

*Christine Morgan's*

# Ef Lore

*Trilogy*



**CHRISTINE  
MORGAN'S**

*ELFLORE  
TRILOGY*

Published by:

Sabledrake Enterprises  
PO Box 30751  
Seattle, WA 98113  
<http://www.sabledrake.com>  
[sabledrake@sabledrake.com](mailto:sabledrake@sabledrake.com)

This new, re-edited edition of the ElfLore Trilogy is  
Copyright © 2006 Christine Morgan  
All rights reserved  
1<sup>st</sup> Printing – Summer, 2006  
Cover Art Copyright © 2006 Christi Smith Hayden

ISBN 0-9771005-1-0

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means – electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or any other, except for brief quotations in printed reviews – without prior permission of the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Originally published by Renaissance Alliance Publishing  
(now Regal Crest Press) as three separate books:

*Silversilk*, published in August of 2001. 1-930928-66-1  
*Knight of the Basilisk*, published in August of 2002. 1-930928-47-5  
*Truergold*, published in March of 2003. 1-930928-92-0



## CHAPTER SIX

*Alas for the soldier, to fight, perchance to die, alone in a foreign land.  
– Elwyndas, King Lamerry, Act 1*

“Mischa, behind you!”

He spun at Ariana’s yell, raising his sword. A nail-studded club knocked the blade aside. The monster grinned at him, showing black teeth and exhaling a chortle of vile breath.

The ugliness of the thing was nigh enough to slay Mischa on the spot. He had never seen, nor imagined, anything so grotesque. It looked like the union of some liaison between wasp and man, with a hard shell of chitinous brown skin and eyes that were bulging, multi-faceted horrors. Yet it was man-shaped enough to walk upright, and wield weapons.

He was so engrossed in gawking that he forgot for a moment the threat of harm.

Suddenly Ariana was there, springing between them with the litheness of a deer and the savagery of a she-pantera. Her saber came down in a vicious arc and chopped into the top of the thing’s head. A brownish fluid sprayed from the scalp, onto Mischa, sticky and steaming-hot and reeking like spoiled milk. His lunch of dried meat and fruit rose thickly in his throat.

Somehow, the creature – would it be a waspkin? as a child born of elf and human was elfkin, and of human and orc was orckin? – did not die. It whirled to swing its club at Ariana. Mischa was treated to a glimpse of a stinger dangling obscenely from its rump. Steel struck wood as Ariana turned the blow. Her face was a ghastly white shock of revulsion and horror, but she did not hesitate to press her counterattack.

Their horses, which they had been leading through this particularly dense clump of woodland, reared and stamped and rolled their eyes. The first waspkin had lunged out of the underbrush and panicked them, a choice it must have regretted for the final few fleeting instants of its life. Shod hooves came down again and again on the crushed body. It had been over so fast that Mischa

hadn't been entirely sure of what he was seeing, and then it didn't matter anymore. Only a trampled pulp remained, all broken shell like shards of crockery glued together by a stringy yellow wetness. The smell from it was abominable.

Mischa wrestled down his rising gorge, knowing that he could not simply stand here and let Ariana save their skins. He was supposed to be her sword-companion, her protector. If he meant to win any pleasurable rewards from her, an aim thus far fruitless, he would have to impress her one way or another.

As he moved to her side, he spotted movement in the bushes beyond. A third of the waspkin beasts poked up a stealthy head. Its hands may have been pincerlike, but they had no difficulty holding a crossbow. The barbed bolt swung to aim at Ariana.

"Ari!" He charged, lifting his shield to cover his face and hoping his armor was as strong as his brothers claimed.

Ariana whirled and sidestepped, a graceful dodge that would have been more effective had it not taken her directly into Mischa's path. He could hardly see where he was going around the shield, but realized he was about to skewer himself on her sword. In his frantic effort to avoid such an embarrassing wound, he stumbled into her and knocked her back. She lost her balance and they collided with the club-wielding waspkin. All three of them fell in a thrashing pile.

Something struck Mischa's shield with a jolt he felt all the way up to his shoulder. The barbed bolt-head had plunged through, its point not a handspan from his nose. Streaks of something viscous-green and foul-smelling streaked it. Poison. He had never known that crossbows could fire with such strength. If that had struck him instead . . . even a scratch might have been the end of him.

The waspkin beneath them struggled and twisted. Mischa saw it try to bite Ari's ear. She rolled, and the jagged, dripping mandibles clacked on a lock of her hair, shearing through. Mischa scrambled off and tried to haul himself to his feet, the weight of his armor dragging at him.

The one in the bushes had ducked back down, out of sight. Mischa had no doubt it was reloading. He remembered Rayke's advice to Rayle and Josef about crossbows – shoot it once, drop it, and get a sword into your hand, boys. No point messing about, because anyone you didn't kill with your first bolt isn't going to give you time to load a second.

But the waspkin hadn't benefited from Rayke's wisdom and experience. Mischa, not killed by that first bolt, knew what he had to do. Insane though it was.

He flung aside the shield, not wanting to accidentally jab himself with that poisoned barb. Ari and the other waspkin, their own weapons lost in the scuffle, were punching and pummeling in the dust like common brawlers. Mischa hefted his sword and ran, shouting some senseless, wordless battle cry as he prepared to hurl himself over or through the bushes and –

The waspkin popped up. A crossbow in its hands. A loaded crossbow.

Mischa did not have time to ponder this contradiction of what Rayke had said. He did not even have time to stop his headlong charge.

As he swung, he offered the world's quickest prayer to Talopea to guide his aim, hoping She might be interested in preserving the life of one of Her young priests so that he could continue to serve.

He missed the waspkin but struck the crossbow just as it went off. The bolt that would otherwise have gone into his chest skimmed over his shoulder so close he could feel the breeze of its passage. The crossbow itself was cleaved into splintered junk.

At once, he understood. There had been two of them crouched in hiding, two, each with a

loaded crossbow at the ready. When the first had fired and dropped to reload, the second had risen up to take a shot.

Now the first sprang up again and both of them attacked. He hacked wildly, shredding twigs and leaves from the bushes. The waspkin flung away their useless crossbows. One jabbed its stinger at Mischa and he heard it squeal-stutter against his breastplate without piercing the metal. The second waspkin slashed with pincers. He parried one, chopped through it with the blade's edge. Ichor spewed.

The other pincer snapped shut on his arm. Pain overtook the entire world. Mischa had never felt anything like it, never. His torn flesh seemed to shriek as much with offense as with injury. A flood of hot wetness doused him. Blood. His own crimson life's blood.

Then he was on the ground, writhing, gargling choked screams. He was dimly aware that the battle was still going on around him, that freezing darts of blue-white ice leaped from Ariana's hands and battered one of the waspkin like deadly hail, that Ariana's saber passed clean through the narrow waist of the other waspkin and sent its two halves falling in opposite directions. But none of that mattered. What mattered was the enormous sheeting agony that had replaced his left arm.

Did he even still *have* his left arm? He was afraid to look, lest it be lying on the ground some distance from him, the fingers still twitching and curling. He was more afraid to touch, because if he had to actually *feel* the gory, jetting stump, he would go mad. His right hand clawed at the earth instead, clinging to it, digging in, as if he could hold onto life by refusing to let go of this world.

"Mischa?" he heard, as if from very far away.

Not that he wouldn't welcome the next world . . . Talopea's eternal garden paradise. He just wasn't ready yet. There was still so much here he yearned to do, delights he wished to sample, indulgences he craved.

But if he was maimed? Mangled? Crippled?

He shuddered with new horror.

"Mischa!"

A cloudy darkness closed over him, suffocating and cold. Mischa no longer knew if he wanted to fight it or not.

"Ariana . . ." He barely breathed her name, but of course she heard. The darkness drew back as she leaned over him, some glorious silver specter.

"You're hurt," she said.

She was paler than ever. No tears yet glimmered in her sapphire eyes, but perhaps she had not let the full, terrible truth sink in yet. She would weep for him, lovely Ariana.

He feebly reached for her with his right hand. "The joys I could have shown you . . ."

She knelt at his side. Now she would caress his cheek, kiss him, express her regret at not having welcomed him into her bed even once in all the time they'd been traveling. He tried to tell her not to look at the savaged ruins of his arm, to spare herself such a sight that would no doubt haunt her for the rest of her days. But he could not speak. His strength was fading, and soon the darkness would return.

"It isn't so bad," Ariana said.

The dear girl hoped to comfort him, ease his passage with well-meant words. It was kind of her, but not necessary. He didn't even hurt as much anymore.

"Tell Rayke I died bravely," he said with effort. "And . . . tell my mother . . ."

Ariana sat back on her heels. “What are you on about, Mischa? You’re not dying.”

“It’s too late, Ariana. Too late for me. You’ll have to go on. You’ll have to be strong.”

“It only nipped you. Barely more than a scratch.”

“My life’s blood is pouring from me.”

“Your life’s blood is oozing out in a thin little line, you ninny. Quit acting like you’ve had your arm off.”

“Haven’t I?”

“Oh, for the gods’ sake, look at it!”

Mischa risked a glance. He saw red, red everywhere, a vast spreading stain of it, soaking through his clothes. The sight sickened him as much as the warm, tacky feel of it. But his arm was not off. His arm was still attached. He could see his fingers, and they wiggled when he tried to move them.

“I’m not dying?”

“Of course not!”

Realizing she was right, that death wasn’t yet upon him although surely it was imminent, Mischa sat up. He examined his arm. The chainmail bit that dangled from the shoulder of his breastplate – he couldn’t remember what Rayke called that part – was rent, and his shirt sleeve was ripped wide open. When he gingerly pushed the cloth out of the way, he revealed a jagged slash in his skin.

He moaned and tried not to faint.

“I thought you Talopeans were trained healers,” Ariana said. “That your goddess grants you the power to mend wounds. How can you be skittish at the sight of a little blood?”

“It’s never been *my* blood before.”

“Are you honestly telling me, Mischa, that you’ve never been hurt a day in your life?”

“Bumps and bruises when I was small,” he said. “And always someone nearby at the Temple to kiss it and make it better. Rayle and Josef, with their roughhousing, were always breaking each others’ noses and splitting each others’ lips, but I stayed out of their games.”

Ariana’s fine silver brows had climbed high on her forehead. “Even I’ve been injured a time or three.”

“Why is it so hard to believe that I’ve been both cautious and fortunate? I am no coward, Ari.”

“I never said you were. You *can* heal it, can you not?”

“I can.” He cupped his palm over the bone-deep slash . . . well, all right, perhaps it wasn’t an actual slash . . . a cut . . . and a fairly shallow one at that . . . “Blessed Talopea, grant Your humble lover and servant the gift and the power. This I pray, that I might go on to further Your efforts and revel in all the bountiful and beautiful pleasures of life.”

It flowed through him like sweet, mulled honey-wine. He could feel it spreading, a warm glow that absorbed and consumed and washed away the pain. His flesh drew back together and merged, mending seamlessly, leaving no mark but a faint pinkish line that would fade without any scar. The full glory that was Talopea suffused him. He could almost see Her, a woman-shape of incomparable loveliness and desirability. Body and soul, he responded to Her presence, striving toward Her touch.

As he returned to himself, he realized that Ariana was watching him, still with those dubious brows arched high. She had taken a few steps back and looked poised to flee.

“Do you expect me to leap at you like some ravenous beast?” he asked, unable to keep from grinning.

“Is it always like that for you? A healing?”

“When we heal, we are in full communion with Talopea,” he said. “It is the most intimate of all sensations, the greatest of pleasures.”

“More than being with a lover?”

“More than being with ten lovers at once. But it does not make us into lust-maddened brutes, Ari, so you need not look at me like that. Although, if you were to suggest —”

“I think not,” she said before he could finish. “Your arm is all right?”

“Good as new, though the same cannot be said for my shirt and this dangly chainmail bit.” He went to his horse, which had finally calmed. With washing-cloth and waterskin, he did the best he could to clean up, but he was covered with blood and ichor and other disgusting waspkin innards too vile to contemplate.

“Have you ever seen the like of them before?” Ariana asked, crouching to study with revolted fascination the one she had chopped in half.

“No, nor do I want to ever again. We should move on, before others come from their hive, or nest, or wherever it is that they dwell.”

The idea that there might be more of them clearly startled her. She stood, looking around uneasily. “If there is a hive, I’d hate to see their queen.”

Which was an idea that had not occurred to Mischa, and one he could have done without. He was more eager than ever to get their horses to someplace where the forest was more sparse and they could ride again. A saddle-weary rump seemed far less a concern now.

Ariana, however, appeared to be of another mind. Rather than rise from her kill, she had drawn a knife and poked curiously at the remains. Her other hand floated above the thing’s carapace. Her fingers were fanned. She murmured something in the liquid language of the elves, too low and too fast for Mischa to interpret the words.

“What are you doing? It’s dead, Ari, leave it. We should press on. I don’t want to be anywhere near here come nightfall.”

“I want to know what it is.”

“Just a wasp-monster of some kind.” Mischa had the reins of both horses, who tossed their heads and nickered, as ready as he was to put this place behind them.

“They used weapons, Mischa. They used cunning. They were not simple, mindless beasts.”

“You’re not suggesting these things are intelligent.”

“No,” she said, slowly rising and backing away from the waspkin with horror. “I’m suggesting they are men.”

“I think I know men when I see them.”

“Well, of course they don’t look like men. But they . . . there is magic woven all around and through them. As if they were changed, somehow. Transformed.”

“You mean by a spell? Is that possible? And if it is, shouldn’t they have turned back into men when they died?”

“There are spells that can alter the appearance,” Ariana said. “Beyond a mere cloaking of illusion. An elf might be made to resemble another elf, or even a human, or an orc.”

“There is magic that can turn someone into an orc?”

“Mischa, you are not listening.”

“I’m listening, Ari. I’m just not understanding.”

She sighed and twisted her hair into a quick, sloppy braid, speaking as her hands flew. “I’m afraid I don’t understand it much myself, at that. Shaper-magics are rare, and those who wield them often go mad from it. I have heard many different things, some nearly impossible to believe. Elves who take the forms of pantera or wolves or eagles . . . or merge two bodies into one – you need not say it, Mischa!”

“I wasn’t about to,” he said, which of course was untrue.

“Some say,” Ariana continued, heading for her horse, “that the minotaurs were created by such shaper-magic, when beasts of burden were given a more manlike form. Legends of gryphons or centaurs or other such fanciful creatures might likewise be attributed.”

“Have you any notion how abhorrent that is in the eyes of Talopea?” Mischa asked, shaking his head. “There are rumors in Thanis of some crazed mage who will, for a price, make an ugly man handsome or a slight woman buxom. If that is shunned by the Temple, I cannot guess what they would say to the likes of what you’re telling me.”

“I thought you Talopeans preferred handsome men and buxom women.”

“We do! But to achieve it by false means?”

“You allow cosmetics, and corsets, and other false enhancements of beauty.” She raised both hands and made a negating gesture. “Never mind. What I’m saying here, Mischa, is that these wasp-things . . . they may have once been men. They were intelligent, thinking beings. And we slew them.”

“They would have done the same to us.” He rubbed at his arm, which was no longer even sore, but the rip in his shirt sleeve rankled as much as any wound. “That one would have bitten your ear clean off.”

Ariana shivered, and touched the ragged place where some of her hair had been unevenly snipped. “I know. We had to fight back. We had to. It’s just that I’ve never killed before. I’ve hunted before, but never . . . killed. Not a person.”

“Nor have I. Believe me, Ari, all this mess and violence is not anywhere near as exhilarating and romantic as Rayke and all his old soldier cronies make it sound. But you must have known what it would be like out here, away from civilization. Your parents must have told you.”

“They did,” she said. “And for that matter, I’m full aware that even the most civilized cities have their share of mess and violence. I’ve seen it in Tradersport, I saw it in Thanis. I’ve heard war stories and watched the combats in the Sand Pits.”

“You’re no swooning maiden, that is of a certain,” he said as they began leading their horses away from the ghastly scene. It occurred to him that he had been injured while she had not, and that she had dispatched all of their foes while he’d scored but a single telling strike. He did not point that out to her. No sense making her feel worse. Or making him look worse.

“No,” she said. “But it is a sobering thing, Mischa. My mother and my grandfather were both adept at dealing death. Even my father, when the need was great. Still, somehow, I never expected it to be something I’d have to get used to.”

\* \* \*

Celinar Elyvorrin threw down his riding gloves and kicked them across the floor.

It was his birthday, his own special day, and no one cared.

Adults hardly ever bothered with celebrating their birthdays, not unless it was for some landmark year like a coming-of-age, or a centennial. And thus, they forgot how important birthdays were to the young.

They were so unfair. Yes, he would miss Grandmother Donystria, but why had she gone and died right now? Everyone was thinking about *her*. All his mother did was weep, all his grandfather did was brood and build toward one of his fits of icy-cold rage from which only Grandmother had ever been able to dissuade him.

Now that she was gone, he and his mother were alone with Grandfather.

And everyone had forgotten his birthday.

He stalked across the room, which was still a child's room, the walls covered with murals of dancing animals and fairies. When would he get a proper room? Probably not until he was forty, of age, and that was still more than a score of years away. He deserved it now. So what if he was young? He was the heir, wasn't he? With Aunt Lionnen having forsaken her claim, there wasn't anybody else. The county would be his, Celinar's. Didn't that mean he should be treated as something more than a silly baby?

"Shadows take it!" He threw himself across the bed. "Shadows take it all!"

He kicked his feet against the velvet coverlet, never minding that his boots were still caked with mud and leaves. Bitter tears stung his eyes. He buried his face in a pillow and cried, drumming his fists and feet on the bed.

Someone tapped at the door.

"Go away," he said, muffled by the pillow.

"Very well."

That voice . . . ? Could it be . . . ?

Celinar was off the bed in a bound, wiping his eyes and sniffing. "Sir . . . Sir Tiercel? Is that you? Please, do come in."

The door opened to admit Tiercel Reyes. Straight and tall, the very image of an ideal knight of the realm. His white belt bore the golden buckle of the Order of the Lion. The sword Lionheart, awarded him by the Council for his great valor during the war, hung at his waist, gold-hilted, the sheath sparkling with gems. Even in ordinary clothes, he gave the impression of being arrayed in glittering mail.

His midnight hair was worn shorter than was fashionable, as the soldiers did to fit it better beneath a helm. It made Celinar acutely conscious of his own, which was shoulder-length, straight and smooth and silken-blond. His mother wouldn't let him cut it.

Celinar stood straighter. He admired all of the knights of the Emerin, but Tiercel . . . Tiercel shone like the Constant Star among the rest. Brighter, more dazzling, brilliant. His handsome face and piercing ice-blue eyes set ladies' hearts aflutter all over Perras Peliani, though he was yet to take a wife. Men, even aged warriors, were quick to obey him. And youths, like Celinar, lived in eternal awe and admiration.

"I apologize for disturbing you," Tiercel said. His impassive gaze swept the room, taking in the dancing animals on the walls and the litter of toys on the floor.

Though Tiercel showed not a hint of reaction, Celinar wanted to die with shame. He hastened

ro explain. "This room would have been a nursery, had my parents had another child."

Tiercel nodded. "And, naturally. With the war, your father's death, and now your grandmother's passing, there has not been time to arrange another room befitting a young man."

"My mother's been in mourning. I thought it would be unkind to bring it up."

"Of course. I do not blame her for her grief. Your father was a brave man." His gaze went to the portrait over the dresser, and Celinar's followed.

"My father died because of human cruelty and dwarven greed." How different, that image captured in oils. His father, noble and never-aging, worlds away from the crushed *thing* that had been sent home to them. His mother, radiating calm joy instead of the sallow, melancholy creature she had become.

"Human cruelty and dwarven greed, yes, ever a threat to us." Tiercel closed the door behind him. "Might I sit down?"

"Please." Celinar said, hoping his giddy thrill of excitement did not show. He could not imagine why the noble Sir Tiercel should want to visit him, and was dreadfully afraid that as soon as he asked, the knight would conclude whatever errand had brought him here and then be on his way.

"Celinar, I come to you in confidence, on a matter of concern. May I speak freely?"

He could not contain a shiver as Tiercel addressed him by his given name for the first time. Addressed him as a man, almost an equal, though of course there were none in the elvenwood equal to Tiercel Reyes. "By all means." Curiosity was eating him alive. Why come to him and not his grandfather, if it was a matter of concern? What kind of concern?

"The day will come when it shall be you who rules this House. You will sit on the Starleaf Council, if it still exists."

"Yes, well, I . . . still exists?" Celinar frowned. "What mean you by that? There's always been a Council. Now that there's not a king, we need the Council more than ever."

"And now that we have no king," Tiercel said, "arguments among the men on the Council threaten to tear it, and our beloved Emerin, apart. We have just come from one war, Celinar, come from it sorely hurt and shamed. Now we face another. A war of the worst kind. A civil war amongst ourselves."

"We do?" His eyes felt like they might fall from his head, they had grown so wide. "Can no one talk sense to them? You're on the Council."

"And would mend these rifts if I could, rest assured. I should hate to see the Emerin and our people suffer more. However, I am but an advisory member, new and considered . . . well, inexperienced in government, and occasionally . . . brash. Some would say that my service to your family colors my view."

No one had ever spoken to him like this before. So frankly, so seriously. He was both flattered beyond belief, and frightened.

"You . . . you don't mean to leave our service, do you?"

"If I were to be released, what would become of me? I plan to remain as long as your grandfather permits it, and someday I would serve you as well. My only other course would be to accept an offer of a land holding, and I do not wish that. I love the Emerin too much to call only a part of it my own. By not being a lord, I can feel that it all belongs to me."

Celinar lowered his voice, smiling to show he was speaking in jest lest the knight think him treasonous. "Perhaps you should be king. Then all the lands truly would belong to you."

Tiercel threw back his head and laughed. “Who would have me be king? Each member of the Council has his own ambitions, each no doubt has a long, long list of friends, relations and political allies he’d see on the throne before me.”

“I think you’d be a splendid king,” Celinar said. “Everyone admires you.”

“My young lord is too kind. Believe me, were I by some mischance to have the crown fall to me, I would serve the Emerin’s interests with all my heart. But I have not come to you seeking support in some bid for the kingship.”

“Then why did you come?” Celinar instantly wished he hadn’t asked. Now Tiercel would complete his business and go, and there might never again be a chance for them to sit and talk as peers.

“I have known you all your life, Celinar. I fought alongside your father. Times such as these make boys grow swiftly into men, maturing them beyond their tender years. It seems odd to me that your family persists in treating you as a child.”

“Yes!” Celinar sat forward, clasping his hands eagerly. “It seems odd to me, too! I’ve asked, begged to be allowed proper tutelage, but Grandfather will not hear of it. He watches me like a hawk. He barely lets me leave the estate, and only then guarded as if I were a baby.”

“In part, I understand his worry. Your bloodline has seen much misfortune of late. Many have died . . . your aunt, your father . . . and well before they lived more than a fraction of their allotted spans.”

“But that’s not my fault. Why must I suffer for their poor fates?”

Tiercel sighed. “This war has had a greater effect than we know, a greater effect than some of our people are willing to acknowledge. We have seen more of our people into rosecloth in the past ten years than in the *century* before that. We are sorely outnumbered, and thus, sorely undone.”

“Undone? How? I don’t understand.”

“The humans,” Tiercel said. “The humans of the Northlands breed near as fast as orcs, and orcs themselves breed like untamed cats. We elvenfolk wait long to wed, longer still to sire children, and even longer *still* between them. We do not raise large families, and forge dynasties. The son of the Highlord, a scant year your junior, is already within a few years of being wed. Whereas you . . .”

“I won’t even be betrothed until I’m forty.” Not that he was in much of a hurry. There were some privileges of adulthood he looked forward to, and others he could do without. Maidens. Bothersome, fluttering nuisances.

“We have great gifts, yet they are improperly used.” His ice-blue eyes burned. “Our wizards lock themselves away, devoting their time to study, when they could be out in the land causing things to grow or sharing their knowledge with others. A standard elven apprenticeship is thirty years, while a human could go from apprentice to master in half that time. Our courtships? Ten years or more. A human couple can wed and have a houseful of offspring in that same decade.”

Celinar shrank back in his chair as he spoke, more than a little afraid of that cold, intense fire in Tiercel’s eyes. “But it’s the way things have always been done.”

“So it is, and is it any wonder that the humans are such a threat to us? If we acted as swiftly as they, our people would be unstoppable. Think on it. A nation of elves, no longer letting the seasons pass like shadows on a wall, but living. Living faster, marrying sooner, having more children. The forest is vast, vast enough to support a hundred times our number. We have empty land standing idle while the Council sits and argues over trifles!”

He fell silent abruptly, uncurling his hands. Celinar saw that they’d been clenched so tightly that the signet on his ring had been impressed deeply into his flesh. He wanted to say something, but

didn't know what, and didn't quite dare.

Tiercel took a slow, deep breath. "Forgive me, my young lord. I sometimes fear that I alone in all the Emerin see the terrible threat coming down upon us. It drives me to a frenzy, and I speak out of turn."

"Not at all," Celinar said. "No apology is necessary. You're right. Absolutely. There must be something we can do. Have you any ideas? Any suggestions?"

"We must take action," he said. "The humans not only thrive and grow, they covet what is ours by right as the eldest children of the gods. Their numbers increase and their territories cannot hold them for long. Where will they go? Where will they spread, to feed their thronging broods of children? We cannot pretend that nothing will happen. We cannot permit them to take over our world."

"Take a stand, you mean?" he dared ask.

"Yes." Tiercel's eyes flared anew. "The elves must take a stand. To do this, we need strong leaders and brave men. We need to find those who have not grown soft under decades of passivity or hidebound by centuries of tradition. I came to you, Celinar, because you are young enough to be free of these burdens yet man enough to speak for yourself. You see much. You know much. Far more than your grandfather credits you. Where can I find such people willing to take that stand with me?"

Celinar stood, feeling a fire spark in his heart. "Here! I am willing. I hate the humans, and I loath the dwarves, but most of all, I despise our people for letting this happen. Oh, let me stand with you."

Tiercel's hands fell on his shoulders. He leaned close. Those icy eyes bored into Celinar's own. His expression was pain and hope and wonder all combined. "Do you mean this, Celinar? Do you?"

"Yes! I do, Sir Tiercel, I do."

"My lord, you cannot know how my soul rejoices at this news!"

"Mine too," Celinar said. Tiercel was giving his shoulders such a squeeze that it hurt, and he wanted to yelp like a tagga-dog pup, but he gritted his teeth and told himself to be a man.

The steely grip softened as a sober shadow crossed Tiercel's face. "Yet it may be dangerous. Our people, in particular the older ones, the Council . . . they blind themselves to the truth and seek to silence those who express any other view. If you would escape their influence—"

"I would!" he said fervently. He was more than ready to escape all their influence. His mother, his grandfather of a certain, his tutors, the uppity domestics who for all they were only servants thought that they had a right to tell him what to wear . . . yes, he was ready.

"Then you must take swift action. Swifter, even, than our people are accustomed to do. You must not wait about while your youth passes. You must begin now to learn of the world and develop your talents. What path is it that you would pursue? Magic, as does your aunt?"

"Magic bores me," Celinar said, lip curling in disdain. "My heart yearns to be a knight, Sir Tiercel. Like you."

"Is it so?" He laughed warmly, and clasped Celinar's hands in his own. "My lord, my friend, once again you bring me near to tears of joy. Say the word, and I will take you as my own squire, and teach you all that you need know of the knighthood."

Celinar gasped. His thoughts whirled . . . himself, squire to Sir Tiercel? The famous, heroic, respected, beloved Sir Tiercel Reyes? Squire? Him? Celinar? A youth of only sixteen? He would be envied the length and breadth of the Emerin!

"Sir Tiercel," he said, hating how high and girlish his breathless voice sounded, "I would do

SILVERSIK

anything to be your squire. But my grandfather would never agree.”

“I will speak to him,” Tiercel promised. “Count Elyvorrin is a wise man. I think perhaps he will, Celinar. I think perhaps he will.”

\* \* \*



## CHAPTER ONE

Rough hands seized and shook her. Tilanne Murren came awake with a start and a cry. She sat up flailing her limbs, and had clouted the man kneeling over her twice before she recognized him as one of her own.

Her first thought, feeling those hands upon her, was that it was the orckin. Having finished Kai Terindor, he would now slay her, but wanted her awake to die. Or that it would be the silver-haired *Avalan*, him whose eyes had carried such a freight of sorrow and empathy, having decided that she must be slain after all.

But it was neither of those. She looked upon Ilantisian, the broad-shouldered scribe and teacher whose assistant she had been. His greying hair was singed and scratches laddered his face, but he smiled with joy despite her pummeling at him.

“Tilanne, alive thou art. Praise Kaledhol!”

Groggily, shaking off the effects of the spell with which the *Avalan* had struck her, Tilanne let him help her to her feet. She chronicled her pains as she did.

Although her arms felt as if they had been battered to shards by the blow of the orckin’s flail she had turned with the Kai’s shield, they did not seem broken. She was bruised and aching from head to toe, but compared to those around her, such hurts were minor indeed.

Cliffcave Fortress was in ruins. Smoke rose from the wreckage of the stables and a heap of wood and bones that had been a funeral pyre. Some of the sharpened tree trunk posts that made up the wall were still blazing like giant torches. More smoke drifted from the sunken shell of the fort proper, where the very stones seemed to have melted from the intense heat. The rising sun shone thinly through that brownish-black pall in the air. Tilanne could hear sobbing, moans of pain,

and the mutter of voices in distress and confusion.

“Worried was I, child,” the scribe said, and smoothed the disarray of Tilanne’s dark hair as if she were a toddler. “Dead is Kai Terindor. Dead also are Marona of the Crown and all of her Circle. Thy father as well, and of the Kai’s soldiers every last man excepting Corandir, who sorely hurt is. What is to become of us now, I despair to think. Even the orcs deserted us here, though to that say I that better are we without them.”

“Leave here we must,” Tilanne said. “Betrayed by the Horned One we have been, and tainted now is this place.”

He patted her shoulder. “Trouble it not, child, we shall –”

Tilanne reached into the collar of her tunic and brought forth the chain and pendant. Ilantisian’s words dried up as he stared at the ruby basilisk depending from blackmetal.

“How came thee by that?” he asked. Those gathered nearby, who had been busy tending their own injuries, looked to see what made him speak in such an offended tone. Eyes grew wide all around as they beheld the gem.

“The Kai himself around my neck did place it,” Tilanne said, trying to sound strong and brave as she knew he would have wanted, even if the burden of its implications threatened to crush her into the earth. “For all that a girl I am, of not even thrice ten years, he did bid me his message deliver, and in his stead to safely lead thee.”

A chorus of disbelieving outbursts met this, but Tilanne stood her ground. This sorry band of survivors was neither wizards nor soldiers. These were the folk like Tilanne whose parents, siblings, spouses, or children had served Marona and Terindor. They had come to be with their families, to care for their needs and support their cause, and now the reasons for it all were gone. Dead. Gone to ash on the pyre, buried beneath the collapsed roof of the fortress.

Their grief had not even begun to set in yet, still lost amid a wash of shock and horror. All had gone awry in a single night. Everything was destroyed, dozens of *Morvalan* lives had been cut violently short, and a *Rhuvvala* lay dead before them.

That last was perhaps the worst blow of all. There were so few who were called to serve Kaledhol in that way, and fewer still to survive the rites needed to be worthy of the sign of the basilisk. They were held in respect and awe, nearly revered for their closeness to the god. To have one die was bad enough . . . to have one die to an orckin was unthinkable.

Tilanne scanned the courtyard, where many elven and orcish bodies still sprawled. She saw the spot where the orckin had fallen, the stain of his blood dark within the imprint left by his massive body, but he was gone. So too was the silver-haired *Avalan*.

“Escaped they did?” she asked, but needed no answer. There were none here able to stop them, and if Kai Terindor had not been able to, perhaps no force on earth was.

“Our lives they spared,” said Ninthar, who had been one of the cooks and servants. He had a sword belted to his waist and wore it uncomfortably. “To me the *Avalan* did say that to go we were, once fit to travel were our wounded. That take only what we needed we should, and the hall of the wizards avoid. Then departed did he and the orckin.”

“And leave we shall,” Tilanne said.

“Thee to follow?” Falana’s face was strained, her eyes reddened, but she did her best to stay composed for the sake of the three children huddled around her. The eldest of them could not have been more than seventeen years, the youngest too young to understand that his father would

never return. “How are we *thee* to follow? A mere girl?”

“So I am, but the Kai did as his chosen heir name me.” She curled her fingers around the ruby, and pointed to the sword that lay near where she had slept. “This did I accept, and so Kor Tilanne am I now.”

“Saw it did I.” That was Jedriel, the younger of the scribes. “To the Kai’s side she did rush in battle, and would have his death avenged, if interfered had not the *Ahvalan*. True it is.”

Now Tilanne saw a wanting-to-believe in many pairs of eyes. She knew how they felt, for their place in Kaledhol’s greater Cause had always been to be obedient and led by those such as Marona and Terindor. Without one to lead them, they would be at a loss, all still joined by the common bond that made them *Morvalan* but unsure what to do. Unsure how best to serve their god and His purpose.

Oh, and there were so few of them left. A painfully quick count showed her a bare score of elves around her. Of those, half a dozen were children under twenty and three others were so badly injured they could not walk. Only one wore a uniform of the Kai’s soldiery, but most of his head was swathed in a bandage that covered the wadding where one eye had been – Corandir had been half-blinded by an elfkin.

Tilanne’s own brother, Vandil, had been the one to tend Corandir’s wound. Seeing his handiwork reminded her that Vandil’s blood still stained her hands. She had tried to hold in his shattered ribs after the orckin’s deadly flail had staved his chest. Her soul screamed with rage and loss, for all of her people but mostly for her brother and their father. Now, of all their family, of all the seven children her mother had born, she and one sister were all that remained of the Murre line.

The rest of the *Morvalan* voiced no further arguments, all too stunned and soul-sore to think clearly or care. Whether Jedriel’s words had convinced them or not, they were eager to quit this tragic place, to leave the sights and scents of death behind.

“If able thou art,” she said, drawing confidence from the Kai’s ruby, “much is there that must be done. Our dead to Kaledhol properly sent must be. What horses live, bring hither that supplies and the injured they might carry.”

Her words set them in motion, slowly, but with faint relief at having tasks to perform. Some dragged elven bodies to the still-burning heaps of wood and cast them within, adding rosewood oil from a few crocks that hadn’t been already emptied or broken. Others looked after the hurt and the children, while the rest combed the ruins for anything that they might need.

Tilanne went to the body of the Kai. He had lost his breastplate, and the links of the mail beneath had been fused by magical fire, slashed by glass. Helmless, his hair burned away, his face blistered and covered in dried blood, there was little left to remind her of the striking and noble figure he had been. With the help of Corandir and Sahen, she carried him to the pyre.

“Over thy soul, Kai Terindor Reyes, may Kaledhol vigilant and proud be,” she murmured, having heard similar words said by her father when the commander of Deepwater had been laid to rest. She hoped it would be sufficient for a *Rhunvala*.

Blinking back tears so as to show no weakness, Tilanne tipped the jar of rosewood oil over the wood and stepped back as Corandir set it aflame. Her brother had been one of many to burn in the night and her father would remain where he had died in the casting chamber, so she could only stand the fire-watch for this man. This man, who had not spoken a dozen words to her before this night, but had forever changed her life.

She stood there as the sun climbed and the fires finally dwindled. Around her, she was aware

of the others moving about, gathering what they could. Exhaustion etched deep hollows beneath their eyes.

“Sleep we need, rest we need,” she said. “But here, we cannot stay.”

“The intruders, we should follow.” Sahen was a few years older than Tilanne, and had been serving as a general squire and attendant to the soldiers. She noted that he had armed himself—excessively, perhaps, for what need would he have of three swords, two bows, and so many quivers of arrows? Further, he had taken from somewhere a soldier’s cloak of midnight and crimson. Its hem dragged behind him, but his expression was filled with a hunter’s hunger.

“Follow?” she echoed. “Follow, for what? That die we might as did our kin?”

“That avenge them we might. Are we our necks humbly to bend in defeat?”

“Nay!” Reshelli cried, and brandished a spear with truesteel point. “Such did I say before and gainsaid was, but vengeance ours should be.”

“And said before did I,” Ninthar put in, “that to attack them a sheerest folly would be. Four of them there were, four only, and all of this they wrought. Against wizards and soldiers and *Rhumvalla* all. How might *we* fare?”

“Too few are we, and too hurt,” Tilanne said. “No more lives can we risk for revenge.”

“And *thee* the Kai his heir named?” Sahen’s lip curled. “Corandir, a soldier thou art . . . surely must thou sayst that this cannot be.”

Corandir studied the jewel around her neck for what seemed an eternity, lifting it before his remaining eye. At last, he nodded. “To Tilanne, the Kai has this honor passed, and for now, heed it shall I. As should thee. But warned be, Kor Tilanne . . . the *Odan Rhumvale*, the Citadel of the Basilisk, much on this might have to say. Deny thee, they might. For never in all our history has a woman *Rhumvalla* become.”

“That must I face when comes the time,” Tilanne said. “Now, from this place shall we go, and in the shelter of the forest our refuge seek in sleep.”

Sahen did not move, merely stood regarding her scornfully as everyone else busied themselves hefting the sacks and packs that held what scant provisions they’d been able to salvage from the ruins of the fort. They had precious little in the way of foodstuffs or weapons, not that many of them could use the latter in any case.

Tilanne took no sword, knowing that the large knife she wore at her belt would have to do. She had torn her cumbersome skirt nearly to the waist to free her legs for movement, and now it was so stained and tattered it was almost impossible to tell what color and material it had once been. After some deliberation, she shed it in favor of a pair of dark leggings and a man’s crimson tunic that fell to her knees.

As the two horses that had been calmed by Vennan were being laden with bundles, Alarice called to Tilanne.

“A cart,” she said triumphantly, brushing her long white-blond hair from her face and leaving a smudge of dirt. “Damaged it was, but with my spells did I mend it. Now Findaire and the younglings ride might.”

“Well done,” Tilanne said, feeling suddenly odd as she sensed Alarice was looking to her for approval.

There had been a time not that many years distant when they had been playmates, schoolmates. But then Alarice’s budding mage-talent had drawn her toward the Crown Magics, while Tilanne

had wavered between healing and teaching, and still had chosen no path. Now a destiny she'd never even dared consider had been dropped upon her, while Alarice's master and teachers were gone.

Findaire had escaped the fires largely unburned, but for a singing crispness at the ends of her hair, but the heat and smoke had seared her lungs. Tilanne could hear the tortured laboring of her fluid-filled breath even from ten paces away when she went to tell her Alarice's news. The sound of it made her wonder if the woman would live long enough even to need the cart.

Jedriel glanced up, and shook his head almost imperceptibly, his dark eyes grim. Young Ninare missed the exchange, bent over her aunt and helping her to lean forward as more spasms of coughing wracked Findaire's body.

"Alarice a cart has found and mended," Tilanne said.

"Of no use will it be. Dead already am I."

"Say such things not," Ninare said. "A physician shall thy hurts tend, I know it."

"A physician we have none," Tilanne told the girl as gently as possible, pierced anew by the loss of Vandil. "And far from here is the Valley of the Cloudflowers."

"Another town . . ."

"Closest is Jewelgreen," Jedriel said. "Even so, many days' travel is it."

"Leave me, thou must," Findaire said, her voice a weak and bubbling whisper. "Here should I stay, in the company of my kinsfolk to rest. If thou wilt, Kor Tilanne, swift mercy grant me."

Ninare sobbed, and Jedriel drew her comfortingly into his arms. Tilanne stared down at Findaire, hardly able to believe what she'd heard. She could not do what Findaire was asking. How could she do such a thing? Take steel and end a woman's life?

"You see?" Sahen spoke from her elbow, when she had not even seen him come near. "Suffers, she does. Thy duty should it be, but the stomach for it thou hast not. Unfit art thou to command us, if this one small thing thou cannot do."

"Small thing? A matter of squeamish stomach this is not," Jedriel said, still holding Ninare. "Couldst *thou* do it, Sahen? Couldst thou?"

"Died already have so many, and so few are we," Tilanne said. "Findaire, please . . . live."

But Findaire could not answer, could only fight for breath into her drowning lungs and look up at Tilanne with pain-shadowed sea-green eyes, mute in her appeal. She was dying, might have died even with a physician to tend her.

"I could and I shall, if too weak is this pretender *Rbumala*." Sahen reached for one of the swords he'd claimed, but before his hand touched it, his wrist was seized in an iron grip.

"Thy place, it is not," Corandir said. "Unless by the Kor ordered."

"Order me about she cannot! Her elder am I, and war-trained besides."

"Enough!" Tilanne cried. "Sahen, enough. Findaire suffers, and relief must be granted. Corandir, wilt thou?"

The half-blinded soldier nodded soberly, and released Sahen's wrist with a brusque push that staggered the youth. Ninare pressed her face into Jedriel's chest, but did not object as they heard steel sing as it was pulled from its sheath.

Nor did Findaire object. With the last of her strength, she mouthed her thanks and set her hands upon her breast, thumbs and forefingers framing the area just above her heart. Tilanne could hardly bear to watch, wished to turn away as Ninare had done, but stood firm as Corandir delivered a single swift thrust.

## KNIGHT OF THE BASILISK

“Thy task it was,” Sahen said in a low, deadly whisper to Tilanne. He was about to say more, but the back of Corandir’s glove slapped the words from his lips.

“Not for thee is it to say what her tasks are. Not for thee is it her place or her fate to say. For the *Odan Rhunvale* to decide it is. Not thee, not me, none of us. Until then, we follow.”

“But wrong it is! Only by luck that closest to the Kai was she. Any of us it could have been, another of us it *should* have been —”

“But Tilanne it was,” Jedriel said. “And better so, for jealousy and ambition such as thine a doom to us all would surely be. Hast thou the Cause forgotten, Sahen? Before one’s own desires comes one’s family, and before one’s family comes the Cause. So has it been, so must it be. If thyself thou wouldst put first, go then to the north and a selfish *Ahvalan* become.”

Sahen gaped at him, the young scribe’s speech having done what even Corandir’s slap had not. He seemed to struggle for something to say, failed to find it, and lowered his head to scurry away before any of them could meet his gaze.

Tilanne sighed deeply and made gestures of thanks to each of them. She helped Ninare take Findaire’s body to the pyre, and stood with the girl as Ninare poured the rosewood oil over the embers. The dying flames leaped up in renewed energy, crackling and bright orange.

When the fire had consumed Findaire, Tilanne raised her voice to announce it was time to leave. Her small band of refugees formed slowly, in protective groups and pairs.

Olithiana and Carenar were so tightly embraced that they might have been one being. The husband and wife stayed a bit apart from the rest, as if knowing how bitterly their good fortune might sting the new-made widows and widowers. Ilantisian, Jedriel, and Alarice, all of them among the best-learned, stood together. Vennan would not move far from the horses, and Ninare seemed to have taken two orphaned boys under her wing, holding three-year-old Parcian while eight-year-old Hastinar pressed close to her side.

Tilanne might have expected to find Ninthar and Reshelli together, as both were cooks and if fortress rumor was to be believed, occasional lovers. But they were far apart; Ninthar with the silent and hollow-eyed craftsman Deverall, while Reshelli with her spear had placed herself beside Sahen.

“Mivana, where hath gotten thy brother?” Falana demanded irritably as she secured her infant son’s carry-basket amid the bundles in the back of the cart.

“In there,” the ten-year-old girl said, aggrieved. “Told thee that already did I, *Vali*, but listened wouldst thou not, and now *me* for his disobedience thou’ll blame.”

Tilanne felt a raw, chilly horror seep from her marrow when she looked where the child pointed. “Falanar in *there* hath gone?”

Falana paled. “Nay, such a thing would he not have done. Too dangerous it is . . .”

“Went there he *did*,” Mivana insisted, and pointed more firmly at the central building of the fortress, where the Circle’s casting chamber had been housed.

\* \* \*



## CHAPTER TWO

A stillness and dread settled over the elves, broken only by the dying sizzle of the flames. As if their very attention had brought it on, a new sound came in the form of a shifting, rumbling groan. One of the fortress walls sagged inward. A gout of eerie purple fire licked up, and from somewhere within that blackened, smoking mess came a cry of pain.

“Falantar!” his mother shrieked.

No one seemed able to move, and in that instant Tilanne fully understood that it all fell to her. She had not been able to save Findaire . . . she could not lose another of them.

With that thought foremost in her mind, she headed for the ruin. Corandir tried to stop her, but one even look from her was enough to make his hand slip free from her arm. He let her go on unhindered, while the rest looked on in dismay.

Each step that brought her closer was a step Tilanne would rather not take. She could see it more clearly now, the damage and the danger. A shimmering bank of heat rose from the stones, which themselves looked softened, melted. Here and there, half-buried by tons of rubble, protruded charred sticks that had once been elven limbs.

From within, Falantar cried out again. “Mother . . . someone . . . help!”

“Where art thou, Falantar?” Tilanne shouted.

“Tilanne, nay, come back,” Alarice rushed after her.

“Alarice, stay! Find him I shall.”

Even the least experienced hunter would be able to follow the boy’s fresh tracks in the ash, which led toward a gaping and uneven opening. It was like a mouth, a dragon’s mouth, all darkness and heat with a reddish wavery glow underlying the shadows. Jagged, burnt stumps of beams

were the teeth, and a slab of marble was the tongue.

The fortress shifted again, things sliding heavily and unseen. Falanar's call became an agonized scream, echoed by one of desperation from his mother.

Tilanne flinched back as chunks of stone tumbled from above. The moment they stopped falling, she squinted against the waves of oven-warmth and held her breath against the vile fumes that issued from the forbidding opening. She plunged inside.

Now she knew what the Torments would be like. Terror and confusion and pain beat at her from all sides as she made her way into the malformed remains of a once-lovely fortress. Everywhere she looked she saw death. Elves robbed of their long lives, robbed of their beauty, robbed of their hope and promise.

Timbers creaked and stone squealed against itself. Tilanne could hardly see but dared not attempt to feel her way, knowing that a single brush against a beam might bring it all down upon her head. She groped with her toes, eyes stinging and watering from the stench of death.

As she pressed deeper, seeking the source of Falanar's voice – he had progressed now to incoherent moans and sobs, perhaps understanding that no one could reach him – Tilanne felt something new and upsetting. The *aether* was disturbed.

She was no sorceress as was Alarice, but any elf could sense the patterns of *aether*. The force that was the lifeblood of magic was as constant and taken for granted as the very air. But in this place the air itself was twisted and treacherous, laden with poisons that dizzied her when at last her aching lungs compelled her to sip short breaths of it. So too was the *aether*, twisted and strange, made poison.

Wiping futilely at her streaming eyes, Tilanne saw shafts of discolored daylight ahead. Had she gotten turned around? No, she couldn't have been, because Falanar's moans still came from somewhere up ahead. Then she remembered the way the explosion of warped fire had roared through the roof, raining down on the courtyard. Picking her way toward the light, she came at last to what had been Marona's casting chamber.

Her foot struck a corpse, a woman whose body was half scorched to a cinder. The unmarked side of her face was locked in a grimace, and the tattoos along her scalp as well as the multiple piercings marching the rim of her ear proclaimed her as one of the Crown Mages.

Candlewax formations of rock, which had melted and then cooled to congeal in strange shapes, turned the floor into a hostile landscape. Shards of thick glass had been driven into the very walls, in one case having pinned the skeletal remains of a robed elf through the chest.

Among the bodies were several in armor, though the black metal had been deformed almost beyond recognition. And the bodies themselves, those ones, looked wrong to her eyes. Even allowing for the damage the fire had done, they looked wrong.

She could not take the time to look further, for she had found Falanar. Or at least she saw part of him, one feebly moving hand over a pile of rocks and debris. A balcony wall had collapsed atop him, the balcony itself resting in nearly perfect condition as the lid to a tomb, in which the boy was imprisoned alive.

Tilanne scrambled over the uncertain footing. "Falanar!"

"Ti . . . Tilanne?"

"Be still, Falanar. Help thee I shall."

"My father . . . sought did I my father . . . only wished did I to find him . . . to the pyre bring

him . . . not buried in stone like a dwarf should he be . . . not left to rot . . .” He coughed, a horrible, wracking cough too terribly reminiscent of Findaire. Too hurt, too hopeless.

She reached the pile and grasped his hand. His fingers closed on hers with no more strength than an infant. Blisters were rising in white bubbles on his skin. Two of his nails had been torn away to the quick, threads of blood trickling from them.

By moving one of the few stones that did not seem to be supporting any of the others, Tilanne was able to see his face. His eyes were dark holes, pits of fear, and he looked so very young. Seventeen, no older than she’d been when her father had been assigned to Cliffcave Fortress. Too young to die at all, let alone such a death as this.

“Falanar . . .”

He heard what she couldn’t bring herself to say, and shook his head in negation. “*Please*, Tilanne. Leave me here thou cannot!”

“If more of the stones I remove, shift shall the balcony atop them and surely crush thee. How severely art thou injured? Able art thou at all to move?” She spied a few other pieces that did not seem to be weight bearing, and pushed them aside. They bounced and rolled in a clatter, and she bared Falanar’s arm.

He did not reply, did not need to when she saw the dismay in his eyes. He was trapped and paralyzed, and the rest of the walls might come down at any moment, and she did not even have Corandir here to do what she could not bring herself to do.

“Lost already so many lives,” Tilanne murmured, touching the knife at her waist. “I cannot. . . Kaledhol forgive me, I cannot.”

But neither could she leave him to a slow and miserable death. Finding larger chunks and parts of beams, she tried to brace up the balcony while pawing away the heap that held him. He watched her like a rabbit in a snare, helpless. Findaire had been resigned, accepting. Falanar was terrified. He wanted to live.

Tilanne cast desperately around the chamber, seeking something else to help hold up the balcony or pry away the stones. Her gaze took in the scattered ring of armored figures again, crumpled in a regular pattern unlike that made by the bodies of the mages . . . almost as if they had fallen before the explosion . . .

A familiar wink of color caught her eye, and Tilanne caught her breath as she recognized the yellow star sapphire set into the pommel of her father’s sword. Dragon’s Eye, that blade was called, and it had been one of her mother’s last gifts to him before death-in-birthing had carried Vandanne Murrees from this world.

She stood, then dropped back into a crouch and shielded her head with her arms as a hail of pebbles pelted her from above. Wincing in expectation, she waited for the inevitable larger missiles. A rock the size of a bird’s egg struck her forearm, another hit the floor and bounced up to crack smartly against her kneecap.

A sliding rumble shook the room. Falanar wailed, and distantly from outside Tilanne could hear the rest of the survivors calling in alarm.

When the room did not immediately collapse in on them, Tilanne risked rising again. She picked her way across the littered floor and came to the glinting yellow gem.

“Dragon’s Eye,” she breathed.

The sword was still sheathed across her father’s back as he sprawled face down. The finely

tooled leather of the sheath had become made of ashy-black flakes that fell apart as she touched it, but the weapon itself appeared undamaged.

There was no time to waste, but she had to look one last time on her father's face. As horrific as it might be to see him so, she *had* to.

She set the sword aside, grasped him and turned him over. The warped metal was hot even through her gloves. Steel clanged dully on marble as she rolled him to his back, and a scream lodged fast in her throat.

She had been prepared to see him burned, thought she was ready for such a sight. But that which greeted her was so different, so horrible, that for a moment Tilanne was rooted to the spot and oblivious to all around her. The acrid smoky air ceased to bother her; the threatening grind and shift of stones went unheard.

He *was* Forantil Murres . . . and yet he wasn't. Not this ancient, wizened husk. Her father's hair, what strands of it had escaped from beneath his helm, was the color of parchment-ivory when once it had been as coppery-red as Vandil's. His skin was etched with wrinkles, blotched with age-spots, and shrunken against the contours of his skull. His lips were drawn back in a rictus, exposing teeth from which the gums had receded. And his eyes, wide-open and frozen in a glassy stare, were filmed in milky cataracts.

Rare indeed was the *Morvalan* that lived out his or her natural lifespan. Warfare took the males, birthing took the females, injury and illness took one and all. They did not have the luxury of their spoiled northern cousins, to while away centuries.

The oldest living being Tilanne had ever seen was the sorceress Ensinameline of the Scepter, who dwelt in Deepwater where Tilanne's sister's husband was stationed. That diminutive, white-haired woman had seen nine centuries, yet she would have looked young and vital compared to this . . . this *thing* before her that showed her father's features in that shriveled mask of age.

She stared as if spellbound, horror creeping insidiously along her every nerve. After an untold amount of time, at last her surroundings filtered back into her consciousness. Falanar was hitching and whimpering, plaintive and desolate sounds that said he thought himself to have been abandoned again, left to die slowly and alone.

This thought gave Tilanne the strength to tear her gaze from her father's desiccated visage. Clutching Dragon's Eye, she backed away from his body.

"Be thou brave, Falanar," she said, unnerved at the shakiness she heard in her own voice. But it soothed him, and he quelled his whimpers as she returned to his prison.

Using the sword as a lever, she worked it into the heap and pried apart the larger stones. Soon Falanar's shoulders and head were unburied, and he clawed at cracks in the floor in an effort to pull himself free. To no avail. Tilanne peered as best she could into the shadows that held him, and saw the rear edge of the balcony pinning his legs.

Her mind was all a swim now, from shock and the impure air. A crash from elsewhere in the fortress shook the ground, and sent new cascades of debris into motion. The opposite wall broke apart with the slow grandeur of an iced-over waterfall giving way to the spring thaw.

Falanar cried out, loud and despairing and doomed. Sensing immediacy, Tilanne let go the sword and seized his outstretched arms. She pulled with all her might. The boy's body moved slightly, him shrieking as bones were wrenched and skin was torn.

A boulder-sized piece of the opposite wall fell, bounced, passed close enough to Tilanne to

whip her hair in the breeze of its passage, and smashed into the corner. The pile that had held up the balcony slid in a jittering and cracking avalanche.

She saw her name on Falanar's begging lips, the sound of it lost in the hungry roar of the shifting stone. She threw her weight backward, no longer caring if she dislocated his arms or scraped all the skin and flesh from his legs, meaning only to get him out, save him.

The balcony slammed down, its leading edge hitting Falanar just below the shoulder blades and driving him into the floor. As if that wasn't enough, it teetered side to side, grinding him beneath tons of marble.

Tilanne screamed with him, and sustained hers long after his was abruptly lost in the gout of blood that spewed from his gaping jaws. He went rigid, his hands beating against her in thoughtless panic. She clutched at them, caught one as he went limp. The other slapped against the floor with a lifeless smack.

His eyes slid briefly toward her, but there was no comprehension in them. And even as she leaned forward, shaking her head in mute denial, the spirit drained from them and left them blank, empty orbs.

Numbed and uncaring that the room was continuing to shake itself to pieces around her, Tilanne kissed the back of Falanar's hand. Only when a careening chunk of stone struck beside her with enough force to batter itself into dust did she suddenly and with a wail of despair and rage come back to her full senses.

She snatched for the hilt of Dragon's Eye and the hilt was all she got, the blade having snapped off. Tilanne whirled toward the exit and saw that it was heaped with rubble, only a narrow gap remaining at the top. She ran at it all the same. She scabbled up the slope, dislodging several stones and almost sending herself to the bottom in a rockslide, and wormed through the gap with her back scraping against the underside of the arched doorway.

The inrush of air had breathed new life into the smoldering fire. Beams and slabs lay at haphazard angles across a long blazing pit, and the ceiling overhead was streaked with jagged, spreading cracks that sifted dust down onto her.

"Kaledhol, please," she said without realizing she spoke aloud. "If Thy will it is, let me this place escape. Swear to Thee do I that never by my hand shall elven life be lost, and pledge do I always elves to defend."

Tilanne stepped onto the end of the nearest beam and crept out over the expanse of hot orange, all too aware of what a misstep would mean. The wood smoked beneath her boots and she could feel the heat through the soles. Her quick, light breaths turned the lining of her mouth and throat to something that felt as dry and baked-shiny as a pot in the kiln.

As she reached the end of the beam, it dropped with a jolt and she went with it. The heavy end kicked up a shower of sparks and flame, and not hearing her own terrified scream, Tilanne leaped.

She landed on a marble slab. It tilted toward her, the slick surface giving her scant purchase as she slipped inexorably back toward the pit. A chance look upward showed her a dangling lattice of wood. A lunge, a grab, and she was suspended above the inferno as the thin slats cracked under her weight.

With no more prayers and no more screams, her jaw clenched tight, Tilanne swung from hand to hand along the untrustworthy lattice, splinters from it sprinkling her hair. She got her feet over another slab, this one at a steeper angle but textured with sculpted reliefs of Crown Magic runes. Not bothering to worry what spells she might unleash by stepping on the symbols, she scaled it as

if it were a rough hillside. She reached the top and saw a clear expanse of hallway leading deeper into the cliff side, and a partially blocked rat-warren of a hallway leading the way she wished to go.

She chose the blocked way, squeezing past and around and under the obstacles. Ahead was daylight, dimmed again by dust and smoke. Her shoulder bumped a beam. Tilanne dove forward as a tremendous deadfall crash jolted the hall, and looked back gasping to see that the beam had missed her by a margin too close to consider.

There was no time to congratulate herself, for the ceiling was quaking and spilling steady streams of gravel. She sprang up and dashed forward although her every muscle strained and hot stitches dug into her side.

The ceiling caved in with a coughing roar, and Tilanne was thrown headlong into the courtyard in the midst of a billowing cloud of dust and soot. She struck with bone-jarring force and was barely able to cover the back of her head before she was overwhelmed by a flying shower of wood and stone.

Gradually, she realized that she was still alive and that the sounds of destruction had diminished, like a thunderstorm passing into the distance. She heard voices calling her name. Dazed and aching, she couldn't answer, could only stay where she was as the others frantically pulled debris off of her.

The next thing she knew, she was being helped to her feet by Corandir and Jedriel. She swayed and they supported her, and she gagged and spat to clear her gritty mouth.

"Falanar?" someone asked.

Tilanne shook her head, tears streaking the dust that coated her face. "Trapped he was, and save him I could not."

A mournful, anguished sob burst from Falana. She fell to her knees, rending her hair and keening her grief, as young Mivana looked on without comprehension and Vanfal cried in his basket.

"For his father's body had he gone, who like mine a soldier had been," Tilanne said to Corandir. A convulsive shudder went through her. "In the casting chamber . . . dead were they, Corandir, dead and unspeakable before even the fire came. What . . . what to them was done?"

"Know do I not," he said, and touched the bandage over his eye. "Resting in the infirmary was I then, when summoned by the Kai were the rest."

As if for the first time, Tilanne looked at him and *saw* him, saw how he was consumed by pain and refusing to show it. She steeled her own spine and pushed the ghastly image of her father from her mind.

Jedriel took her by the upper arms. "Tilanne, that thou shouldst not have done. Too great a risk was it. Lost as well thou could have been."

"True he speaks," Olithiana's voice was shrill. "Better a man had gone."

"Gone would I have," Sahen said huffily. "The chance I had not, so quick and impetuous was she."

Reshelli snorted. "Man, not boy . . . and what of it? At least alive Tilanne emerged. The same would I have done."

"For thee, Reshelli, fine it is thy life to throw away," Olithiana said. "Barren thou art anyway, and thus no true woman. But Tilanne young and vital is, and best shall her people serve as a woman ought. By marrying, by bearing many children our numbers to replenish. Now more than ever, needed is such."

Sahen pounced on that, while Reshelli sputtered in indignation. "And so, plainly, no *Rhunvala*

should she become. A *Rhumala* marries not.”

“Kai Terindor wed was,” Corandir said. “Died long ago did his wife, but live on still do his children. No law is it.”

“Different is it for women,” Olithiana said. “Hazardous enough is childbirthing, and moreso if with combat she life and limb endangers. Thus is no woman to arms training permitted.”

Reshelli, still fuming, thumped the ground with the butt of her spear. “If so great a proponent of motherhood thou art, why no children yet dost thou have, then?”

“No compassion have any of thee?” Falana stormed into their midst. “Dead lies my son! Unsafe is this place, cursed is this place, and away from it we should before more of us into death my poor Falanar follow. Two children have I yet, and not a moment longer here will I keep them.”

“So it is,” Tilanne said, although every fiber of her being cried out for a rest. She brushed herself off, only then discovering that somehow she had tucked the broken hilt of her father’s sword inside her tunic. “Leave for Jewelgreen we must, and now.”

Vennan led the horses, with the children perched in the cart while Ninare walked alongside. Sahen insisted on leading the way, and with Ninthar’s help was able to wrestle the heavy gates open enough to admit them. Tilanne was the last one out, and turned to look at the fortress that had been her home for over a dozen years. She would have given much to be able to blink and have it back as it had been, to be able to go to the apartment she shared with her family. To have life be as it always had been, when her most pressing problem was the very one that Olithiana had voiced—which prospective suitor her father would choose for her, and how many of their children would survive. But she did not waste time wishing for the impossible.

“As was thy wish, noble Kai, so shall I do,” she promised in a whisper. “Fail thee shall I not. Though know do I that thou might otherwise have wished it, I do pledge thy trust to earn, and that cause to regret thy choice shall thou never have.”

\* \* \*



## CHAPTER TWO

*For in that town there walked a thing unspeakable, and their hearts were filled with dread.*

*– Elnyndas, The Shaper's Fate (ballad)*

Rantiel Herann was debating whether or not to have another cup of tea before bed when he heard an eerie cry on the night wind. It sent chills racing along his spine. The wooden cup slipped from his grasp. It struck the table and rolled to the floor, and splashed his slippered feet and bare ankles with the cold dregs of tea.

Sleekfur had been dozing on the hearth, as close to the fire as she could get without her silver-white belly fur at risk of being ignited by a stray spark. At the sound of that strange cry, she shot up. Her ears twitched, her tail puffed, and a low, wavering yowl issued from her throat.

“Shh, girl,” Rantiel said. His heart was galloping, galloping.

What in the name of the gods had that noise been?

His first thought was to call for Illan and Dharra, asleep in their small rooms off the kitchen. But as he opened his mouth, he changed his mind. If the cry hadn't disturbed the apprentices, he wasn't about to. Not until he knew for a surety that there was some good reason.

He was closing on his millennial birthday, an age at which he ought to be attended by devoted children and grandchildren, respected by all, vaunted for the wisdom that his ten centuries had brought. But young people today had lost all respect for their elders. His neighbors either bored or irritated him when he was forced to go into town. He lived apart from his family and that was the way they all liked it.

The apprentices were a necessary evil, now that he wasn't as spry as once he'd been. It galled him to admit he needed younger backs to do the work around the place. They'd learned, though, right quickly and well, that he wasn't about to tolerate backtalk from the likes of them. They knew to keep their opinions to themselves and mind their manners, or they'd be sent away so fast it

would dizzy their heads.

That didn't stop them from thinking him a doddering old fool. He didn't care much what they thought, so long as they behaved. But he wasn't about to give them one more reason to roll their eyes at each other when they didn't think he could see, or one more tale to carry into town.

No, he'd see for himself first.

There *was* something out there. He knew it; Sleekfur knew it.

Probably youngsters from town, out on a lark. He'd been the butt of their pranks before. They came in the night and stole fruit from his orchard, used his barn for their romantic assignations, left wine bottles in his field. Only a few days ago, he'd gone into town and complained to the constable, naming the ones he suspected. This must be their spiteful revenge.

Trespass on his land, would they? Bother him with animal calls? They'd see about that. He wasn't too old to defend what was his.

A bow hung over the mantle with a quiver of arrows beside it. Rantiel took these down and slung the quiver's strap across his body from shoulder to hip. He strung the bow, grunting as he did so – it had been twenty years or more since he'd fired it, and it was a tougher pull than he remembered.

Sleekfur rubbed around his legs. Her back came to above his knees, and when she pushed hard she could nearly knock him over. Her fur still stood on end and she made the chittering sounds he associated with her hunting.

"We'll find them, won't we, girl? Give them a bit of a scare." Rantiel bent down and took the spotted pantera's heavy, triangular head between his hands. "No killing, now. Scratch them up a bit if that's what it takes to teach them their lesson, but no killing."

Her serious, lambent eyes met his. She made her chittering sound again. *Eh-eh-eh-eh.*

Rantiel was in loose trousers and a patched tunic gone colorless from age. He threw a light cape around himself and went out, still in his slippers.

The porch of the farmhouse faced across a dooryard of short grass to the large barn. To his left was a fenced garden patch, to his right an arched wooden footbridge over the creek that bisected his property. The night was clear, the silver moon overhead and the black moon rising in the east like a slitted eye. The wind gossiped among the *alkarra* orchard's leafy boughs. The ripening fruit's sweet, syrupy scent hung thick on the air.

Again, the cry. It drifted out of the night.

Sleekfur hissed.

"Let's go find them, girl," Rantiel said.

Bow in hand, he descended the porch steps. The pantera stayed close by his side as they crossed the yard. His soft footfalls on the bridge were swallowed up by the burbling of the creek. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the diminished moonlight beneath the trees, but soon he was able to see clearly.

He should have been able to hear them by now. Giggling. Plotting their next bit of mischief. Referring to him by terms they hadn't learned at school.

But there was none of that. Only a third utterance of that uncanny cry. And a rending, splintering sound he identified all too readily.

"Wretches!" He broke into a shambling run.

Sleekfur paced him, then streaked past him. He had a momentary blurred impression of her feline form darting ahead. He saw her crouch-gather-leap, and bright terror spiked through him.

“No kill, Sleekfur, no kill!” Ah, he could just imagine the trouble if she tore the face from one of those insufferable infants. He would never hear the end of it.

The pantera screeched. Not in hunting. Not in victory. In agony.

“Sleekfur!” His terror was instantly replaced by rage. Harm his pantera, would they? Well, mayhap they’d be sent running for home with arrows in their backsides, and let them explain *that* to their families. In his day, the young had known to show proper respect!

He plunged ahead, though the shadows here were so thick as to defeat even elven sight. Sleekfur was screaming, screaming, her voice like that of a woman being tortured.

And then, even worse than the screams, came a wet ripping. Then silence.

Rantiel thought his heart might burst, whether from grief or exertion or anger he didn’t know. He grabbed for an arrow, nocked it, and charged on.

A looming shape rose up. Up and up. Hunched and awful. At the end of one long arm, it held Sleekfur’s dangling corpse. At the end of the other, which was shorter, stunted, and bulging, it held the fruit-laden branch that had been wrenched from one of the trees.

The cry came again, all challenge and fury now as the creature towered over the old man. He could not see clearly and was *glad* he could not see clearly, for what little he could see told him that this was no natural beast but something hideous and wrong.

He loosed the arrow without fully realizing he did so. The strength ran from his limbs like water. The arrow struck and buried itself harmlessly in the ground between the thing’s splay-toed, taloned feet.

“Sleekfur,” Rantiel said, in a weak croak that was barely a word at all.

The creature advanced. He could smell it, through the fragrance of the *alkarra* fruit and the hot reek of his pet’s blood. Its scent was bitter and earthy, acrid, a nose-wrinkling, sneeze-bringing scent that made him think of worms after a hard rain, drowned worms on the cobblestones.

The pantera’s torn body and the broken branch dropped, cast aside by the creature. Its mismatched arms reached out for Rantiel. He could only see that they were thorned with claws, an impossible number of claws. They ran and dripped with blood.

Rantiel closed his eyes. He knew he was going to die. His frail old form was braced for it in grim anticipation. He would die, but no one could make him *look* at the beast.

Its breath, sweet with fruit juice, washed over him and blew his thinning hair back from his face. It would be right in front of him now, its jaw surely as crowded with teeth as its hands were with claws. Teeth jutting off in all directions, pointed and vicious.

But then, as his life dangled on a thread, shouts and running feet disturbed the stillness. Rantiel heard his name being called, recognized the panicked voice of Dharra Felthris.

Air buffeted him. He felt something brush by him, something scaly and hairy and damp. Cold. There was no heat to the beast. Even its breath had been cold as a tomb. It whirled away from him, bumping him hard enough to send him sprawling.

His eyes flew open. The creature was fleeing into the deeper reaches of the orchard. It did not run upright like a man nor on all fours like an animal, but went hunched over in a clumsy yet swift lope.

Light, blindingly white and pure, spilled over him. His apprentices were there with magelights shining from their hands. Both talked at once, was he all right, what happened, where was Sleekfur – this last question bitten off in a strangled sob as the light reached the remains of the spotted pantera.

Rantiel did not answer. He groaned and pushed himself up, the scene revealed in uncompro-

missing brightness. The blood. The broken branch. Sleekfur. The tracks. Pressed deep into the soil. The tracks.

\* \* \*

“You asked for my conclusion, Constable,” Selara Viska said. “There you have it.”

She picked up a pristine white square of cloth and cleaned her hands with it, although as far as Ainvar Lynellen could see, not the slightest stain or smudge marred them. They were ivory-pale, exquisitely shaped and perfect. The sort of hands that a man might happily spend an entire evening lavishing kisses upon. The sort of hands that promised to know every detail and every secret of a man’s body.

Which, he thought, they did. Just not to bring pleasure. Hers were a physician’s hands, and not in the gentle manner of most healers. Her touch was brisk and efficient, cold and businesslike.

The rest of her, while equally lovely, was equally forbidding. Straight jet-black hair was gathered into a bun at the nape of her swanlike neck. Her face was severe in its beauty, her eyes as cool and sharp as obsidian.

“An hallucination,” Ainvar said. “You’re certain that’s all it was?”

“He is close to a thousand years old and has been breathing *alkarra* pollen for at least eight hundred of those years,” she said.

“What of the pantera?”

She sniffed. “Dead.”

“Yes, Doctor . . . I saw that much for myself when I brought it in. What slew it?”

“Its neck was wrung and its chest torn open. Either of those would have done. I cannot confidently tell you which was the cause of death.”

“Could *Tars* Herann have done it himself?”

“Hardly.”

He raised his eyebrows expectantly at her. She exhaled through pursed lips.

“Oh,” she said. “So therefore, this monster must have done it. Is that what you’re thinking, Constable? You were out there. Did you see any monsters? Any tracks?”

“The old man said there were some, but in all the confusion, his apprentices running to and fro, they trampled the ground thoroughly.”

“Have you considered *them*?” She took the cloth to her hands again, fastidious to the point of obsession. The pale skin was reddened from the rubbing. “Rantiel Herann is not well-liked. To his apprentices, he’s doubtless a tyrant. Far easier for me to believe that someone, some *person*, did this. If not the apprentices, surely there are others who’ve voiced grievances about him.”

“Many,” Ainvar said. “But none who’d do something like this. Slaughter a pantera? Pull it apart like a roast fowl? Who among us has that kind of strength?”

She looked at him then, long and speculatively. Had she been any other woman, he might have dared to hope that she was evaluating with a lover’s eye his lean archer’s build, firm jaw, and the upswept tips of his ears just visible through his chestnut hair. Not so Selara Viska.

“You are a strong man, Constable. And you’re the one to hear all these many complaints. Such a man could grow tired of them, and desire to throw a scare into an old nuisance.”

“Flattered as I am by your opinion of my strength, Doctor, you’re far afield. I am entrusted to

keep the peace.”

“If not you, someone else,” she said with a shrug. “My purpose is to treat my patient. That I shall do. He is physically unharmed but for some bruises, and his heart is weak. I expect him to be on the mend very shortly. It is, however, his mental state that concerns me. He’s not fit to be left to his own recognizance.”

“That is for him and his family to decide,” Ainvar said.

She nodded and turned to the shelves that lined one wall of the room. They were covered with glass vials and ceramic pots, all neatly labeled and free of dust, as scrupulously clean as the rest of her office. She set to rearranging them, and turned to speak to him over her shoulder. He couldn’t help admiring the way her slender body twisted, and the way her functional snow-white overtunic molded to her hips.

“Excuse me?” He grinned abashedly as he realized he hadn’t paid attention to what she said.

“A bear could have killed the pantera,” she said. “They still roam the woods, and one might have crossed over to our island. Entirely possible that he saw a bear, and his mind did the rest.”

“Ah. Yes. Thank you, Doctor.”

“Was there anything else, Constable?” she asked when a few moments had gone by and he hadn’t yet left.

“I was . . . no. Nothing. I’ll let myself out.”

He did just that, knocking himself in the brow with one curled fist when he reached the outer office and opened the door. Golden sunlight fell on him and made him aware just how cool, almost icy, that room had been. Did she utilize some magic to keep it that way? Or was it nothing more than the chill Selara Viska gave off?

Chiding himself – to think, he’d been on the verge of asking the woman if she’d like to go out for a glass of wine sometime, the more fool he – Constable Lynellen went out into the street. The physician’s building, which consisted of her office downstairs and living quarters above, was a ways removed from the main market street. Still, a respectable crowd managed to linger in the area, ostensibly on their way to see to various errands but really waiting for him. This was the talk of the town, the most excitement to rouse Eltarrin in years.

He had been sleeping in the small apartment above the guard station when a frantic Illan Norr had come pounding at his door. The reflexes he’d honed in the war had remained keen despite the town’s peacefulness, and he was out of bed with sword drawn before his eyes were all the way open. Shortly thereafter, he’d been thundering along the road in the moonlight with the youthful apprentice clinging in a death-grip to his waist.

At the orchard farmhouse, the other apprentice had been waiting. The two young plant-mages had shaped a stretcher from lengths of wood and carried the half-conscious Rantiel Herann back to the house. There, Dharra Felthis had forced an herbal sedative on him while Illan ran for help.

All the shocked man could do was mumble fitful, unnerving half-heard words. *Scales . . . claws . . . tracks . . . cold.* The apprentices had also brought back the body of the pantera – neither of them said as much but Ainvar was left with the clear impression that they cared far more for the cat than for their master – and, presumably thinking he’d want it as evidence, the stripped branch that had been broken from one of the *alkarra* trees.

Herann kept no horses, preferring to hire them at harvest time. He did keep his own wagons, though, and into one of these Ainvar and the apprentices loaded the sleeping man and the oilcloth-

wrapped body of the pantera.

The apprentices hadn't been willing to return to the farmhouse in the dark, spending what little remained of the night at the town's only inn. They were among those waiting for Ainvar as he emerged from Physician Viska's office. He went to them.

"The doctor says that he'll be well soon," he said, raising his voice enough to be sure the onlookers could hear. "She theorizes that a bear might have been responsible. I'll need some woods-wise hunters to search the orchard. Dogs, too."

A perceptible wave of relief went through the assembled crowd. A bear, of course, why had no one suggested it already? A bear, they could handle. Far better than rumors of some shaper-mage monstrosity.

"Dharra . . . *Tarsti* Felthis," Ainvar said to the young woman. "As senior apprentice, you'll come with us."

She looked both pleased and distressed by his words. She took a deep breath, steeled herself, and nodded. "Very well, Constable. What about Illan?"

"He'll stay here, should the doctor or her patient need anything," Ainvar turned to the youth with a grim smile because he knew this was the one whose careless feet had obliterated the tracks. "You, *Tars* Norr, will inform the physician of my wishes in this matter."

The youth's puzzled but hurt frown indicated that he did not know why he was being singled out, but he clearly knew a punishment when he heard one. He hung his head and trudged toward the physician's door with steps that might have been approaching the gallows.

"The rest of you leave this to us," Ainvar said, sweeping them with his gaze. "We'll have all well in hand by dusk, I assure you. Nothing to concern yourselves over."

As he mounted his horse and waved his arm to lead his small group of searchers, he fully believed what he told them and had as of yet no reason not to.

\* \* \*

His father didn't emerge from the workshop, but shouted some instructions as Nerevian left the house.

"Tepwood, if you can find it, Nerevian. And pearl-shells, but only the whole ones, mind."

"I know, *Vala*, I know." His bag swung at his side, empty except for a few tools and the parcel that held his lunch. He opened the door, smiled expectantly into the sunlight, and skipped down the street.

He stopped at the corner to turn and wave and his mother returned it from the stoop. She blew him a kiss and mouthed her usual farewell: "Be careful!"

Be careful. As if he wasn't always. Sometimes he thought she would never realize he wasn't a baby anymore. She still bathed him, laid out his clothes, cut his meat . . . once when he'd witnessed a mother bird spitting up regurgitated food for her babies, had counted himself lucky she didn't do *that* too.

They lived on a narrow, winding street that climbed toward a hill. The shrine to Valannin – the spring visitors called it quaint – at the top was a marble pedestal in the middle of a round lawn, ringed with bowers and open to the sky. On special occasions, the townsfolk came and left little tokens here, offerings of thanks to a god that Nerevian hardly knew anything about.

The few times he'd asked, his parents and teachers had given him vague answers: Valannin the Wise Lord, god of thought and scholarly pursuits. As far as Nerevian had been able to determine

for himself, Valannin and the other gods were like the ancestors. No longer around, but good to pay remembrance to all the same.

He passed the shrine with barely a glance, headed for the bower on the far side. It gave onto a path that went crookedly off into the forest, down the hillside that sloped steeply to the beach.

What he liked best about this path was the way it ended so suddenly. He'd go through the woods, seeing nothing around him but trees and bushes, and all of a sudden he'd go up one final rise and the lake would be there.

The lake was like a piece of the sky fallen to earth, reflecting the mood of the weather above it. Today, it was clear and pale blue, and along the shore the water mirrored the trees and rising mountains as well as any lookingglass. Little lapping waves rose and fell against the coast. Those wavelets provided his family's livelihood. The water-sculpted wood and stones and shells that washed ashore were what his father needed.

Someday, Nerevian would be a craftsman too. If his mother ever trusted him with a carving knife. She seemed convinced that the very instant she allowed him to even try, he'd lop off half his fingers and be maimed for life.

In the meantime, he was developing an eye for pieces that his father could use. This rounded section of log was already almost a bowl, that smooth-worn rock could easily be chipped and polished into the likeness of a horse, these shells were just right for a necklace.

He unlimbered his bag and wandered the beach in a weaving course. His gaze scanned the ground, not looking for anything but taking it all in, and that way he was better able to single out the best pieces to add to his bag.

After a while of this, his stomach spoke to him. He found a comfortable rock and sat down, the bag between his feet, while he rooted through it and came up with a sealed jug.

Turning the jug over and over, Nerevian scowled. There was a lake in front of him, a lake as fresh and clean as anybody could want. He could have just brought a cup and dipped it full. But no. The lake was full of fish scales and fisher-bird droppings and gods-knew what else. His mother would let him drink nothing but pure water on his outings, *created* water, made by magic so she'd know it was good for him.

Sighing, he reached into his bag again for his lunch. He might disagree with his mother's stance on beverages, but no one could make a better almond-butter and *alkarra* jelly breadroll than she could.

A shadow fell on the sandy, rocky beach beside him. This beach, harder to get to and arguably less scenic than the ones closer to town, was not frequented by many besides himself. Surprised but not afraid, he turned.

A greeting froze on his lips. The strap of his bag fell from nerveless hands.

He was given a sudden violent shove. Nerevian tumbled off the rock, skinning his knees and elbows. Stones dug into his back as he scabbled like a freshwater crab.

His bag was snatched up.

"That's mine, give it to me!"

Indignation overpowered his fear. He launched himself from the ground, grabbing for the bag. It was lifted beyond his reach, the way one of the bigger boys from school might laughingly hold his books while teasing him. Except the figure wasn't laughing, wasn't teasing.

At the furious glare of its eyes, the boy forgot his indignation, his lunch, the driftwood and shells he'd spent the morning collecting for his father. Terror replaced all thought.

The hideous face leered at him, snarled at him. He screamed and turned to flee but his feet tangled in themselves and sent him crashing back down. His flailing hands scraped trenches in the rocky sand and then he was up, up and running. Not into the woods, no, he'd heard enough scary stories to know that fleeing into the woods was sure doom. He'd be chased, caught, savaged, and killed.

He ran down the beach instead, shrieking for all he was worth.

Ahead was a spur of high wet-backed stones like a natural breakwater. He scaled them as fast as he could, slipping and banging his shins, rubbing his palms raw. At any moment, he just knew he'd feel that horrible hand closing around his ankle. It would yank him backward while his fingernails etched furrows in the stone.

The hand never touched him. He was up, he was over, he was rolling down the far side sure that he was about to break all his bones or pitch into the lake . . . or both, where he would drown as his shattered limbs floundered madly.

He hit a heap of rotting lake-grass. A damply fetid stink rose around him but he barely cared, so grateful for the soft, if slimy, landing.

Nerevian risked a look up, expecting to see his pursuer coming over the top. Nothing was there, nothing to see except the sky.

Not at all reassured, crying now instead of screaming, he got unsteadily to his feet. The lake-grass squelched with every step, threatening to dump him on his face. He made it to dry land without further falls, every part of him in pain, blood seeping from his hands, knees, elbows, and chin.

His chest hitching, tears turning the world into a watery waver, Nerevian was just beginning to calm down, just beginning to realize he had escaped, when he heard movement behind him.

\* \* \*



Spring 2007 Catalog

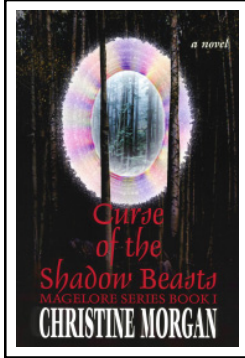
## Books & Games



The Official  
**Christine Morgan**  
Information Site  
<http://christine-morgan.com>

Always the home for online orders, free pdf demos and exclusive stories, as well as appearances, reviews and more.

*The MageLore & ElfLore Trilogy  
by Christine Morgan*



**Curse of the Shadow Beasts – MageLore Book I**

They come from beyond the walls of nightmare, hideous creatures bent on seeking and slaughtering, leaving only death and misery in their wake.

Arien Mirida knows them only too well. He has faced them before and witnessed their evil, and fears that their hunger can never be stopped.

Cat Sabledrake is about to meet the horror, when a deadly dream becomes deadlier reality.

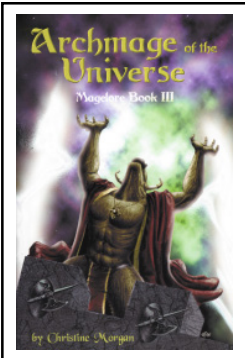
\$11.95 • 1-56315-188-X • 182 pages

**Dark of the Elvenwood – MageLore Book II**

They are the Morvalan, elves in the service of a god of destruction. To further their war against humanity, they have joined forces with the minotaur wizard Solarrin. Together, they have hatched a plot to bring about the downfall of the Northlands.

Four reunited companions are all that stand between the Morvalan and success. But as Cat, Arien, Greyquin and Alphonse brave the dangers of the woodlands, a worse peril threatens the very home that they left to save.

\$11.95 • 0-9702189-0-7 • 272 pages



**Archmage of the Universe – MageLore Book III**

He is Solarrin. Once his body was as twisted as his mind. Now inhabiting the form of a minotaur, his physical and magical prowess are without equal.

The young Highlord is his pawn. The city of Thanis is under his control. His next move will plunge the Northlands into war.

The only ones who will stand a chance against him fled on a foolish quest – to bring his predecessor back from the dead.

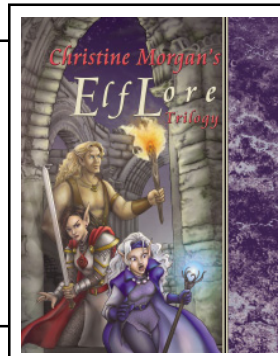
\$11.95 • 0-9702189-1-5 • 292 pages

**The ElfLore Trilogy – All 3 books in 1 volume**

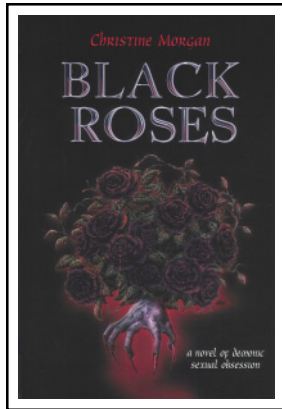
Set 20 years after the MageLore books, the ElfLore Trilogy follows the story of the next generation as they seek to find their place in a world recovering from a devastating war.

Caught up in the scheming of manipulative elves and the plots of dark warriors, Ariana Mirida and Mischa Narrin are forced to fight for their lives as they get caught up in the struggles for the Emerinian throne.

\$39.95 • 0-9771005-1-0 • 636 page hardback



*The Trinity Bay series  
by Christine Morgan*



**Black Roses – Trinity Bay Book I**

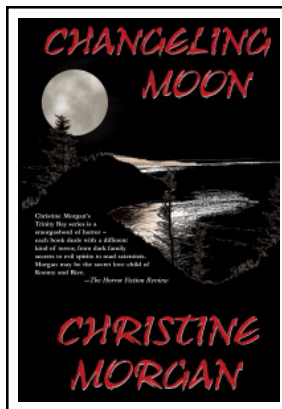
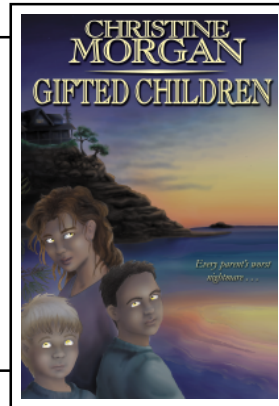
He is the man of their dreams – literally. He feeds on the sleeping minds of the women of Trinity Bay, making them believe their most forbidden fantasies are coming true. Now he has chosen the one woman he intends to be his, no matter how many people must die. Theresa Zane, newly returned to her childhood home, is drawn into a century-old mystery of sex, death, and the ominous haunting of the power behind the black roses.

\$14.95 • 0-9702189-5-8 • 300 pages

**Gifted Children – Trinity Bay Book II**

The children of Trinity Bay are like any other American kids. Lora Blake has a way with animals. Toby Edwards is the class brain. Jenny Forrester can talk her friends into anything. But in the innocent gifts of these children and others like them, someone has seen a gift of terrifying potential. Seacliff, the house on the hill, has a new secret.

\$16.95 • 0-9702189-9-0 • 372 pages



**Changeling Moon – Trinity Bay Book III**

For thousands of years, they have lived among us. Their abilities have given rise to our oldest legends and our deepest fears.

They are changelings. Shape-shifters. Hunters. Creatures of the night. Ruled by the moon, and by their own savage hungers.

To them, we are prey.

Now they have come to Trinity Bay, where one troubled young woman will be caught in the midst of their deadly conflict.

\$14.95 • 0-9771005-0-2 • 284 pages

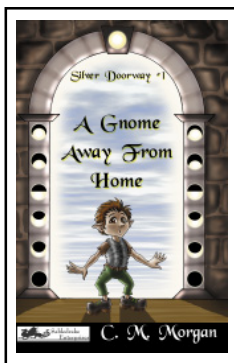
*The Silver Doorway series  
by C. M. Morgan*

Life is complicated for the Broderick kids. They've just moved to a new neighborhood. Their parents are having problems. Mom is always busy with work, Dad is always busy on his computer. Half the time, it seems like they forget they even have children.

The kids are having problems too. Twelve-year-old Katie doesn't like having to take care of little brother Sam. Katie's twin Kevin is only interested in sports, and is mad at Mom and Dad. Eight-year-old Sam can't stand being bossed around by Katie.

The rest of the family thinks Dad's sister, Aunt Ellie, is weird. But when the kids discover a secret room in Aunt Ellie's basement, and a glowing silver doorway that leads to another world, they realize how weird their aunt really is.

Other kids sometimes come through that door. Kids from a world where magic is real, and so are gnomes, elves, goblins, and dragons. They come through the door looking for help from a good sorceress. Instead, they get Katie, Kevin and Sam.



**A Gnome Away From Home – Silver Doorway #1**

Marky of Gnome Keep is lost and alone. He can't find Pip, his puppy. He can't find his way out of the woods. To make matters worse, some giant owls have decided to have him for dinner.

When Dad doesn't show up to get them after Kevin's game, the Broderick kids decide to walk to Aunt Ellie's house. She isn't at home, so they use the spare key.

A sneeze leads them down to the basement, where they follow a little gnome back through the door . . .

\$6.99 • 0-9702189-2-3 • 104 pages

**Dwarves in the Dark – Silver Doorway #2**

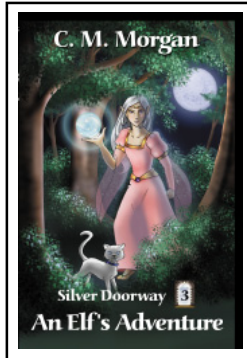
Stone Hammerfine and Sam Broderick might be from different worlds, one of them a dwarven boy and one of them a human boy, but they have something in common. Mean, bossy sisters!

Sam decides to prove he's not a baby by going off to find Stone all by himself. But when giant spiders want to tie them up in webs, and robbers with axes chase them through the dark tunnels, Sam and Stone wonder if maybe this time, just once, they should have listened to their sisters after all.

\$6.99 • 0-9702189-3-1 • 104 pages



Silver Doorway books are written for younger readers, ages 7-12.



### **An Elf's Adventure – Silver Doorway #3**

The world on the other side of the Doorway is a dangerous place, full of giant owls, spiders, goblins, and robbers. So, just in case, Kevin gets a lesson in how to use a sword from Aunt Ellie's boyfriend, Cal.

The kids are spending the whole week with Aunt Ellie, when someone comes through the Doorway. She is the most beautiful girl Kevin has ever seen. She's an elf, able to cast magic spells, and she is on a quest for an enchanted cup that will make her divorcing parents fall in love again. She needs help. She needs someone to protect her.

\$6.99 • 0-9702189-4-X • 104 pages

### **Dragon on the Loose – Silver Doorway #4**

Katie thinks that she is going to have a peaceful day. Her brothers are playing video games. She is spending a pleasant afternoon reading . . . until she gets a phone call from Aunt Ellie's cat.

With Ellie gone, Chester knows that there are only three people he can turn to for help. There is no time to waste! A baby dragon is on the loose in Luna Park!

And catching the baby turns out to be just the start of their problems. They have to take the baby home to its mother, but where is its mother?

\$6.99 • 0-9702189-7-4 • 104 pages



### **Orcs Ahoy! – Silver Doorway #5**

Sam Broderick thinks he's got it bad.

That is, he does until he meets Druush. Druush has it a lot worse.

Chagro, the fiercest warrior in the Empire of Gerosh, wants to marry Druush's mother. But before he can, he has to get rid of one thing – her son.

The people of Gerosh are seagoing orcs – strong, tough and blood-thirsty. On his own, there is no way Druush would survive. He needs help. He needs a way to convince the emperor to spare his life.

\$6.99 • 0-9702189-8-2 • 104 pages

### **The Alchemist's Girl – Silver Doorway #6**

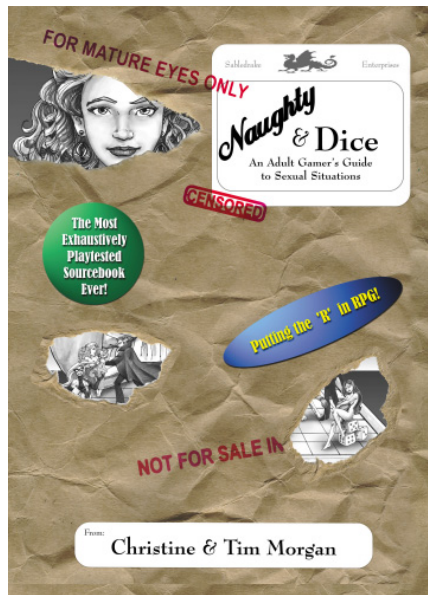
After all of their adventures, keeping the secret of the Silver Doorway has been difficult. But it becomes impossible when hostile wizards from the other side send their magic against Aunt Ellie and Chester.

Katie, Kevin and Sam must find help on both sides of the Doorway in order to rescue their Aunt, but can they do it in time?

*Coming in May, 2007*

\$6.99 • 0-9771005-2-9 • 104 pages

## Roleplaying Games



### Naughty & Dice: An Adult Gamer's Guide to Sexual Situations

Written by Origins Award nominated author Christine Morgan and 20+ year gaming veteran and game store manager Tim Morgan, *Naughty & Dice* takes a light-hearted yet serious look at the topic of sex in RPGs. The tone of the book is centered around themes of tolerance and respect. It is recommended for mature readers, and is easily adaptable to any roleplaying game system.

*Naughty & Dice* includes chapters on:

- instructions for factoring a character's "Sexuality" statistic.
- rules for sexual gifts, drawbacks and abilities.
- character types and adventure ideas.
- pregnancy, contraception and sexually transmitted diseases.
- enchanted items, spells, potions, and types of sex-related magic.
- an overview of sex in history, mythology and folklore.
- genre-specific looks at horror, aliens and fantasy races.
- OGL conversions, feats and classes.
- and much more!

\$19.95 • 0-9702189-6-6 • 108 pages

Available in March 2007  
through Key20 Games!

## Simulacrum RPG

And look for *Ellis: Kingdom in Turmoil* featuring the **Simulacrum Roleplaying System**, by Tim Morgan, coming in 2007 or 2008 from Sabledrake Enterprises. We're still working on the final size and price, but check out <http://sabledrake.com> or <http://SimulacrumRPG.com> for updates, demos and up-to-date information.

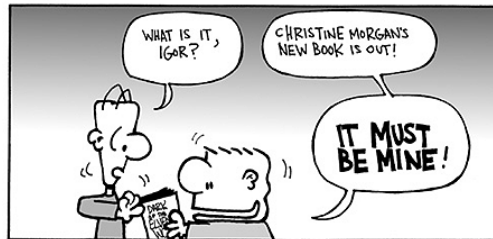
### Tell No Tales

The latest hot reality television program is in the works, blending historical re-creation with physical challenges, mental strategy, and emotional manipulation. On the Caribbean island of Veradoga, a dozen contestants and the show's production team get more than they bargain for when world events and the island's haunted history combine to make it anything but a game.

\$TBA • 0-9771005-3-7 • ??? pages

Coming  
in  
July,  
2007

*Christine Morgan*



Artwork © John Kovalic.  
All Rights Reserved.  
Used with permission.

In addition to the works presented here, Christine Morgan's writing has appeared in many magazines and story anthologies.

"Coppers, the Alchemist" in *Pyramid Magazine* #17.

"The Reaching Wall" in *Cthulhu Sex Magazine* #14, Vol 2.

Several entries in *GURPS Villians*.

"The Dawn of the Living Impaired" in *The Book of All Flesh*.

"Seven Brains, Ten Minutes" in *The Book of Final Flesh*.

"I Am . . ." in *Leather, Lace & Lust*.

"Safe Sucks" in *Closet Desires IV*.

"Monsters" in *Path of the Bold*.

"Don't Look Back" in *Fear of the Unknown*.

"Death and the Scream Queen" in *Hell Hath No Fury*.

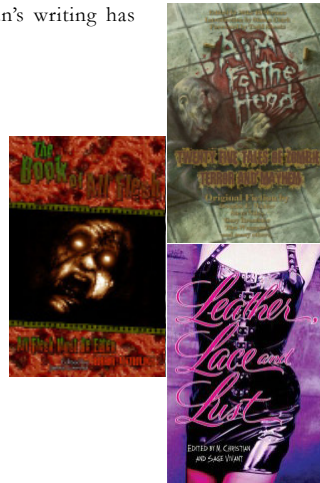
"Easting for Two" in *Dreaded Pall*

and coming soon . . .

"Family Life" in *Aim for the Head*.

Sabledrake Enterprises keeps a few copies of most of these in stock and we can fill orders on a first come, first served basis for anyone interested.

Visit <http://www.christine-morgan.com> for the latest information.





**Sabledrake  
Enterprises**  
*Order Form*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ **Sabledrake Enterprises**  
 Address: \_\_\_\_\_ **PO Box 30751**  
 \_\_\_\_\_ **Seattle, WA 98113**  
 City: \_\_\_\_\_  
 State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_ **425-317-9241 phone**  
 Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ **772-673-2381 fax**  
 E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_ **sabledrake@sabledrake.com**

Quan	Item or SKU	Price	Subtotal
<b>Shipping (\$3.50 for US Media Rate)</b>			
<b>TOTAL</b>			

**Item Recap:**

Curse of the Shadow			A Gnome Away		
Beasts	SDK 1880	\$11.95	from Home	SDK 8923	\$6.99
Dark of the Elvenwood	SDK 8907	\$11.95	Dwarves in the Dark	SDK 8931	\$6.99
Archmage of the			An Elf's Adventure	SDK 8940	\$6.99
Universe	SDK 8915	\$11.95	Dragon on the Loose	SDK 8974	\$6.99
The ElfLore Trilogy	SDK 0510	\$39.95	Orcs Ahoy!	SDK 8982	\$6.99
Black Roses	SDK 8958	\$14.95	The Alchemist's Girl	SDK 0529	\$6.99
Gifted Children	SDK 8990	\$16.95	Naughty & Dice	SDK 8966	\$19.95
Changeling Moon	SDK 0502	\$14.95	Tell No Tales	SDK 0537	\$1BA