coming. "Helm, steer us seaward of the storm."

"Aye, sir."

* * * * *

Though it had been but an hour, to Freya it seemed as though there had never been anything in the world but wind and waves. The little boat was swamped, and her dragoon's hat had been blown/washed away some time ago. She and Crimson both retained their weapons and packs and the clothes on their backs, but little enough else. Onward marching, relentless, the waves came over them not in sheets, but as walls of water. Occasionally, when they rode a wave's crest instead of being crushed by it, they could spot foamy waters: the rocks of South Xenan's eastern coast. Each time they were closer, and each time she found herself wishing that they would just crash already and be done with it. Judging from Crimson's occasional grumble and the look on his face, she guessed that he probably felt much the same way.

They should have been careful what they wished for. With a bone-jarring jolt, they crashed into a rocky spire jutting from the sea. Though the beleaguered knights held on, the impact pushed the boat to one side and capsized it. The two immediately let go, but they weren't swept away from the rock in time. They were smashed against the rock, and the launch against them. Crimson took the brunt of the impact, and Freya heard him bellow in pain as its impact crushed him. She didn't escape unscathed, though; something sharp tore into her right side, ripping a gash that stung from the salty sea and the splinters now embedded in it. Such a wound would only have slowed a being with a body as massive as Crimson's; but to Freya's slim body, it was a mortal wound.

Freya heard Crimson cry out her name in a strangled voice, but she hurt too much to reply. Breathing was difficult. As she struggled to stay conscious enough to keep her head above the waves, something grabbed her and began dragging her. She tried to struggle, but stopped when a gruff but familiar voice made her aware that an arm, not a wave, was carrying her.

"Dammit, stop struggling," Crimson panted between gasps for air and grunts of pain. "This is difficult enough!" After another minute or so of Hell, they were ashore. Crimson grimaced as he lifted her in both arms and, teeth gritted, hiked for a place that was safe from the waves. After a short time, he found it in the form of a path of sorts, stumbling up a shallow cleft in the cliff face. It was treacherous going, but they made it to the top without falling back down the face. Crimson set Freya down as gently as his beaten, broken body allowed before collapsing to the ground beside her. Slowly, she turned her head towards him. His only obvious injury was a deep, flowing gash on his left bicep, but Freya knew there had to be even worse than that from the look of defeat on his face.

He fixed her with a weak, brave smile and formed his words carefully. "Lady Freya, it has been an honor and a pleasure serving with you."

Though she wished she could deny it, she knew that he was right. Neither of us will live much longer. With effort, she returned his smile, and formed her own words as carefully as he had formed his. "I assure you, Sir Crimson, that the honor was mine." Slowly, painfully slowly, he reached his right hand out to her. She took it in her left hand, and together they prepared to enter the void.

Because of the rain, she couldn't see the tears coming from his eyes as he felt himself start to slip away. "I shall dearly miss your company on the coming journey. . ."

"Nonsense," Freya protested weakly. "I'm coming with you. I have to. How else will the keepers of

the dead know that you are no demon?"

"Joking. . . at such a time. . . you're wonderful. Such a pity. . ." His voice trailed off and his grip on her hand loosened.

"No pity," Freya insisted. "I said I'm. . . coming with you. . . I keep my word." Freya's own vision was starting to fade, and couldn't even cry bitter tears. It seemed somehow wrong to her, in those last moments, that they should meet such an end and she couldn't so much as shed a tear.

Just then, something almost incomprehensibly odd happened. Freya began to lose contact with her body and surroundings even more quickly than before, until they were all nothing but faint wisps, moving at a glacial pace as her reckoning of time slowed. She looked down at herself and saw that she was glowing, and becoming brighter as fresh energy poured into her from an unseen source. Freya's first thought was that Crimson was sacrificing what life he had to save her, and she wished she could see him to thank him. And she did find him, right in front of her, and realized the energy was not coming from him. His glow was pleasant to touch, Freya found, while the energy flowing into her had a different feeling that she would forever be unable to describe. If only I could rouse him to this state, and share this energy, Freya thought to herself. Or, she thought it was to herself.

<He's too far gone for that,> announced a woman's voice. It seemed to come from all directions, and the dragoon couldn't see the source any better than she could see the Akula.

<Who are you?>

<I am, for the moment, your benefactor. And that is all you need concern yourself with.>

<What do you mean, 'too far gone'?>

<You are both still alive. And before you ask, no, I have not slowed time. Once removed from the concerns of the body, the mind works remarkably quickly. Thus, it does seem as though time is slowed. This will give you nearly ten, rather than two, minutes in which to decide what to do with the energy I've just given to you.>

Freya didn't even hesitate. <I will save Crimson.> The voice, however, continued as though she had said nothing.

<You can either use it to save yourself, or you can attempt to bond your mind to his, enabling you to share the energy with him and save both of your lives.>

<Why can't you give him energy, the way you did to me?>

<Though I can tell by his nature he is no demon, he has some similar powers. I am a stranger to him, and his mental defenses are very formidable. I cannot say for certain they wouldn't destroy me if I attempted to break them. You, however, are known to him; more than that, he trusts you.> Freya tried to reach out to him, hoping that would somehow form the "bond" that the being had described. However, she was stopped by something.

Or someone.

<Release me!> Freya ordered.

<Creating this bond will change the both of you forever! You have no idea what you are about to try!>

<Then educate me!> impatiently demanded the dragoon. Almost to her surprise, the voice complied.

<Besides the fact that it rarely works between those who are not of my kind, there are consequences even if you succeed. If you fail, he will be unable to accept the energy and its backlash will kill you.>

<And if I succeed?>

<The bond is permanent. It never fades. It is a perpetual marriage, if you will, of minds. Close proximity will bring pleasure; distance, pain. Each will feel what the other feels. If you stub your toe, he will feel it; if someone steps on his foot, yours will ache, whether you are present or not. If you become pregnant, the pains of labor will be shared. The opposite, however, is also true - if one of you takes a warm bath, the relaxation will be shared. If one of you is happy, the other will find it difficult to be upset. And one other thing.> The voice lowered a bit. <The bond is exclusive.>

<I don't understand. . . it sounds as though you are describing love, not a lifesaving device.>

<It is, yet isn't love. If you were to succeed, you would understand why one cannot but love a mind so compatible, complimentary to one's own. To see each other in the basest form. . . one must experience it to understand it. And yet, it is more than that, a need for physical proximity that causes physical pain in absence.>

<But it would enable me to save his life?>

<Yes. But don't forget - it is exclusive. If you have plans to spend your life with another->

<This bond isn't marriage, is it?>

The voice paused before answering, <Not necessarily. But its nature precludes, as a practical matter, marriage to any other.>

Freya sighed. <No matter. Even if the one I loved were a possibility, I could not sacrifice another on the altar of my happiness.>

<So you still wish to do it.>

<Yes.>

<Very well, then.> The restraints holding Freya dissipated, and she could move once again. As her mind began its slow return to her body, subjective time accelerated. She had little time, but it would have to be enough. She latched her mind and his together without quite understanding how she knew what to do. As she began to give him the energy that had been given to her, she was surprised to feel Crimson's mind latch itself to hers as well. They shared brief exultation as they realized it had worked; overjoyed at her success, she continued the outpour of energy.

The voice entered her mind again, sounding a bit panicked. <Stop! Enough! You need some too, if you want to live!> Freya did stop, but as the passage of time returned to normal, she passed out. She had given too much of herself.

Part 3: A Gate Beyond

Chapter seven

A mighty, bronze-colored dragon soared lazily above the swirling clouds. Like the rest of the clan of which he was head, he had very sharp features: the staggered row of spikes that went down the ridge of his back; his sharp, spade-like tail tip; his clawed, bat-like wings; his pointed, almost beak-like snout; and the frill on the back of his head, with three backwards-pointing spikes, one for each of his three centuries of age.

As clan leaders went, he was unusual. His bronze clan and the greens were the only of the Elosian clans to live outside of the Sanctuary Caves, and as a result, they were larger, stronger, and longer-lived than the dragons whose growth was stunted by the caves in which they lived. Not to mention the fact that, unlike the cave-dwelling dragons, their wings were large enough for flight. Excepting the gold dragons, of course, that got at least some of their power from the planet itself rather than the sunken remnants of an ancient kingdom. And the skeletal black dragons, that guarded and transported the self-appointed royal Purples. Also, besides being unusually strong and smart even for a clan leader, Suhilin was quite young for a race that often measured their lifespans in millennia. And he tended to be impatient.

<Where is she? It should not have taken this long.> As if on cue, the clouds parted and the green dragon chief, nearly as large as he, rocketed up out of the clouds towards him.

Like her greens, the chief had a crocodilian snout, two rows of bony ridges going down her back, and a huge, bony club of a tail-tip. The fact that the leading edges of her wings were covered in feathers identified her as a female, and the two fully and one partly grown spike on her frill set her age at a mere 250. Tucking her wings for a moment, she rolled twice before extending them again. She was soon flying alongside her bronze friend and looking quite smug. Before she could brag about whatever she'd just done that she felt justified two victory rolls, he addressed her.

<I take it from your aerobatics and that ridiculous expression on your face that something went right. Am I correct, Sumetra?>

<Oh, Suhilin, you have no idea!> She rolled again, obviously quite happy with herself. <It worked perfectly!> The older dragon began to share her excitement.

<Really?>

<Yes. I found them; and not only are they both still alive, they're now bonded.>

<Can they survive for long enough for us to show the Council?>

<Yes, they can. I've promised them safe passage back to their friends, as well. My greens will ensure they're bothered by no wild beasts, mystics, bandits, or other hazards of the forest.> Sumetra performed another happy roll and continued exuberantly, <They're perfect for this! They're noble, brave, selfless, know the right people, had minds matched for bonding as well as circumstances necessitating it. I didn't have to lie! Though they may not trust us at first - once they see us, that is - I think that they are open-minded enough to at least listen to us. Finding two people that meet all of those qualifications should have taken an entire clan centuries or more. Who could possibly have expected us to find them before the 50-year deadline set by the council? I think that the only reason they even gave me any time was so I would shut up when I failed. If we can, through these two, prove to the other dragons that our kind is not the only species that has souls. . . our dreams could be realized. They'd rather christen all mortals soulless, the better to sleep at night when they give in to that monkey-tailed madman's demands and kill them all. War-mongering idiots. I can scarcely wait to see their expressions when I tell them I've succeeded.>

<When's the next meeting?>

<In only a few days. But I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to miss it.> Suhilin raised a questioning eyebrow at her.

<May I ask why?>

<A meeting about something as important as this should take at least a few days. You and I are both well aware of the Gold clan's hatred of you and, by extension, me. I wouldn't put it entirely past them to arrange an 'accident' for our specimens to spite us both.>

<And you want for me to stand guard,> the bronze finished. Sumetra paused before answering.

<Yes.>

<Why can't one of the bigger Greens do it?>

<I am afraid they've become a little busy lately. Those freakish Gates that link people to points in their past have begun appearing again, so they've got to keep people away from the deep forest where those usually occur. And in any case, neither they nor one of your warriors will do. Though the Golds hate you, they know that if they attack you or yours the consequences could destroy them. You're a bit less deniable an 'accident' than a lowly Bronze Warrior or Green Guardian, and the combined wrath of the clans would come down on them if they harmed you.>

Suhilin snorted flame in resignation. <Very well. Will you permit me to bring warriors along with

me?> The last part was sarcastic but without rancor. Sumetra didn't mind; she'd expected a more severe reaction.

<I'm sorry, but no. You need to stay hidden from them for a few days, to allow them time to recover from all that's happened to them. When you do make contact with them, you'll want to be as unthreatening as possible, a requirement prohibiting additional warriors. You alone are intimidating enough.>

<Are they powerful enough to threaten me?>

<In their present state, no. Later, potentially; I don't know. I've never seen them fight. But the point is that their first impression of us be a good one. I'm less worried about their ability to pierce your hide than about your potential ability to sour them against us.>

<Your concern for me is touching, > Suhilin grumped.

<You know that's not what I meant.>

<I'm sorry. It's just. . . I dislike guard duty, however important it may be. Never fear. I will keep them safe.> He was rewarded by a glowing smile from Sumetra (or what passed for a smile among dragons).

<Thank you. I'll be back as quickly as I can.> With that, she tucked her wings to her body and dived southeast, skimming the cloud tops at high speed.

<You're welcome.> The bronze chief shook his head ruefully at her fleeing form. <The things I do for you. . . > Pulling one of his wings to his side, he spiraled down through the dissipating storm to the cliffs below. He soon spotted the wreckage of a small boat. It was not difficult to find the cleft they must have climbed; it was the only decent path to the cliff top around. And in some such places, places where humans could easily breach the barrier the sheer cliffs posed, were caves. These caves were built into the top of the cliff, to be accessible and seen only from the forest and not from the sea. They had been built by the dragons as guard posts, or for use as ambush points. Presumably, Sumetra had ensured this one's vacancy. As soon as the figure dragging his wounded comrade into the cave was safely in, Suhilin searched for a place to land.

Chapter eight

The bedroom had been the only private place on board the ship, with the exceptions of the head and the engine room. All the way up to the point in the storm that an eighty-foot freak wave snapped the mast off. Aeron sighed and slogged his way through the shin-deep water to the bedroom's port bulkhead. The bedroom door was nailed there, in what had been a desperate effort to patch one of the Aquilae's three one-foot wide holes.

The ship had shuddered under the freak wave's impact, which had actually done two things: besides snapping the mast, it had forced water into the engine room through the diesel's exhaust pipe. It hadn't been enough to cause lasting damage, but it had been enough that the engine had sputtered and died. With the engine dead they could no longer keep the bow into the waves, which had made capsizing a terrifyingly real possibility.

So, Lucca had dashed to the engine room while Aeron and the sure-footed thief, Zidane, went topside to cut the lines and free the mast. Before they could get to it, they'd been beset by yet another freak accident: the next wave had indeed caught them broadside, and swung the fallen mast from its own rigging like an eighty-foot long battering ram, smashing a hole in the bedroom's port bulkhead. Between that wave and the next, Aeron and Zidane had cut the forestays. Unfortunately that had only swung the mast further aft, and sent it crashing through the port bulkhead of the cabin. They'd cut the mainstays as quickly as they could, but the mast had struck once more before disappearing into the storm, crushing a section of the armor surrounding the engine room.

Zidane had gone to the cabin to try to stop the flooding while Aeron dashed (or, moved as quickly as one can on the deck of a ship in the midst of a raging cyclone) to the engine room to help Lucca

get the engine going again. They had succeeded in stemming the flow of water enough to keep the engine safe, and even managed to get it running. Much to Quina's dismay, the galley table had been sacrificed to patch the hole in the cabin. Though the patches had held, the six-inch deep water in the bedroom and cabin were mildew-inducing, soaking testimony to their imperfection.

Nor had those been their only problems. They had greeted the day within radio range of the Akula, but without Crimson, Freya, or the corvette's sole launch. The davits had been snapped off as though by some great force. The Akula, interestingly enough, reported that an MN warship was steaming towards them; it could easily have passed the Aquilae during the night. After much fruitless speculation, Zidane had finally come up with a reasonable possibility: Crimson and Freya had been somehow snatched up by the mystics. Though neither knight seemed the type to be captured without making some kind of noise, it could be done. Especially, Zidane had suggested, if they had been (for whatever reason) sitting or standing in the launch when it had been broken off by a group of powerful, swimming mystics. What might have motivated the mystics to kidnap the watch standers rather than destroying the ship was still a mystery, however.

Nearly as mystifying was the fact that the MN cruiser had fired only a few shots at the Akula before continuing past it at a high rate of speed. Believing (or hoping) two of their comrades were aboard the vessel, the respective crews of the Akula and Aquilae agreed that they had no choice but to follow. That, however, had been before the storm. They were all now equally agreed on the fact that the Aquilae was in no shape to be chasing down a cruiser on the open sea.

The two ships were at last within visual range of each other, with the enemy cruiser teasing them just outside of the Akula's cannon range. Crono and Marle had nowhere near the tech knowledge required to take Aeron's destroyer into a fight, and someone had to get some important news to Guardia. There was a discussion to be had, and to avoid spending the time to get everyone together at a face-to-face meeting, a radio conference of sorts had been arranged. On cue, Marle's always cheerful voice came from the wall-mounted cabin speaker.

"We're ready! Are you guys listening?" Before anyone could summon him, Aeron trudged back into the cabin and sat next to Lucca, who held the microphone.

"Yeah, we're here," she replied. "Aeron and I have developed a theory to explain all of the weird things that've been going on lately, and a plan. But because I despise long-winded explanations, I'll let the shadow wizard do most of the talking." She handed the device to Aeron and leaned back in her creaky chair, eyes staring beyond the bulkheads, as though she were contemplating some secret problem.

What is she thinking about when she does that? Aeron briefly wondered. "First of all, our theory: we think that Kuja's behind all this." He noticed that Zidane and his Gaian companions were now staring at him as though he'd just told them he was a purple polka-dotted whiskerfish. Good, they're listening now. "Let's do a little comparison between the recent behavior of the Mystics and the odd behavior of Queen Brahne, shall we? First of all, about a year ago Kuja made his first appearance in Alexandria. At about the same time, new shipments of weapons begin to arrive, weapons more advanced than anything the kingdom had ever possessed: high-quality airships, heavy cannon, and the secretly manufactured black mages. A militarily effective mix of technology and magic.

"Shortly after Kuja appeared in Medina, the Mystics built shipyards. We're talking about a race that's built nothing larger or more powerful than a rowboat in all of their centuries of existence. About one year ago, the shipyards were completed and warships and freighters began pouring out of them. The sort of thing I'd expect from a first-time navy with none of our technology would be small, simple, wooden ships with primitive, coal-fired steam piston engines and powder-fired muzzle-loading cannon. I mean, after centuries of seafaring, the RGN has large, metal ships with oil-fired steam piston engines and smoothbore breech-loaders. The mainstays of the RGN, however, are outclassed by the warships that have come from the MN yards the past few months." Aeron paused for effect, then continued, "Crimson showed me around that captured MN ship some, and I

didn't like what I saw. They've got pretty powerful oil-fired steam engines, rifled breech-loading cannon, and steel plate armor.

"Just as Alexandria had never cared much for magic, so the Mystics have never cared much for technology. Yet they now have the most advanced navy on the planet, though not much more than a year ago they had nothing. Interesting, no? Now the Mystics have technology and magic, just as Alexandria did before it attacked. And, like Alexandria, the Mystics have a history of aggression.

"And that's not all. When Kuja saw that Zidane and his crew could be a threat, he arranged to have them eliminated. That has already happened to us." Another pause. "I told you all about the sabotage of Lucca's rocket that took her arm, but there were a few details I left out because I wasn't sure if my suspicions were on target. First among those is the fact that the explosion should've killed all of us. Lucca was saved, barely, by her armor and natural resistance to fire; Crono, Marle, the old King, the chancellor and I were all saved by the fact that we weren't there.

The morning of the launch, Crono, Marle and I were all gone flight testing the Procyon with the Epoch flying as backup. A couple of idiot bell-carrying birds got sucked up the Epoch's intake and blew the engine to shreds. She crash-landed, and the three of us spent all of our time up 'till the launch trying to see if we could fix it. We were supposed to return to the castle several hours before the launch, and when we not only failed to do that but forgot to radio in, the chancellor led a search party while the king waited for us at the castle. So, you see: for reasons beyond the control or anticipation of anyone, we all survived." He paused yet again, to be sure it all had time to sink in.

"Unfortunately, that's still not all. A few days later, a large Mystic fleet sailed into Truce harbor. We saw them far enough off that we were able to block their entrance with some RGN ships and the Akula. They left without a fight - that time. But if the king and chancellor had been dead, the kingdom would have been in chaos. No offense, Crono and Marle, but I don't think you were ready to take over then. And with Lucca and I dead, there would have been no one that could analyze and neutralize their technological edge. They would've had a field day.

"Shortly after that, the king became mysteriously ill and an angry mob tried to burn Lucca and I's lab while we slept. Then we have. . . other recent events. After screwing around with our heads, an army is sicced on us. If it hadn't been for Crimson, I would've died; after I got shot down, he got me away from the remains of the Procyon before the mystics could get me. So, that's our theory. Anyone care to disagree with it?" Unsurprisingly, no one did. Even after spending all day thinking about it, the implications still shocked even Aeron. He's trying to take out the major kingdoms of not one, but two worlds at once! What's he after? Is all the death and destruction a means to an end, or an end in itself? Lucca, breaking herself out of her trance, took the microphone next.

"Before we tell you guys the plan we put together, we need to say something to Zidane and everyone who came with him: we can't ask you to help us. As soon as we get Crimson & Freya back our priorities will be to defend our kingdom first, find and take out Kuja second. There are places on this world where you'd be safe until the carnage is over. This isn't your fight, and we don't want to pull you into the snake pit with us. If you want to jump in with us, that's more than fine. We sure won't stop you. So, just be thinking about that.

"Now for our plan. The first part involves what we believe to be the reason behind the apparent kidnapping of our comrades: to get us away from Guardia while they strike. The bait's much too precious to just leave, so the Akula will follow the MN heavy cruiser and get our friends back. Aeron will be her captain. After we get them back, the Akula will go and park on Melchior's doorstep. There, her crew will do four things: check the Black Omen for signs of Kuja's presence; repair the ship; wait for the Aquilae; and give the Mystic navy as bloody a nose as possible.

"Next, the Aquilae's task. Crono and Marle have to get back to the castle to tell everyone what's going on. Even if her engine and hull were in perfect shape, it'd be slow going upcurrent in this boat. So, we'll go ashore and drop them off. The closest place to do that is a merchant port by the name of Culpepper, a bunch of taverns and docks just south of Fiona's Forest. It'll take us a few

days to get there. While there, I'll take the opportunity to replace the engine parts damaged by contact with seawater and running at Flank for too long. That done, I'll take the Aquilae up to Melchior's villa and join the others in beating up Mystics. Just like the good old days, eh, Crono? Aeron and I would really like to take that time to use the vortex in Heckran cave to go to our lab and put the finishing touches on our latest attack plane, if she's still there. But that's secondary at this point." She shrugged. "That's it, I guess. Any takers?" Lucca turned up the mic and held it out so that anyone could speak and be heard.

Much to everyone's surprise, Amarant was the first to speak. "So if I go on the Akula, I get to take on an entire army?"

"And navy," Aeron reminded. Amarant smiled. A rather disturbing smile, actually.

"Sounds like a good fight. I'm in."

Aeron and Lucca were not, however, surprised when a similar smile spread across Kabra's face. "I like the way this man thinks! Goin' on the Akula sounds like fun. Lots of explosions. I've got some new hardware I've been dying to try out. . ."

"And I'm sure you'll get to," his siamese friend interrupted. "Next." She was surprised and impressed when he actually shut up.

"Obviously, Marle and I are going with the Aquilae, at least for the first bit," Crono piped.

"Yeah," answered Lucca, "Which reminds me. Because we're going into a human-controlled port, everyone on my ship has to be easily recognizable as human or demihuman, not mystic. That is, if you don't all just want to go on the Akula so that you can wait the fight out somewhere else."

Zidane quickly decided that he wanted to meet this Crono guy, and find out how the commoner had convinced a princess to marry him. "I'll go on the Aquilae. I can hide my tail."

Almost immediately after that, Marle chimed in, "Dagger wrote that she wants to go with Zidane."

Quina Quen spoke next. "Zidane, I want go with other cook."

"You mean Aeron? PLEASE, feel free."

"Yay! Aeron teach me many recipes. I become master of gourmand in no time!" Several of those physically present looked away as the asexual thing wagged its grotesquely huge tongue.

Then Vivi's voice issued forth from the speaker. "If it's ok, I wanna go with Aeron and learn some shadow magic."

Boisterous little Eiko made her decision next. "I'll stay on the Akula with Vivi. Just to keep an eye on him."

Those that knew Steiner were surprised by what he said. "With Queen Garnet's leave, I would like to accompany the Prince and Princess on their mission."

"She writes, 'you have it'," Marle assured. Sera made a face.

"You think you're going sneaking in the forest in that noisy armor? Hopeless. But I'll come along anyway; maybe you'll pick up a thing or two from a professional."

"Okay," Lucca began. "For the Akula, I've got: Aeron, Amarant, Eiko, Kabra, Vivi, and Quina, plus Crimson and Freya in a day or two. For the Aquilae's permanent crew: myself, Zidane, and Dagger. For the Aquilae's deadweight to be dumped in port: Crono, Marle, Steiner, and Sera. Did I leave anyone out?" After a moment's silence, Lucca continued, "Good. Ok then, I've got some stuff I want you all to bring when you come over here. First, I want another light bolt cannon to replace our missing deck gun. . ."

Chapter nine

Freya regained consciousness slowly. Was it all a dream? It must have been. . . it was so strange.

But as she noticed a strangely pleasant sensation in her mind that she recognized from her last remembered moment, she realized that it might have been real after all. When she opened her eyes, she saw that she was in a good-sized circular cavern roughly fifty feet in diameter with a short, sloped passageway to her left that she could see led to the surface. About a dozen feet away from her feet was a small fire, the smoke curling up the passageway outside. Looking to her right, she saw a few things leaning up against the same wall as she was, a foot or two away: her retracted triblade spear; the pack that they had found aboard the launch; and Freya's own coat, now torn and bloodstained. Nowhere in the cavern was Crimson to be found. Freya wondered how well his injuries had healed thus far; judging from his absence, it was obvious that he was at least still mobile.

With some trepidation, she fought a wave of nausea and decided to take stock of her own injuries. Looking down at last at herself, she saw that the short orange pants and shirt that were now her only clothes had bloodstains as well. Unsurprisingly, it was badly torn on her right side, which was where most of the pain was. Freya could not, however, tell how bad her injury was; a white cloth was tied around her middle. Its extended from just below her chest all the way to the belt that still held her own small pack to her waist. Perhaps it is better that I not see what lies beneath it. She noticed sharp pains in her back and left arm as well. Oddly enough, though, her left sleeve was neither torn nor bloodied. And though the intensity of it varied, it did not seem to vary with her movement. Like the pain in her back, it had an odd sensation to it. Almost as though the pain she was feeling was not her own.

It's true, then. It really did happen. If she concentrated, she found that she could sense Crimson's presence nearby. And it was coming closer. Not a moment later, the demon framed the doorway and saw that she was awake.

As he entered, he smiled and said, "Freya! It is good to see your eyes open and clear again!" He approached the fire, and Freya could see him clearly.

"Crimson, you're injured!" she announced with some concern. Virtually his entire left torso looked like a bloodied bruise, a scabbed-over scrape on his left arm, half of his right horn broken off, his entire left wing missing, and a slight limp. Favoring his left side, naturally.

"'Tis but a flesh wound," he assured her. "I heal very quickly; in a few more days, the only remaining sign of my collision with the launch will be the conspicuous absence of one of my wings."

"A few more days? How long was I . . ."

"I am uncertain, for I lost consciousness at times, as well – perhaps four or five days."

It's a wonder I'm not starving and parched. "And your horn?"

Frowning, Crimson reached up to feel of his horns. When he felt the remains of the right one, he "hmp"ed in mild surprise. "It seems to have broken. The impact that accomplished that must also have provided me with my headache." His complete nonchalance almost made Freya want to laugh in spite of her tender right side. "However, I am not particularly concerned about myself; I am much more concerned about your wound. I know little about healing such a gash as yours. All Chorán knights were given basic first aid; being a commander of knights I received more, but still I fear that my treatments may prove to be inadequate."

"How did you treat me?"

"The first task I set for myself was to remove the splinters. Besides being a tricky business," he made a grimace, "It was painful enough even for me that I deemed your unconsciousness fortunate, for your sake. After that, I held it as tightly as I could bear while I poured tonic on it to seal it. Again, pain ensured imperfection in my work. I then washed and cleansed it as best I could with what little rainwater I could catch in my remaining wing, and I also cleaned the blood from the fur surrounding your wound. So the, ah, bandage would not stick to it."

Skeptical that he could look so terrible, yet feel so fine, Freya retorted, "Crimson, you look like hell." He winced, then chuckled softly, looking appreciatively at Freya as though she had just done something quite amusing. "What?" she asked in confusion. "What is it?"

"Do you habitually say clever things on accident?" he inquired, still smiling. The dragoon needed only a second to realize what the demon knight was referring to.

She mirrored his earlier wince and replied, "I do seem to have a penchant for pitiful puns, don't I?"

"I find your puns quite witty, all the more so for their unintentional nature."

"Gods, Crimson, please don't make me laugh!" she pleaded.

"I would enjoy it but for the fact that I can honestly say that it pains me almost as much as it pains you. Thus, I shall not make such a reply next time."

"Besides puns, I also seem to be good at making you forget your injuries. They look even worse close-up. Hold on a moment." Closing her eyes, she cast a simple regeneration spell on him to speed healing, a common dragoon technique. Because of her severely weakened condition, the spell scarcely had an effect; but that mattered little to Crimson.

Crimson shook his head slowly at her, smiling. "That is part of what I admire about you, Freya: your strength and selflessness." She began to protest, but he cut her off. "Please, allow me to finish. After I had done all that I could for your wounds and mine, I had little left to do but think. Which is something I have been told I spend entirely too much time doing. . . but with the prospect of your death weighing heavily on me, I thought of you. And I realized that you have, in the past week, changed me and done more for me than any individual has in my entire life. Though I have little to offer, that which I have, I give to you." He switched his position from crouching to kneeling and drew the Phoenix. Laying it across his open palms, he bowed to her. "My life and my sword are yours."

Freya could only stare openmouthed at the profound display of complete humility, devotion, and self-sacrifice that was normally reserved for a knight's liege lord. Between two elite knights, such an act held very deep meaning indeed. Why is he doing this? Why does he feel I deserve such an incomparable gift? Is it because of the bond we now share? Her curiosity overcoming (momentarily) the emotional impact of the moment, she slowly, gingerly put a foot beneath herself and rose to a crude kneeling position. "Look at me," she quietly ordered. He hesitated, for to do so would be to breach the etiquette of his action. But only for a second, for he had felt the pain of her rising to one knee and wondered what her response was. They locked eyes and Freya struggled, trying to see herself as he saw her, that she might understand. Sensing her wish, Crimson opened his mind to her, and she saw her deeds through his eyes.

When she had offered him a position as her man-at-arms, he had seen it not as a job to be done, but a duty to be fulfilled. Duty was almost like air to him; he needed it to live. And when she had formed the bond, she hadn't seen herself as having a choice; she could never have lived with herself if she had sacrificed Crimson. But he had seen her as choosing probable death, and a poorer life if she succeeded in forming the bond. And at the moment of her action, the forming of the bond itself, he had seen her as she was: a fiery, compassionate woman doing what she believed to be right, regardless of the consequences to herself.

It was at that moment, looking through his eyes and into his mind, that Freya at last saw him as he was: a kind and earnest man doing what he believed to be just and right, giving to the object of his adoration all that he had to give: himself. Taken aback by her new view of him, Freya found herself feeling more than fond of the ex-knight; finally, they both understood what their benefactor had said and knew it to be true. After feeling such closeness of minds, such mental intimacy and vulnerability that frightened and thrilled them both, nothing less would ever do.

Freya decided in that instant the reply she wished to make. As slowly and carefully as she had risen, and without moving her eyes from his, she reached for her triblade. She extended it smoothly and

laid it across her palms in a perfect imitation of Crimson's position. His eyes widened in surprise at her as she softly but firmly told him, "I can do no less. My life and my spear are yours."

Chapter ten

[DD548]

Captain Sheridan was, once again, peeved at his situation. Things had started well; less than an hour after the storm, DD550 had reported that they'd sighted the Akula. But as they closed in, they realized that they had a problem: besides the fact that the Aquilae had given them the slip, the Akula was hounding a hapless heavy cruiser flying a Mystic flag. Aeron had doubtless intimidated her captain into escorting him to Medina. But whatever the cruiser's reasons for criminal compliance, Sheridan was sure that if his DS.34 closed with the Akula, the larger vessel would try to stop them.

He needed more ships. So he dispatched a frigate, FF1407, to acquire some help. The nearest GRN patrol stopover was a merchant port just south of Fiona's Forest, a little place called Culpepper. Who names these towns, anyway? It was a one-shot effort; if FF1407 failed to find reinforcements there, it was simply to return to the fleet.

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Freya sat near the cliff's edge outside the cave's entrance, watching the waves crash against the rocks. Many of the crags looked large enough and sharp enough to cleave a storm-tossed ship in two. Small wonder so many ships meet their end here. She looked to the outlying rock Crimson was sitting on, seemingly oblivious to the pounding surf all around him. They were both anxious to get moving after nearly a week of rapid healing spells and rehabilitating exercise. Tonight was to be their last night in the cave; they'd leave first thing in the morning.

Quite bored and with little else to do, Freya considered the events of the past week. Neither she nor Crimson had quite been able to come up with a word to describe their new relationship. Their exchanged vows made them more than companions or comrades, more than friends, but they couldn't term themselves lovers. Perhaps we'll have to make up our own word to describe it.

Crimson had told her what their benefactor had told him after she'd left the waking world. She'd said that her name was Sumetra; and no, she wasn't a god or a devil, an angel or a demon. She was the queen of a clan of beings that protected and tended to the forest, and she had instructed her clan to let them pass unhindered. Suhilin, Sumetra's trusted friend and a great warrior king, would personally watch over and protect them. Two of the things that she had said were still perplexing, however. First, that when they finally saw Suhilin and/or her, not to be shocked or frightened by their appearance. Second, that she would soon have a favor to ask of them, but that they didn't need to wait for her. They could continue their journey and, when the time came, she would find them through Suhilin.

Discussing such life-altering things had made them realize that, in spite of their intimate mental contact, they really knew very little of each other's experiences. They had spent much of their recovery time remedying that. Judging from Crimson's descriptions of Choras in 580 a.d. (including an atmosphere heavy with moisture), Freya believed that he would be quite comfortable in Burmechia, were he ever to visit. When she had described it (or the way it had been) to him, he'd agreed.

Then they'd exchanged stores about the soldiers they'd fought alongside, the sights they'd seen, the people they'd met. The two knights talked about anything and everything, except for the two things that Freya had still not mentioned: Fratley and her years wasted chasing him. Her omission raised some uncomfortable questions, she found.

Why not tell him? The worst part, perhaps, is my uncertainty in regard to his death. I didn't see him die, saw no body. Of course not, it was incinerated with the rest of Cleyra . . . And yet, he left even before we fought Beatrix . . . could he not have made it to the ground in that time? I heard that a female Kindjal was traveling with him, yet neither Prince Puck nor Sir Fratley made any mention of

her. Nor did I see her at any point that I can recall. Why not? It isn't at all unusual for two dragoons with similar missions to travel together for a time, helping one another. Why would she not be present, especially with Cleyra under attack? Perhaps they broke paths before then . . . and all of this speculation is likely moot anyway.

Crimson had finished examining the coast from his rocky outcropping, and leapt from rock to rock back to the cleft from which he'd come. Freya, in spite of having seen him in action before, was still surprised at the smoothness of his movements. In short order he was bounding up the cleft, looking satisfied with something. The odd grin on his face chased away the Dragon Knight's troubled thoughts for the moment, and one side of her mouth quirked up as she grunted amusedly at him.

"You certainly look pleased with yourself. What did you find?"

"The storm blew us much further south than we had dared to hope. Two days of quick marching along the coast should bring us to the port town of Culpepper. It is perfect for our purposes, Freya, absolutely perfect. Ships of all kinds carrying humans, demihumans, and mystics stop there, as do pilgrims over land coming from Robo's Shrine. Its only permanent residents are shopkeepers and bartenders. We should be able to go unnoticed!"

"Wonderful! You still wish to wait until tomorrow to leave?"

"Yes. I believe that we may need the extra rest."

"Why do you say that?"

Crimson frowned. "Branches sway without wind in the forest of my mind. I feel as though. . . as though something odd is about to happen."

"I, too, feel uneasy. Let's go back into the cave. The sun has nearly set, and the sooner we sleep, the sooner we can wake up and leave."

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From his hiding place, Suhilin nearly jumped in surprise. They can sense the Black Wind! Suddenly curious, he crept a bit closer to the cave.

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Freya opened her eyes at a noise, and saw a moonlit figure standing in the cave's entrance, a figure much too small to be Crimson. Instincts taking over, she picked her spear and herself up off the floor and dashed for the entrance. She was about to leap at a wall to ricochet off it at the intruder when she heard an achingly familiar voice.

"Freya." The combination of voice and a closer view of the figure made her throw her spear aside. She knew this man.

"Sir Fratley! You're alive!" This cannot be a dream; I feel the sea breeze, and the rocks chill my feet.

"Yes; I'm alive, well, and happy." His voice took on a slightly sorrowful tone as he continued, "But I'm afraid that you may not be happy once you've heard what I have to tell you." Freya's heart sank a little, but she refused to let it drop.

"What is it? Do you still not remember me?"

"Truthfully, no. . . but that's not what I meant. Before I tell you, however, I need you to promise me something."

"Anything."

"Promise me that you'll listen to all I have to say."

Is that all? "I promise to listen."

"I'll hold you to that. Oh, heavens, where to start. . . I woke up about two years and nine months ago

on an icy hillside with fresh wounds and no memory of what caused them, or anything else for that matter. That much you know already. What you may not know is that a lady Kindjal had been chasing a dragon nearby, and saved my life. She couldn't believe my loss of memory at first, and even after she did was able to tell me – and that only because of the engravings on my weapon - that I had been a Dragon Knight. Because I had no idea what my quest had been, I decided to help her."

Freya nodded. "I had heard that a female Kindjal accompanied you."

"Really? Hmm. . . at any rate, we have been traveling together ever since. And shall forever more."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Along the way, we fell in love."

"What did you say?"

"We're married."

"It cannot be. . ."

"You must realize that I had no idea that I might have left a lover behind, and neither did Lira. We had no reason to resist what we were feeling, and after Puck told me about how I had left you, and you had followed . . . I felt terrible."

It must be a dream. In an attempt to prove it, she made a small scratch on the back of her hand - and watched in amazement as it bled. But it cannot be real. He cannot be. He's on Gaia, not here!

"You never saw me die. You may recall that I left Cleyra quite quickly after I met you. I wasn't ready to see you; I had no idea how to apologize for an action I couldn't recall. I fled to the desert to think, and my wife guarded the trunk to ensure that no more invaders crept up it. That, Freya, is why we lived. As a matter of fact, we thought you had died."

This is too much. She tried to turn away, but couldn't; tried to cover her ears, but she still heard his voice.

"We even arranged a funeral for you."

Have I gone mad? Why can I not escape this surreal nightmare?

"That is enough. You've had your say." Freya looked towards the new voice and saw a human man walking from the depths of the cave. His voice sounded eerily like Crimson's in pitch and inflection, but this voice was a pleasant baritone, not the gravelly basso she knew. His hair was white – in spite of his obvious youth – and hung limply to his cheeks, and his face looked as though it should have held a smile rather than its current scowl. His helm was adorned by two horns, and in his ears were crude-looking skull and crossbones earrings. He wore half-plate armor, and upon the shirt he wore over his breastplate was emblazoned a silver and blue crest featuring a dragon rearing up on its hind legs. All of that was very interesting, but what cinched it for the dragoon was the sword that the man held: it was a scimitar, a rare weapon amongst the axe-and-pike wielding Chorans.

"Crimson?"

He looked a bit wistful as he replied, "Nay, what you see is not that which is, but was, long ago, known as Sir Gilneas Tyr. I am still thus in my dreams, sometimes." He then turned to Fratley and said, "You have upset her quite enough, have you not? Now, leave her be!"

Fratley lowered his head. "I am sorry. When I saw Cleyra burn, I feared that my cowardice had prevented me from ever seeking your forgiveness. Now, I wish only for you to understand my actions, and know that I meant no harm. I will leave you now. Goodbye, Freya, and may you find happiness." With that, he vanished. Sir Gilneas remained.

"I apologize for intruding on so personal a matter, but I felt your distress, and could not in good conscience leave you alone."

"You did not intrude," Freya assured. This seemed to settle the familiar, yet strange, knight's nervousness.

"Nonetheless, I will not do such a thing again without your permission. If you ever need my assistance, you need only call my name. After all, I am a man of my word." He favored her with a gentle smile, and saluted her with his sword as he backed into the cave's darkness again. "Sweet dreams, my Lady Freya."

* * * * *

In the small hours of the morning, Fratley suddenly sat bolt upright in bed, awakening his wife.

"What is it?"

"Lira, I've just had the strangest dream . . . have we ever known a human knight named Gilneas?"

* * * * *

Freya opened her eyes, heart still racing from the tension of the dream. Wasn't it a dream? she examined the hand she'd scratched, and watched bleed. There was no sign of injury. And her triblade was exactly how and where she'd left it. It must have been, she thought with relief. But it was unlike any other dream I've had. . . so real. . . Glancing back into the cavern, she saw no metal-clad knight, but Crimson, still sound asleep. The frazzled dragoon looked towards the entrance, curious to find out if there was anything where she had seen Fratley standing. With a gasp, she saw that there was a black sphere. Just as her spear was beside her, there was a Gate where she had seen Fratley. Lucca had mentioned during her ramblings that, on occasion, Gates would appear in Fiona's Forest linking someone present to a critical point in space and/or time that had been a source of emotional turmoil for them. Fratley. Freya wanted to not believe what she had just been told, but it sounded far too plausible . . . No! I must have faith in him. Yet, she had to find out for herself. Slowly, as though in a trance, Freya walked to the vortex and stepped in.

* * * * *

When Suhilin saw the Gate open, he cursed his misfortune. Of course, such a Gate would have to open tonight, near this particular lair. He cursed even more vehemently as Freya walked towards it. Alone. He sent out a mental call for help, and gathered his strength. Suhilin knew that such Gates closed after the person for whom they appeared entered them, and reappeared only to return that person to their time and place. But if the Gate closed with Freya on one side and Crimson on the other, their minds would destroy themselves trying to reestablish the lost contact. Though Suhilin was powerful, mind and magic were not his specialty, and holding the Gate would be difficult.

Two terribly young Greens, only about a hundred ninety years old, landed next to him. A slight swishing of leaves was all that betrayed their arrival; even Suhilin's keen eye could not pick them out of the moonlit forest. Focusing his energies on the Gate, the Bronze leader pushed, and held it open. Though the two dragons beside him weren't even half his age, their Green minds gave them mental power rivaling Suhilin's, and he felt the strain on his brain ease somewhat as his two helpers put their own focus on the Gate.

Chapter eleven

Four hundred years ago, a particularly brutal war between martial Alexandria and the industrial Regency of Lindblum carried over to the latter's ally, Burmecia. Burmecia had long provided troops and supplies to aid the Regency in times of need, but never before had the kingdom itself come under direct attack. Though it was the first time, it would by no means be the last, and the people of Burmecia knew it. But by the time the war ended, they were bitterly divided about how to deal with it.

There were pacifists who wanted Burmecia to isolate itself and forget the troubles of the outside world, concentrating on developing the peaceful arts, such as dance and music, a heritage common to all Burmecians. There were the militarists, who were tired of reacting to the attacks of others and

felt that the best defense was a good offense. They wanted Burmecia to remind Alexandria often that the nation in the rainy valley was not to be trifled with. And then there were the moderates, who wanted to continue providing Lindblum with assistance while increasing defense at home.

The king was, in the best interests of the majority of his kingdom, forced to side with the moderates. Declining a royal offer of assistance, the pacifists went into a nearby desert and founded the settlement of Cleyra high in the branches of an enormous tree. They protected and isolated it with a tremendous sandstorm formed and maintained by their nature magic and ritual dances. The militarists accepted the royal offer of assistance, but only if certain conditions were met: first, the king would have to allow the militarists to intervene on behalf of Lindblum at their own discretion; second, that they would retain access to the central kingdom of Burmecia, and be allowed to trade openly with whomever they wished; third, that in the unlikely event of another attack on Burmecia, the king would seek the militarists' assistance; and fourth, that any dragoons wishing to leave the King's Own regiment be allowed to do so.

After a few short weeks of negotiation all conditions were met, with one being added by the King: that if both Lindblum and Burmecia were in danger, that Burmecia would receive the militarists' aid first. In return, the militarists agreed to leave the Kingdom out of their daily affairs, lest they attract any of the enemies they were bound to make to the valley Kingdom.

The militarists moved into the Aerbs Mountains that divided the three nations. The largest militarist settlement was founded at the intersection of the Burmecian, Lindblum, and Alexandrian branches of the Aerbs range. That location enabled them to attack Alexandria, assist Lindblum, or defend Burmecia with near-equal convenience. Unfortunately, there was one feature other than high altitude that made the location anything but convenient: dragons. Though not combative by nature the wild dragons were very territorial, and more than willing to fight for what they saw as their piece of the mountains.

So despite the fact that every Aerbs highlander was trained to use a weapon, the highlanders developed their own breed of dragoon: the Kindjals, named for an ancient fighting knife. In some ways, the two types of dragoon were quite similar: both relied on spear-based jump attacks; both wore headgear with a pair of triangular holes in the front, like a pair of angry eyebrows; both traveled the world on quests of various kinds, often information gathering; both were known and respected the world over for their fighting prowess; and both were able to enter almost any town, pub, or tavern they wished.

But that's where the similarities ended. Though their fighting styles were similar, their equipment and methods differed. The way they talked was different. During their years in the highlands, the people of the Aerbs had developed a strange accent that might've been called Scottish, had such a country existed on Gaia. And whereas the Dragon Knights wore pants, tunic and robe the Kindjals were known for their drab jumpsuits and cloaks. Both carried backup weapons on their belts, but while Dragon Knights used knives a Kindjal typically carried a short sword. And though both wore headgear with holes of the same shape, Dragon Knights wore hats and Kindjals wore headbands. Though both relied on multi-bladed spears, the types they used were different. The Dragon Knights used a triblade spear, which had two secondary blades, one on either side of the spear point jutting outward at a forty-five degree angle. The Kindjals, however, used a multi-purpose spear they called the Mauler. It was tipped by a large, flat, diamond-shaped blade that was sharp on all sides. But the most recognizable feature of the Mauler was its double-edged sickle, a foot-long blade attached half a foot down from the primary one. The addition of the sickle to the four-edge blade made the Mauler one of the most versatile polearms in existence.

Methods differed nearly as much as equipment. Kindjals were trained in the use of explosives, small airships, and were well-versed in many types of sabotage. They excelled at performing surgical strikes alone or in small groups. Dragoons were able to go where they pleased because they were generally well-liked and respected. Kindjals were able because they were feared, as much for their legendary tempers as for their abilities.

It was in the Aerbs Highlands that Freya found herself dumped. One of the low-slung, fire-resistant stone houses typical of the highlands stood only about a dozen feet away, and she could see more a few dozen yards beyond it. Might Fratley be in one of those houses? She approached the door of the nearest one with trepidation and anticipation, heartbeat pounding in her ears. She was about to knock when the words of a woman with a typical Aerbs accent issued from inside the house, freezing her in her tracks.

"Fratley, Fratley. Calm down, me love! I'm sure it was just a dream. An' even if it wasn't, you got to tell her, didn't you?" Then came a voice that threatened to shatter her frozen state.

"I did indeed, Lira. And yet, it seemed so real . . ."

"But it couldn't have been real! Neither of us has ever heard of a human knight named Gilneas, and the crest you described is unfamiliar." There was some sadness in her voice as she continued, "An' Freya died in the fires of Cleyra, in full uniform. Why would you see her in plain clothes, with a gash in her side instead o' burns as the fatal wound? It makes no more sense than any other ordinary dream."

"Intellectually, I know you're right. But the rest of me feels that there was an undeniable sense of reality to it." He sighed heavily. "I don't regret a single moment of the two and a half years you and I have spent together, understand. And I know it's not our fault that Freya was hurt so . . . yet I still feel responsible somehow."

"Might yer untimely guilt have somethin' to do wi' the fact that her funeral's this mornin'?" Freya nearly gagged at that. My funeral? "Look, yer feelin' responsible because you don't like seein' anyone hurt. Especially those that don't deserve it. Truth be told, I feel guilty, too. Poor lass . . . Gone through such hardship an' waitin', only to be disappointed. I can't imagine what it must've been like for her, an' she only knew half the story. A bitter end for a noble Lady." There was real sadness in her voice, but Freya barely noted it. To her, things had now officially spiraled beyond the surreal and into the nightmarish.

"Her bitter end and forgotten love also worry me for another reason: what if her restless spirit becomes vengeful? I wouldn't normally fret, but there was a sense of foreboding in that dream that I can't ignore."

"From what I've heard of 'er, she wasn't the vengeful sort. If anythin', I think she'd want us to move on with our lives, an' not let 'er death ruin 'em." Lira's voice came closer to the door. "An' if her angry spirit shows up, I'll make sure she doesn't get you. Come along now, or we'll be late for the funeral. You're presidin', remember?" Freya could hear footsteps now, and her shell-shocked mind made a jump: when they opened the door and saw her, they'd likely attack.

What if this isn't a dream? I'm unarmed. They might kill me . . . Her stomach leapt into her throat as she realized that yes, what seemed to be happening could, in fact, be real. All that she'd heard began to make a sickeningly great deal of sense. As the doorknob turned, she knew she'd never make it to the Gate in time. Freya could think of only one thing to do: she concentrated on the link between herself and Crimson, and tried to subvocalize through it. <Crimson, Gilneas, whatever your real name is, I need your help!> Much to her relief, she heard in her head his reply.

<I am coming!>

<Just don't kill them. Please?> This confused him a little, but he agreed anyway.

<They will live, but not over you.>

Then the heavy wood door swung open, and the dragoon got her first look at her former boyfriend's new lover, Lira. Her mahogany fur contrasted nicely with her flaxen hair and blue eyes. Her own pants and tunic closely matched Freya's old uniform, but was made of dark green fabric. She wore a grey cloak over it to shield her from the high-altitude winds. A short sword was sheathed at her waist, and a knife was belted to her thigh. Also conspicuous were her Kindjal's headband and the

retracted Mauler slung over her back. As soon as she saw Freya she drew back as if bitten, her expression tinged with a healthy bit of terror at the sheer otherworldliness of the situation in which she now found herself. Fratley stood behind her, holding his half-moon bardiche like a lifeline, also utterly unable to accept what he was seeing.

When Freya saw the two of them and the look of horror on their faces, her face scrunched up uncontrollably as she fought back tears. Here at last was the man whose memory had troubled her so, who'd she until recently given up for dead, alive and breathing. To hear his voice was one thing; to actually see him was quite another. Her arms half-raised, as though to touch Fratley one last time.

Panicked by the very sight of this slain dragoon on her doorstep, Lira took the slow movement of Freya's arms to be an attack, a casting of some devious kind, and the kindjal responded as quickly as she could. Lira's kick knocked Freya back, but she recovered in time to block the next one. Her arms were no match for the butt of Lira's retracted Mauler, though, and she winced as her left forearm took a blow. It had probably not broken, but it certainly hurt like it. She leapt over a low kick, and jerked back to avoid a backhanded slap. This was the fighting style of the Kindjal: relentless attack with whatever was available, leaving the opponent no time to regroup. It was fortunate for Freya that Lira thought extending her Mauler would give the dragoon too much time. Her weakened and dispirited body her only weapon, the dragoon knew she could not win. But she didn't have to win; she only had to survive long enough . . . she felt a surge of hope as she felt Crimson approaching the Gate, a surge of hope that was crushed when the distraction allowed Lira to land the butt of her spear against the side of Freya's head.

Chapter twelve

As the dragoon fell back on the ground, barely conscious, the Kindjal had the presence of mind to notice two very important things: blood streaming from the fresh impact on the left side of her head, and the fact that the gash on her right side was not an open wound. Ghosts don't bleed, and their mortal wounds don't heal. . . did I just. . . ?

Lira breathed a sigh of relief as she saw Freya's chest rise and fall, and called out to her still-motionless husband, "She's alive, by the gods! Fratley, she's alive!" Oh, damn. What have I done? "She's alive. . ." No reply came. She looked towards where Fratley had been standing and saw him dashing from tree to tree, as though hiding from something, or trying to outflank it. Then she heard an earsplitting, unholy roar, and saw why he was running.

"Leave her be!" the demon roared as he bounded away from his dark portal. In his right hand was a great flaming sword, and in his left was a fireball. The latter he hurled at Lira, who leapt well out of the way. Too late she realized her mistake, and leapt back to protect the fallen dragoon. The demon was already fleeing to the refuge of his portal, the Lady Freya tucked under his left arm. It was only about a dozen or so feet away, so she calculated and extended the Mauler to its full length as she jumped into the portal after the demon. Fratley had been on the wrong side of the portal to help his wife and ex-girlfriend, but he was just close enough to jump into it before it closed.

Gilneas entered the portal in the same direction he had left it, and so was headed right back into the cave as soon as he appeared back on Elosia. Of course, so was Lira. The point of her spear missed its intended target as she flew from the Gate, but the front of the double-edged sickle cut the demon's left shoulder. The impact of Lira's body in the same spot made him drop Freya, though he tried to set her down gently. The drop had been only partly accidental, the Kindjal realized as his left hand reached over his shoulder, grabbed her, and flung her against the wall in front of him. She hit the wall feet-first and rebounded right back at him. Except that he wasn't there; he had tucked and rolled as soon as he'd thrown her, and was well out of the way. Undaunted, Lira whirled as soon as she landed. Very clever, Demon. You put up a good fight, but it won't be enough.

* * * * *

Fratley had the extreme misfortune to enter the Gate in precisely the opposite direction of everyone

else, and thus found himself flying over the edge of a cliff instead of into a cave. By the dim light of the not-yet-risen sun and desperate skill, he was able to land with nothing worse than a sprained ankle. That ankle, however, was enough to prevent him from making a quick jump back up top to join the fight he could hear going on. He'd have to scale the twenty-five foot cliff.

* * * * *

Freya awakened to a pounding headache and a sharp pain in her left arm. She cast a quick regen spell on herself – such a common Dragoon ability hardly required concentration anymore – and opened her eyes. She could see that she was back on Elosia in the cave, and could hear that there was still fighting. The only sources of light were the dimly moonlit entrance and Crimson's flaming sword, which had a strange beauty about it as it weaved its way through the air in a deadly dance with Lira and her Mauler. The dragoon sat up, fighting the pounding in her head that threatened for a moment to send her back to the ground. Fratley was nowhere in sight. Why even look for him? He doesn't matter right now; all that matters is that Crimson saved me from Lira, and I'm presented with the opportunity to return the favor. Interestingly enough, her spear was right next to her. He must have set me next to it, knowing that if I regained consciousness, I would want to assist him. Ignoring the protests of her battered left arm, the bruised and bloodied – but not defeated – Dragoon picked it up and stood, ready to fight . . .

* * * * *

Lira had worked herself into a frenzy; her universe consisted solely of herself and her enemy. Attack, leap away. Repeat with variations. This demon was quite good; he had received nothing worse than that first cut on his shoulder since they'd begun. Though the Kindjal did find the Demon's defensive stance more than a little unusual, given demons' usual aggressiveness, she wasn't about to complain. His defenses were difficult enough to pierce without having to dodge berserker blows. Suddenly, something distracted her opponent, and Lira seized the opportunity. She brought the diamond-shaped blade of her Mauler down on her Hellborne opponent like an executioner's axe, and knew that he would not be able to dodge this time. Even if he could dodge her blade, the sickle would get him.

Instead of metal rending flesh, she heard metal on metal as the shaft of her spear was caught and thrown aside by a Dragoon's triblade. Holding the triblade was none other than the Lady Freya. Her cheeks glistened as though she'd recently cried, her left eye was swollen half-shut, and the fur and hair on the left side of her head was matted with blood; but there was no denying her grimly determined expression or the lethal potential of the triblade she now held just handspans away from Lira's chest. When she spoke, her words, though spoken through gritted teeth, were as sharp and clear as the shimmering mythril blades that tipped her spear.

"Stand down, or I swear on Ifrit's fires we'll run you through."

We? Lira wondered, and risked a glance at the demon. His posture was no longer defensive; he was ready to pounce, and his wicked-looking flaming sword was poised to strike at his Lady's command. "What's happened to you, Freya? Have ye sold yer soul to th' devil?" The Dragoon's reply was as cold and hard-edged as before.

"Leave. Now." The Kindjal obeyed, picking up her Mauler as she left.

After she had gone, Freya allowed herself to slump against the cave wall, then against Gilneas' shoulder when he offered it. Neither of them said a word, and yet their silence seemed to them more profound than any speech either could recall.

Chapter thirteen

It didn't take Lira long to find her husband. He had struggled to within about five feet of the edge of the cliff nearest the cave. His keen hearing had caught every word that was exchanged, though he could make no more sense of it than his wife could. She helped him the rest of the way up, looking over her shoulder occasionally to see if Freya or her . . . friend. . . had changed their minds about

letting the kindjal go. They did not. Nonetheless, as soon as Fratley was over the edge, they both walked a short distance into the woods. Neither could find words, so the silence was filled only with the soft sounds of Lira tending to Fratley's injured ankle by the predawn light. The dragoon startled the kindjal from the crude wrap she was applying with a piercing question.

"Neither of them so much as hinted at where we are, did they?"

"Damn! No, they didn't. We can't be too far from civilization of some sort, though. They didn't have more'n a day's worth of supplies in that cave."

"I think they came here by accident. Notice anything strange about some of the driftwood at the foot of this cliff, my dear?"

"I'm a mountain girl, Fratley."

"You say that as if I'm a sailor . . . I found what appears to be the remains of a small boat, no more than thirty feet long and more likely twenty. About the dimensions of a small lifeboat."

"An' if that's the case, we could be in th' middle o' nowhere."

"Or the remains of their ship might be nearby; who knows? Perhaps we could salvage some supplies from it."

"Maybe. I'll climb a tree to see what I can see." Mauler now retracted and slung over her back, Lira began shimmying up a nearby tree, her clawed feet making it a relatively simple feat. As she climbed, she called down to him, "This place reminds me of the Evil Forest, yet it's not. There's an energy in these trees, but it's not foul-natured."

Fratley placed his hands on Lira's tree, closed his eyes, and concentrated. He shook his head and stepped away. "I feel nothing!" he yelled to his wife, who had reached the top of the tree. She scanned the horizon in all directions, her golden blonde hair fluttering in the stiff morning breeze.

"Aha!" she declared as she pushed away from the trunk. A mid-air somersault landed her on a lower branch, and she didn't even pause as she leapt for another. The kindjal landed with a muffled thud in front of Fratley and smiled.

"Was that really necessary, my dear?"

"Bah. I always somersault, and you know it. I saw a road, running north-south, a few miles west of here."

The dragoon gave Lira a wry smile. A few miles, eh? More likely a day or two's march, more with my sprained ankle.

"Ach, it's just a wee stroll. If we hurry, we'll reach it this afternoon. Even wi' that lame ankle o' yours."

"I can handle the pace."

"You'll be singin' a different tune tonight. Let's go. The sooner we reach the road, the sooner we can find our way back to Burmecia."

"Lead on." They'd not gone more than three steps when Lira whirled and pulled him to the ground. "You're certainly feisty this morning," he deadpanned.

"Shhh!" she whispered. "Stay down, but look!" So he looked back at the clearing they'd so recently left, and saw that Freya and the demon were standing near the woods.

"Freya, are you certain that you are ready for this?"

She turned to face him and replied, "Yes. My gash finished healing yesterday; now it's just a scar." She indicated her right side with a finger, but the demon apparently didn't need to check.

"I know; 'twas thus when we removed the bandage yesterday evening. Yet, it is not the wound that

worries me. Nor is it even your poor, freshly swollen head. Are you truly ready for what we are about to do?"

"I do. I'm ready."

"Are you certain you're ready? Until we have left this forest, they will need to stay quite near us to protect them from this forest's guardians. They will also need to remain with us even after we have left the forest; this world's denizens will hunt them, as they are hunting us. Even if they were not pursued, neither Sir Fratley nor Lira possess knowledge of this world, or of how to leave it. Their path back to Gaia lies with us." Oh, dear, Fratley thought to himself. They've both gone mad.

"What it comes to is this: are you psychologically prepared to spend at least the next week in relatively close proximity to the man for whom you have searched these past five years? Even before you summoned my aid last night, I could feel your anguish."

"So, it's as I thought: you are Sir Gilneas!"

He nodded. "That was my name when I was human. The uniform that you saw me wearing was the same one that I wore in the service of the Kingdom of Choras. I still wear it sometimes in my dreams."

Fratley was thoroughly astonished, but now that he knew to look, he could see the similarities: the odd type of sword, for instance; and his voice, though different in pitch, was the same in tone. So was his manner of speech. Lira, apparently, was thinking along the same lines.

She leaned towards Fratley and whispered, "I thought he was very odd for a demon. This makes more sense."

"Your voice is different, too," Freya continued. "Why do you think I see myself as I was, and not in my uniform?"

"I cannot be certain. That was no ordinary dream; it felt. . . contrived somehow. And yet, I suppose that this forest is not arbitrarily termed 'Enchanted.'"

"Why didn't you tell me your real name before?" Freya asked.

"I fear that my name has become associated with deeds that were not mine. I accustomed myself to not using it."

"May I call you by it?"

The demon/knight considered for a moment. "I would like that. And, you have my compliments. You changed the subject so adroitly that I failed to notice. I fear that my earlier question must still be addressed before we can venture any further."

"What will it take to satisfy you?"

"If you would explain to me why you are so certain that all will be well between them and us, I would be satisfied."

"I'm not certain, Gilneas. In fact, I've no doubt we'll have our share of disagreements. What I am certain of is that they won't likely survive long without us, and they didn't follow us seeking death. They won't like accompanying us any more than we will like their company, but unless we want their blood on our hands and minds we have no choice."

"Were you not ready to kill Lira a short while ago?"

"I was, and I would have without the slightest hesitation; but that was when she was threatening you. And as for Fratley's presence – I must learn to deal with it. I may never get used to it, but I can deal with it."

"What of the mistake that Lira made, trying to kill you, and that she and Fratley both made, trying to kill me? and of the unspoken might-have-beens?"

“A mistake, however tragic, is just that: a mistake, something to be regretted by all and avenged by none. And it could not have worked out between myself and anyone else. My brain knew it when I chose to forge the link between our minds a few mornings ago, and my heart knew it the afternoon I woke up. Seeing Fratley again, when I thought him dead, made me temporarily forgetful. I’m willing to try to put it all behind me if you and they are willing to do the same.”

“Very well, you’ve convinced me of your mental constitution, but your physical constitution is another matter entirely. . . we must rest a bit, I think, before continuing. My shoulder and your head require healing . . . and I am sorry.”

Freya squinted in confusion. “What for?”

Her titular man-at-arms looked away, seemingly embarrassed. “’Tis rather personal and slightly awkward. I should not have even mentioned it.”

“You’ve mentioned nothing other than that you’re sorry for something. I’d like to know what it is.” He remained silent. “If you insist on being recalcitrant, I could try to read your mind.”

“I am sorry for depriving you of the possible personal companionship of one of your kind,” he blurted. Had his skin not already been red, it would have become so.

“You’re right. That is rather personal and slightly awkward. However, seeing as we are going to be more or less in each other’s company for however long we live, I think that a frank discussion of ‘things’ is in order.”

Gilneas frowned slightly. “How frank?”

“Very. Other than Sir Fratley and Lira, who aren’t returning here on their own, we are the only two for a hundred miles inland.” The crimson knight shifted his feet and he grimaced. “Look, this is as uncomfortable for me as it is for you!” Freya informed him. “But this is probably the only time we’ll get all to ourselves for the next several weeks. Considering the proximity in which we’ll be traveling, it’d be best not to wait.” She waited until he looked at her and nodded his agreement before continuing. “You go first.”

“I have nothing to regret; if not for you, I’d have died. Nor have I any complaints about your company, in body or mind, thus far; and though ‘tis perhaps too soon to make such a judgement, I think I never shall.” He paused and shook his head. “I could go on for some time about why that is so, and precisely what I think of you and what you’ve done for me. But you will know how I feel when I say what I shall say, and that will be sufficient. It is said that ‘tis in the times of most terrible trial that one’s truest character is revealed. Given that, and the trials we have met in the past several days, I can now honestly say this: I have in you a better companion and friend than I could ever have asked for.”

“But I have done nothing extraordinary,” she uttered in confusion.

Crimson gave her a half-grin and replied, “That you honestly believe that is extraordinary in itself, and only makes you more so.” After a gentle moment’s silence, he raised an eyebrow and quipped, “Is that frank enough?”

Freya flicked an ear and raised an eyebrow of her own in reply. “Yes. Precisely what I was looking for.” She sighed and put her hands on her knees. “Now, it is my turn. First of all, I have no regrets about my decision to risk forming the bond between us. You see, I knew then that no matter which path I chose, even if Fratley had retained all of his memories and Lira were not present, I could never have been happy with him. Every time I looked at him, I’d have seen the life I sacrificed to be with him: yours. The fact that you’d have understood my refusal of the bond would only have worsened the guilt I’d have felt. I would not have been able to live with myself.” She thought for a moment before continuing, “Though I’ve no complaints about your company, I know you will not simply take my word for it.”

“I trust you completely!”

“I know that; but do you believe me when I say that I do not feel in any way ‘cursed’ by you?”

“I believe you, but I cannot understand how that could be.”

Freya rolled her eyes. “And you complain at my humility. . . You give yourself too little credit. Perhaps I can help you understand.” She leaned towards him and ticked off one of her fingers. “First of all: when our launch crashed on the rocks, you ignored your torn wing and crushed side to aid a certain struggling dragoon in reaching the shore. And, despite the fact you were injured nearly as severely as I, didn’t rest until we both lay dying, away from the waves.” She ticked off another finger. “Second: when I lost consciousness after our bonding, you still did not rest. You found a cave, made a fire, and despite the fact that you shared my every pain, dug the splinters from my wound and treated it as best you could. The entire time, you never so much as bandaged even one of your own wounds.” Another finger went down. “Third: after you got me away from Lira, you defended us both while not killing her or Fratley. Just as you promised.” Her last finger went down, and she rested the uninjured side of her face on the fist. “The fact is that you, Sir Gilneas, have made a more favorable impression on me than any save Fratley have been able to make on me in the years I’ve know them. I, too, believe that times of strife reveal one’s true self; and if that is so, then I’m fortunate to be ‘cursed’ by you.”

Gilneas’ right – and only – wing suddenly flapped twice, and his face took on a very odd-looking expression of pleasant surprise. “Truly?”

“Truly,” she affirmed, grinning slightly. Much to her annoyance, Gilneas’ own grin vanished and was replaced by a frown.

“Then my own words were grossly inadequate.”

The Dragon Knight rolled her eyes. “You think everything you do is grossly inadequate! Please, stop self-deprecating. It suits you no better than your form. Your words conveyed their message quite well, I assure you.” She gently tapped the uninjured side of her head. “Don’t forget that I hear you with more than just my ears.”

“A fact of which I am glad, for what I have to say next is quite personal and extremely awkward. It is the true reason behind my beginning this conversation, and I will feel better for having dealt with it. But . . .”

“Yes?”

“It will sound forward . . .”

“Will you mean it that way?”

“No.”

“Then don’t worry.”

“Very well. It is purely hypothetical; it may not even end up being a consideration in our lives. Even if it does, it is unlikely to be an issue for months, years, perhaps even decades . . .” Abruptly, he smacked his knee and looked away from her. “Damn! This is more extraordinarily awkward than I had thought it would be, I will sound like an adolescent . . .”

“Stop worrying about how I’ll react! Just tell me simply, no matter how you think it sounds.”

Gilneas took a deep breath to prepare himself, his wing fluttering nervously. “If, someday, we were to decide to, ah . . . seek each other’s love, I do not wish for it to be merely because we have no one else from whom to seek it.” His tail snapped back and forth, and his wing flapped thrice. “That sounds ridiculous.” He was about to apologize for wasting her time with such foolish flights of fancy, but she had asked him not to self-deprecate. So he shut his mouth and looked anxiously at her for a reaction.

At first, Freya’s only reaction was the whipping motion of her tail, betraying her own nervousness.

Finally, though, she cocked her head to one side and told him, “No, it isn’t ridiculous. It’s a valid concern, and one that I happen to share. You’ve told me what you don’t want.” She straightened her head and raised an eyebrow at him. “So, what is it that you do want?”

Crimson had expected indifference at best, righteous anger and indignation at worst. Instead, he got interest; she actually seemed genuinely anxious to hear his reply. “I want for it to be our choice, our decision. It is difficult to put into words, I fear. Perhaps I could better say it another way . . .”

“No need,” Freya interjected. “I know precisely what you’re trying to say, because I came to the same conclusion myself. I doubt that I could have said it better.”

The demon-knight’s fanged jaw almost dropped. “You have considered the possibility before now?”

She nodded, grinning nervously. “Is there anything else you wish to say?”

“No, I think that will do it for now. Are you ready, then, to go searching?”

“Yes. Are you?”

He nodded. “I still worry about the knot on the side of your head, however. It looks like hell.”

Freya’s nervousness evaporated into a wild grin. “You look like Hell!” That provoked a belly-laugh from Crimson as they rose from the rocks upon which they’d been sitting, ready to begin their journey.

* * * * *

While Freya and Gilneas made their nervous mirth known to the world, Fratley and Lira sank back behind their bush and shook their heads in disbelief at what they’d just seen and heard. They had thought their extra-Gaial location and Gilneas’ true identity had been big surprises; and they most certainly had been. But they were as nothing compared to the apparent mental link the two knights shared, and the content of the final phase of the conversation. As the disbelief began to wear off, Fratley looked down at his hands in distaste.

“I feel so . . . unclean,” he murmured. “We should never have witnessed that exchange.”

Lira nodded her agreement. “Aye, we shouldn’a been listenin’.”

“Then why were you?” There, perched on a nearby branch like a large, angry, furry bird was Freya. Her lips peeled back intermittently to reveal her sharp teeth as she struggled with her temper.

Lira turned back to her dragoon. “Uh-oh, Fratley. I think we just fell from their good graces.”

Instinctively, her hand reached behind her back for her Mauler. Fratley’s eyes widened as she did so, and she wondered why - all the way up to the point where her wrist was grabbed. She whirled, and found herself face-to-face with the demon knight. How’d he sneak up on me?

“There is no need for violence. However, it would probably be in your best interests to do as the Lady says and explain yourselves.” He released her, stepped back, and crossed his arms. His scowl was quite impressive, but it didn’t intimidate Fratley, and only angered Lira.

“We’ve got nothin’ to explain! We were sittin’ here, makin’ our own plans, when you two come a-frolickin’ all the way up to the edge of the forest!” Gilneas was unmoved, and both he and Freya continued their scowling and fang-baring, infuriating the Kindjal. “Now, don’t you be getting all self-righteous! Not when yer little girlfriend was listenin’ at our door.” Crimson growled, a sound so low that it was more felt than heard.

“Lira?” Fratley warned. Satisfied at having elicited a reaction from the nondemon, she turned to her husband. Before she could acknowledge him, she heard the distinctive snick of a triblade spear extending, and the nearly as distinctive whoosh of someone landing next to her.

Somehow, Freya made her snarls form a question: “What . . . did . . . you . . . say?”

Facing her, Lira replied, “You heard me-“

“Lira!”

“What?”

“The red knight is correct; there’s no need for violence or for the provoking of it. Whether we like it or not, we are stuck together. Freya, Lira and I both know you had no intention of eavesdropping when you approached our door. Likewise, we had no intention of eavesdropping when we sat down here so I could rest my freshly sprained ankle and discuss our plans. We could not, however, help but to overhear some things. In a way, this might actually turn out to have been a good thing.” Freya and Gilneas both disfavored him with skeptical looks. “Because now, you don’t need to waste valuable time trying to find us or convince us to come along with you. Also, your friend’s true identity is helpful to know. I’d much rather travel with a former Knight Commander vouched for by a fellow Dragon Knight than with a demon. So,” he continued as he picked up his bardiche, “Shall we be going?”

Freya and Gilneas exchanged indecipherable glances before nodding. The snowy-haired dragoon turned to face Lira and snarled at her again as she retracted her spear. Lira snarled back, but the Lady was already walking away, demihuman in tow. She paused only long enough to accept the machete he offered her from his pack, and to say to the two tagalongs, “We’ll take turns leading; I’m going first. Try to keep up.”

Part 4

Chapter fourteen

The *Akula*’s hold was actually a series of storage rooms connected by a long, wide, scrap-metal strewn corridor. It also had a high ceiling from which pipes, ducts, and conduits were suspended for ease of maintenance. It was dim because Aeron and Lucca had not bothered to take the time to set up anything more than basic lighting. This made it a pretty creepy place, by the standards of some; a good place to set up an ambush by others; and to one member of the crew, it seemed a good place to go hunting.

Kabra was primarily concerned with the latter as he searched for the source of the odd noise he’d heard earlier. He was carrying his axehammer: a heavy, four-foot metal shaft that had a double head with a hammer on one side and an axe-blade on the other. The dwarf-orc had loved it from the moment he’d seen it on Aeron’s weapons rack, and ever since the Shadow wizard had given it to him, he’d spent every spare moment practicing with the thing. Even though it did look a bit odd with Kabra’s five and a half foot frame, to him it already felt like an extension of his own body.

He thought he heard a soft sound coming from the overhead pipes, a sound that didn’t come from something flowing through them. It was not, however, the noise that had brought him into the hold, so he shrugged it off. *Probably just Amarant playing ninja again.* Kabra looked up to see if his eyes could detect the slightly freakish-looking man’s presence, and only just avoided falling down on his backside. Looking down at his feet, he was surprised to see that what he had almost slipped on was a partially frozen puddle of water that appeared to be coming from beneath a storeroom door. When he approached the heavy steel door, he could feel the cool air flowing along the floor, and coming from beneath the door. And the door was covered with a thin film of condensation.

The room’s not refrigerated, because Aeron and Lucca’s refrigerator room is in between the galley and lab #1. It’s not full of cold seawater, because then there wouldn’t be any air flowing from beneath it. So, what the hell is it? Kabra leaned towards the door, trying to divine an answer to his question from any sounds he might hear coming from within the room. He could hear a faint, rhythmic hissing sound. Like creatures breathing.

Kabra backed well away from the door before unclipping the radio from his belt. "Bridge, Kabra."

"Bridge," Aeron's voice acknowledged. "Go ahead, Kabra."

"I got something here that rates a strong 9.5 on my weird, freaky crap-o-meter. I'm in the hold, by a storeroom with a puddle of cold-ass H2O coming from underneath the door, and hissing sounds from behind it. You got any friends down here I don't know about?"

"No," Aeron replied, sounding alarmed. "*Stay there! I'll be right down with the others, and don't open that door!*"

"You know me."

"*Exactly. So stay put. Bridge, out.*"

Releasing the key, Kabra approached the door again. "You're such a worrywart." Before opening it he performed, as he did before any potential fight, a mental inventory. *Two frag grenades, two incendiary grenades, two very nasty FAE grenades, and my eight-round frag pistol.* He called it a pistol; it was actually more like a foot-long automatic twelve-gauge shotgun, fairly enormous shot for such a short-barreled weapon. The recoil would've been fierce had it not been for the fact that the handle and trigger were practically at the front end of the barrel, which allowed the heavy clip to pull the back end to a rest on the forearm. Kabra loved it. *But my axehammer needs a little live eval, I think. But even though I've now decided to go medieval on the intruders, a little napalm grenade can't hurt. Me, that is.* So he pulled the pin on one, cracked the door, threw it in, and closed the door.

The muffled FOOM of detonation was accompanied by a pair of gratifyingly inhuman screams. Kabra stepped back, axehammer held high and ready to crush anyone with sufficient lack of sense to leave the room. Surely enough, there was such a one. The creature dashed out of the room and stopped to look around. He saw that the thing looked like a blue imp, but its height was about five rather than three feet. It wore only simple pants and a short sword that appeared to be made of ice. Kabra christened it an Ice Imp just before the blunt end of his axehammer caused its bulbous head to explode like a watermelon. The hammer end was still resting on the floor when a second ice imp came out. Kabra jerked his weapon up off of the floor, and the axe-blade went right in between the creature's legs. It fell, wishing it were dead, to the deck.

Kabra winced, then laughed. "Looks like I ripped ya a new one, pal! Mwahaha!" Two more of the ice imps dashed from the room; they, however, were not coureous enough to pause just outside the door. The axehammer missed. "Dammit! Hold still so I can properly pulp you, pricks!" Smiling at his own little joke - and not realizing how very twisted he sounded - Kabra raised his weapon so that the axe-blade was at the ready.

The two ice imps suddenly stopped three-quarters of the way to the other side of the corridor and raised their swords above their heads, faces contorted into ugly grimaces. "KILL!" they shouted, and charged.

"Well, aren't you a nice couple buggers?" One leapt off of a pile of rubble, while the other charged low. With a grunt, Kabra brought his axehammer around diagonally, the heavy axe-blade scarcely slowed by the flesh of the jumping imp. On its way down, the orc was sure the imp would dodge the blade; it had ample time. But it ignored its impending doom and let loose a final cry instead.

"KI-" The word changed into a gurgling sound as the axehammer's blade removed the imp's head and shoulder. Kabra peeked into the room to be sure there were no more, and laughed again.

"That's no way to get *ahead*. Heh." But his laughter was weak, and it didn't take him long to figure out why. *There's no one laughing at or with me. I miss Sera . . .* They'd always fought side-by-side, their respective strengths complementing each other. Sera's precision and flair for details reigned in Kabra's adrenaline-fueled recklessness, and he helped keep her from becoming inflexible. But she wasn't there. And that made Kabra bored, which in turn made him still *more* reckless. "Hey! That all you got? I'm ready for ya!" No response. "Don't make me come in there and find you little bastards! You won't like me when I'm angry . . ." That did elicit a response; from *behind*.

"Kabra, you crazy-ass moron! I told you NOT to open that door!" The dwarf-orc looked back and

saw Aeron, Quina, and Vivi. Eiko, apparently, was at the helm. Just as apparently, Aeron was displeased.

"Aww, c'mon. Can't a guy have a little fun? Not that those big blue ice imps were much for that. They were stupid. Nothing to get upset about."

"What about those guys?" Vivi cut in, pointing to a spot in the corridor beyond Kabra. There stood six imps like the first, except that these were red and had swords of flame. The corridor was too narrow and cluttered for them to run more than two abreast, so that's what they did. They raised their blades over their heads and shouted the same, unimaginative battle cry that the ice imps had used.

"KILL!"

Kabra dropped his axehammer and drew his fragpistol, chambering the first slug and aiming it in the same motion. He pulled the trigger twice, and one of the imps gained the rather dubious advantage of torso aeration in the form of two twelve-gauge holes in its chest. Aeron was less than a second behind Kabra with his peculiar laspistol; the dust floating about in the corridor allowed the blue beam of light to be seen connecting the pistol's barrel to a fire imp's forehead. With two fallen, the remaining four continued their brainless charge, paying no mind to the fate of their two comrades or six frozen brethren.

As Quina charged with his/her/its giant fork held low, Vivi focused a simple blizzard spell on another imp, encasing it in a block of ice. The block shattered seconds later to reveal another dead fire imp. Kabra and Aeron shifted their aim, and uncounted photons and two more slugs easily found their non-evasive targets, sending them to meet the Reaper.

As those two fell, the other screeched and shrieked as though it were being eaten alive. Which, as Aeron and Kabra were astonished to see, it was. They stared with a mixture of awe and disgust as the imp was drawn feet first into Quina's cavernous mouth. It swallowed the thing in one gulp, slurped its lipless mouth, and belched smoke.

"Mmmm . . . spicy. Yummy, hot, and spicy."

* * * * *

Suhilin was less than pleased with the turn in events. Now he would have to introduce himself to not two, but four knights, three of whom he now knew were specially trained dragon-killers from another world. And when he spoke, only two of them would be able to understand him; and as it happened, those two were in conflict with the newly arrived two. Despite this, Suhilin couldn't just call some of his warriors to assist him, because that would only make his charges more likely to react aggressively.

There was also the increased risk of him being discovered by them before he was ready. At the pace the four were moving, Suhilin could either make a great deal of noise crashing through the underbrush, or he could risk being spotted in the air. For the moment, he had chosen the latter.

Why can't they just walk? Sumetra had better hurry . . .

* * * * *

Actually, Sumetra was loitering over a ship that contained some of the companions of Crimson and Freya. It was involved in a running gun battle with a larger Medinan vessel, and she wanted to make sure it won. She also didn't want to directly involve herself if she could avoid it, so loitering was, for the moment, all she was doing. Besides scaring the bejesus out of the flying Mystic scouts, that is.

She was particularly intrigued by the sheer power of magic she was sensing onboard the smaller vessel. Not only were they powerful, the magics she was sensing had an odd flavor to them, dissimilar to anything she'd sensed before. That alone could be enough to justify her continued

presence over the battle. Some things were more important than being on time.

Chapter fifteen

At last, a rest! Fratley thought to himself. Part of the reason he was so grateful for the stop was that his ankle was beginning to seriously trouble him; they'd been running nonstop since Freya had given up the lead to Gilneas three hours ago. His mighty sword cut through the foliage with greater ease than any machete, and 400 years of exercise seemed to have done wonders for his endurance. Even Freya and Lira looked glad they were stopping, but the big demon looked like he was ready to run all day.

But Fratley was grateful for another reason as well. During the previous rest stop, he and Lira had quietly made a few plans, plans that were now to be executed. He caught Lira's eye and jerked his head away from the clearing the four of them occupied. Lira nodded in reply, and Fratley mouthed "Thank you" to her as she turned towards an inattentive Gilneas.

* * * * *

"I'm hungry. Let's go huntin', Gilneas."

"Beg your pardon?"

"You heard me. Let's go kill lunch." Gilneas frowned and was about to protest when he was stopped by a pleasant, now-familiar voice in his head.

<I think Fratley wants to talk to me.>

<What makes you think that, Freya?>

<His signal for Lira to leave was less than subtle.>

<And I'm to go with her. Are you certain you'll be alright with him? As I recall, your last solitary meeting produced less than spectacularly satisfying results.>

<I'll be fine. I don't think he has any more shocking revelations.> He sensed humor entering her mental voice as she grinned slightly. <Actually, I'm more concerned about how you and Lira will get along. If Fratley and I's last time alone was less than spectacular, your last time with Lira was nothing short of abominable!>

<We did have a . . . *spirited* meeting, didn't we? She can be a handful when she decides to cause trouble, but this time we'll be working towards the same objective: to stay away - but not too far - until you tell me you're ready for us to come back.>

<If you're sure you'll be alright . . .>

<I am sure, Freya. Remember, if you need anything, you have only to call.>

<Don't forget that our vows were reciprocal! We live together, we die together, bond notwithstanding. If you ever need anything at all, just call and I'll come running.>

<I will remember.> Subjectively, the conversation had lasted several minutes, but to Fratley and Lira it was only a few seconds. It was, however, enough of a pause to make the dragon slayer nervous.

"You comin' or not, Gilneas?"

"Yes, I am coming. I believe I saw a particularly dense grove of trees a hundred or so feet away. Perhaps our lunch resides therein?"

"Only one way to find out! C'mon!"

<Gilneas?> He stopped at the edge of the clearing to look back at Freya. <Thanks.>

<You're welcome, Freya.>

The exchange of words had been silent, but the glances, smiles, and short chuckles that had accompanied them had not gone unnoticed. Fratley watched Freya intently until he was sure the other two were out of hearing range. Then, he asked her the question that had been burning in his mind for all of the past fifteen seconds or so.

"If I may be so bold, what was that all about?"

"What? Nothing," she replied with nonchalance. "We were just talki - oh." She interrupted herself as she caught Fratley's curious look. "Does it disturb you when we communicate like that?"

"Not at all. It's just . . . different. It will take some getting used to, for all four of us, I presume. After all, the two of you have had scarcely more time to accustomed to it than Lira and I.

"Actually, we've already gotten more used to it than you might imagine. But that isn't what you wanted to talk about, was it?"

Was I that obvious? "No, it wasn't. But don't worry; it's nothing that will upset you."

Freya was suprised she didn't feel as she had that very morning near Fratley; she was clearheaded and cool. Not at all like she thought she sould be. <Gilneas, is something wrong with me? I feel . . . only the mildest distress, as if I were just having a casual conversation with an old friend. How can that be all I feel? Our years together, and the years I spent searching for him, and I'm over him in a day? What's wrong with me?>

<Nothing is wrong with you, Freya, any more than is wrong with me. I know it cannot even remotely compare to your situation, but Lira is presently behind me with her spear ready. Yet I feel no urge to knock it from her grasp, as I did anytime she so much as touched it this morning.>

<When we converse like this, we can say a great deal in only a little time. Could it be that our emotions now work the same way?>

<It most certainly could be. It makes sense. Also, perhaps the sharing of our unpleasant emotions mitigates their individual effects somewhat.>

<It does make sense. Yes, that must be it. Thank you.>

<You're always welcome. Perhaps we had best go now; Lira is looking at me strangely.>

<And no doubt Fratley is doing the same to me. Goodbye, for the moment.>

<Goodbye.>

When Freya returned her attention to Fratley, she saw that he was, indeed, giving her a look. "It's rude to start side conversations, however short, when someone is trying to talk to you."

"I'm sorry. Please, continue."

"When we planned for your funeral, we had no body, of course. So, in accordance with tradition, we decided to bury a weapon instead, a weapon that those who knew you thought best represented you." Freya nodded. She was familiar with the tradition. "They all agreed that you would prefer the simple triblade spear of a Dragon Knight."

She nodded again. *That's exactly what I would have chosen for myself.*

"However, they also agreed that would never do. On Cleyra, especially, you proved that. Standing by the King to the very end, even to the point of challenging Beatrix, before whom many a knight has fled. And that after your role in ensuring the survival of Cleyrans and Burmecian refugees both, some of whom escaped before the tree's destruction. No, an ordinary triblade would never do."

"Any other dragoon would have done the same!" Freya insisted. "I did my duty; nothing more."

"Every surviving Burmecian, Cleyran, Aerb, and I beg to differ. And the only other Dragon Knight present at the time did not do the same; he fled. I'm not frightened by a legion of black mages, but I lacked the courage to face you, then." Freya started to protest, but Fratley cut her off with a motion

of his hand. "But my own courage and deeds - or the lack of them - aren't what we were discussing. We were discussing yours, and what not you, but everyone else decided they merited. So . . . I suggested a Holy Lance from Daguerro. There were a few disagreements. You are a descendant of Kain, one of the first dragoons, correct? Don't answer; I know you are."

Kain's claim to fame had been the single-handed slaying of a dragon king whose forces had once laid siege to Burmecia. He had taken from the beast as trophies a large talon and the red magic stone that it had worn. When Kain had offered his trophies to the Burmecian king, the monarch had been so impressed with the dragoon's skill and generosity that he'd refused the gifts. Instead, he'd ordered them incorporated into Kain's lance. Thus, Kain's barbed-arrow tipped spear had gained a talon instead of a sickle, and a magic stone in the butt of the weapon. Kain had, with a forthrightness true to his highland upbringing, dubbed it the Talon.

"Another of Kain's descendants calls the highlands home, and was recently decided to have proven worthy of wielding the Talon."

Another custom with which Freya was familiar. When an exceptional deed was done in the line of duty, a Dragon Knight or Kindjal was granted by the King or Elder (respectively) the right to carry their ancestral weapon, if they had one. Fratley had won the right to use his family's bardiche shortly after becoming a dragoon.

"What did this highland soldier do to earn such an honor?" queried Freya.

"This Kindjal, all alone at the base of Cleyra's trunk, prevented no fewer than two dozen - more likely three dozen - crack Alexandrian soldiers from climbing up to reinforce General Beatrix's attack. In fact, by the time Cleyra was destroyed, most of the enemy had fallen, and this dragoon prevented those that had not from attacking Cleyra's survivors."

"I would call such a person worthy."

"So would I. But the Kindjal was absolutely adamant that you were more deserving. This dragoon managed, in fact, to convince everyone that you should be the final wielder of the Talon."

Freya was incredulous at the notion of burying such an irreplaceable weapon. "This person wanted the Talon to be my funeral weapon instead of using it for themselves?" Fratley nodded. "I should like to meet that Kindjal, someday; they must be extraordinary."

Fratley smiled. "You have, and she is. Her name is Lira."