

# Power Worth Having

A tale of fantasy

By John Frazer

Autumn came early for the northern kingdom of Paragrad. The ripe barley swayed heavily in the fields as a long line of Lord Swordwain's men advanced with a rhythmic swinging of scythes. The sun was high over the golden hills, and the air smelled of cut grass. It was a busy time, but not everyone was working.

The kitchen maid and the magician's apprentice lay together in a small, secret space - between the lord's barn and his fragrant, dark green hedges. It was stifling, but they didn't care. They'd have been hot anyway.

Her hair was a pale, straw blond and her eyes were the sharpest crystalline blue, but she was not beautiful.

She was not beautiful, but she was, in a way, appealing. Her greasy skin and flushed complexion spoke of her enthusiasm, ripe as it was with the promise of clumsy sensuality. She may have laughed a little too quickly and a little too loud, but she was happy, and her joy gave her ownership of the moment.

For her part, Prudella was intoxicated by the young magician's apprentice. As she rested her head on his shoulder, she inhaled his unwashed musk. The scent of his body thrilled her in strange and confusing ways, but underneath the dirt and sweat, he smelled of pungent and unfamiliar herbs, suggestive of the exotic secrets he surely must have learned in the house of the Magician, and that excited her most of all.

His name was Valon. He was dirty and underfed, and he wobbled when he stood, but he was quiet and sensitive, and she thought he was beautiful.

"My brother doesn't like you," she said, too loudly. Prudella had not yet mastered the lovers' whisper, and wouldn't for many years. She gulped out her conversation to fill the silence, desperately wanting Valon to think she was smart.

"He says he and his friends pass by the Magician's house every day and you always ignore them when they try and talk to you."

Valon said nothing, but Prudella could feel him retreating to a dark place. She tried to cheer him up.

"Like you would have anything to say to those meat-heads," she laughed. "You'd probably try talking about magic and they'd be like: 'duh, where do you put the shovel?'" When she imitated her brother, Prudella made a face she would later find acutely embarrassing. Valon laughed.

"Your brother's not that bad," he said. Prudella hugged him tightly.

"You're a lot nicer than I would be," she said. "If I were a magician, I wouldn't want anything to do with normal people."

Valon didn't correct her. He was too far into his own thoughts to notice Prudella's vulnerability. Her comment hung, unanswered, in the silence.

Cursing herself for feeling so small, she tried to continue. "You're so lucky to be learning a real profession like magic. My

parents say I have to work in the Lord's kitchens until I get married." She looked pathetically hopeful. This time Valon noticed. He stared at her with his intense brown eyes.

"I can't marry you, Prudella. I want to, but the Magician says I will never get married."

"Oh," she gasped. "Is it a magic thing? Like maybe celibacy lets you call upon the power of the earth? Is that why the Magician doesn't have a husband?"

"I don't know. All I know is that she doesn't like it when I think about girls. She caught me writing a poem for you and . . ." At this point Valon touched her shoulder, reflexively. ". . . and she didn't like it."

"You wrote me a poem!?" It was more a scream than a question.

"I don't really remember it. The paper got destroyed."

"That sucks. I really want to hear it now."

"I could try to remember."

"That would be so great," she said.

Valon nodded, and disentangled himself. He stood awkwardly. Prudella thought he looked manly. He didn't.

"I'll warn you, it's not very good."

"I'll bet it is," said Prudella.

"All right," he began, and when he spoke the words of his poem, he seemed to grow larger. Valon may have been a trembling wisp of a boy, but he was also a magician in training. His voice had power.

"Lips like granite.

An inseparable whole  
With the soul of a mountain.  
Grind me and ground me.  
The weight of ages  
Is happily borne.  
Open for me  
The cave of your womb.  
When I enter,  
I shall find  
The mystery of generations."

Prudella didn't understand. And what she understood, she wasn't sure she liked. But she didn't want to admit that to Valon. She tried to spare his feelings.

"Wow," she said, "that was great. I'm sure you'll make a great magician someday."

"It's all right if you didn't like it," Valon said. "I didn't really have a chance to perfect it."

"I liked the part about my-" she hesitated, blushing, "-my womb."

Valon froze and refused to meet her eye. She worried that she had scared him, that she had been too forward. Tentatively, she touched his leg.

"I like your womb too," he said.

Prudella shrieked, laughing. "You're so bad!"

Valon breathed heavily. He looked like he was panicking.

Prudella grabbed his face and stared deeply into his eyes. She aimed for soulful, and wound up pouty, but it seemed to work.

"Maybe you'll open it for me," Valon said. As he said it, he cringed, but he needn't have worried. Prudella was knocked speechless.

Secretly, she had long wanted this, but did she want it now, here? She looked down at her hand and saw that it was trembling. She couldn't remember why she had ever wanted to wait.

"All right Valon, take me, but be gentle." It was the line she had rehearsed in her fantasies. She thought it sounded sexy and mature. Her eyes watered, and her smile cramped as she waited for Valon to respond, but he eventually nodded in agreement, and inwardly, she allowed herself to laugh with triumph.

Their kiss, like all of their kisses up to that point, was inept, but so laden was it with expectation that it exploded through their young bodies in an unstoppable wave of pleasure. Prudella couldn't bring herself to think about the bony elbow digging painfully into her stomach. She wanted Valon's lips.

Valon tried to retreat, but Prudella wouldn't let him. She attacked his lips and chin and neck. Once, she even kissed the tip of his nose. What she lacked in aim, she made up for in passion. Her fingers rummaged frantically through his hair, jerking his head to the side whenever she caught one of his tangles. She barely noticed. She was in a strange, erotic dimension all her own.

Valon gasped for air between kisses. He cautiously placed a hand

on Prudella's breast. She yelped when he squeezed it, and glared at him when he tried to pull away. Thereafter, his touch was apologetic, yet pleasant.

And it was there, between the barn and the hedge, with the men working in the fields and the cows lowing gently in the pasture, that the two would have consummated their adolescent love - had the Magician not arrived.

The Magician was tall and gaunt. There was a shadow of regal beauty in her strong jaw and imperial eyes, but that was another life, one long since withered away by cruelty. Though ancient, she was by no means frail. The power that animated her could humble a hale young man. Her eyes were lit with fury.

When she spoke, it was with the Sorcerous Voice. Against such power, Prudella had no defenses. The Magician's viciousness shredded her tender, young heart.

"Imagine my *surprise*," the Magician said, "when I returned home to find my garden untended. *Naturally*, I was filled with *trepidation*. Maybe something had *happened* to my *dear apprentice*. I wouldn't have *worried* if I knew he was with the village **SLUT!**"

With that last word, Prudella burst into tears. She righted herself and attempted to flee. The Magician grabbed her arm, bruising it with her unnatural grip.

"Don't you dare try to hide from me Prudella Harverson. I can see straight into your heart. I know every dirty, wicked, slimy thought you ever had. I can see them squirming around in your head."

"No," Prudella gasped.

"Yes, my darling little skank. I know you better than you know yourself. You may have fooled your brother and your friends and your mother. You may even have fooled the boy, but you don't fool me. You never loved my apprentice, You just wanted to be close to the magic."

"That's not true," sobbed Prudella.

The Magician stiffened. Her other hand lashed out and closed around Prudella's throat. The Magician lifted her off the ground.

"How dare you call me a liar. I could kill you with the effort it takes to close my hand, and the blood price I'd pay wouldn't trouble me in the slightest."

Valon whimpered. Prudella looked, pleadingly, into his eyes, but saw only indecision. The Magician noticed his discomfort and smiled.

"You look unhappy, Valon. Am I hurting your precious little fuckhole?" Prudella flailed ineffectually against the Magician, her face already darkening from a lack of air.

"I'll make you a deal, boy. If you ask me nicely, I'll spare her life."

"P-please," Valon stuttered, "don't hurt her."

The Magician laughed. "Nope, sorry. Not good enough." Valon gasped. The Magician stared icily. "Is there a problem, boy?"

For a moment, through the dizziness and pain, Prudella allowed her heart to hope. Surely her dashing young magician would rise to her defense and drive away this monstrous witch.

Valon stared, wide-eyed, but said nothing. The Magician loosened



her grip on Prudella's throat.

She whispered in her ear, "Do you understand now, how much he cares for you? Even to save your miserable life, he won't say a word against me. Valon belongs to me, now and forever. If I ever again see you flashing your cunt around him, I won't be so merciful by half."

The Magician threw Prudella to the ground. Crying and choking, the young girl ran away. Behind her, she heard the Magician's final taunt.

"Listen well, boy," she said, "There is nothing you can possess that I can't destroy. . ."

## Chapter 1

It was a dark night, fifteen years ago, when an old woman slunk into Swordswain Manor, bearing with her a bawling infant. No one knew who she was or where she came from, but she quickly gained the ear of Lord Swordswain, and her advice allowed him to outmaneuver his fellow counts in their various ongoing rivalries.

They called her the Magician, or if they were bold, the Witch, or the Sorceress. Nobody liked her much, though in the dark of night many cut through the Lord's forest to seek out her ramshackle cottage of unmortared stones. She was clever and wise, and could see through any deception. She knew many secrets of the forest and field and air. She performed abortions, silenced nightmares, and gave ruthlessly pragmatic romantic advice.

She wasn't exactly helpful, but she was useful, and through that usefulness gradually won a wary acceptance. As for the dirty, bug-eyed child she kept with her, the villagers rarely thought of him at all. Quite deliberately, they rarely thought of him at all.

Valon didn't know how he came to live with the Magician. He couldn't remember a time when he hadn't lived with her. For the first few years of his life, he thought she was his mother. There was even a time when he was foolish enough to ask her about it.

"Mistress," he said, late one evening, when the hearth flickered merrily, and the Magician relaxed in her hand-carved oaken chair, her mood less foul than usual, "are you my mother?"

The question took her by surprise, and when she answered, she neglected to use the Voice. "Where would you get a stupid idea like that," she replied, scathing even in her normal tone.

"Um, the other children . . . They . . . They live with their mothers and fathers. And I, um, live with you. So I . . . I thought that maybe . . . you were my mother."

The Magician softened. Her eyes glowed with kindness. She caressed the boy's cheek in an astonishingly nurturing gesture. Valon would remember it as the happiest moment of his young life. "My dear child," she said, her Sorcerous Voice dripping with sweetness. "Of course I'm not your mother. **If I ever thought my womb could spit out such a cancerous little wretch, I would kill myself in shame.**"

His instincts dulled by the unexpected pantomime of kindness, Valon could not dodge the Magician's slap. It sent him sprawling to the floor.

"Just to disabuse you of any romantic notions that you may be entertaining, let me be absolutely clear. I am not your mother. I did not find you abandoned in a basket and take pity on you. I did not kidnap you from a loving home.

"I bought you. Your parents didn't want you, so they sold you to me for a goat and a good steel knife. The family pig would have cost me more."

She laughed at the cruelty of her story before continuing, "And they couldn't have thought they were giving you a better life. Before I retired, I had quite the reputation, and I made sure they knew who

I was before I paid them. They probably thought I was going to eat you or use you for a magical experiment. Whatever it is they thought I would do, they were sure glad to be rid of you. If I hadn't come along, they'd have probably left you on the trash heap to starve.

"And I know what you're thinking, boy. 'She bought me from those horrible people, so she must have wanted me for something.' You're right. I did want you for something. I bought you because I wanted a slave, someone weak and stupid I could hurt whenever I got bored and who could clean my house whenever I didn't feel like using magic to do it."

Valon bawled, and tried to flee, but the Magician's cottage had only one room, and there was nowhere to hide. Pinned by the wicked old woman's gaze, he collapsed and cried, trying desperately to ignore the sound of her laughter.

By the next day, he'd recovered, but she would not let it drop. For months afterward, at seemingly random moments, she would audibly muse, "Maybe it's time to trade up for a new pig," or, "It's a shame I lost touch with your mother. I'm feeling a bit peckish, and I'm sure she's squeezed out another brat by now."

When he stopped bursting into tears, she eventually lost interest, but Valon never forgot. He buried his anger down deep, and tried to stay out of the Magician's way.

She didn't make it easy for him. She seemed to delight in petty cruelty. He could not walk across the room without her trying to trip him. If he kept his distance, she laughed and called him a coward.

That was almost worse. The Magician's voice had a way of worming itself into the darkest corners of his heart.

At other times, she would poke him or slap him or kick him, often for no apparent reason. She always smiled after she did it, so maybe it made her happy.

Valon did not enjoy his childhood. But it wasn't all bad. On his tenth birthday, the Magician delivered a stunning announcement. "I've decided I want an apprentice."

Valon didn't know what to say. He suspected some fresh game, but he couldn't restrain his hope. It was nice to think that she did have some use for him after all.

In his excitement, he forgot that the Magician could see right into his heart. "Don't get too full of yourself," she said. "I'm just sick of sharing my house with a moron. To a sensitive like myself, your inane, uneducated thoughts fill the room like a foul stench. If the situation doesn't improve, and soon, I'll be forced to tie you up outside."

That night, she tied him up outside anyway. The joke was on her, though. It was the best night's sleep Valon had in months.

Over the next few weeks, Valon was beaten more frequently and more fiercely than any other time of his life. He learned slowly, and the Magician did not tolerate mistakes, but it was worth it. She was teaching him to read.

His favorite was history. He loved reading about the goblin

wars, and how the High King of Aurel united the seven human kingdoms to fight back against the invading horde. It seemed to annoy the Magician that he was taking pleasure in his studies, but it was with those books that he made the fastest progress and the fewest mistakes, and apparently, this once, her impatience outweighed her arbitrary malice.

He liked to imagine what it would be like to fight beside the High King, to be a member of the legendary Council of White Magicians. He would single-handedly defeat the goblin clans, and be the savior of humanity.

The Magician smacked the daydreams out of him. She had impeccable timing that way. Valon eventually concluded that was why she *really* made him her apprentice. It was more fun to abuse someone who had at least some small happiness to ruin.

As the seasons passed, and he gained proficiency in the basics of the craft, she gave him more advanced lessons. When he was twelve, she taught him the Three Laws of Magic:

You always give others the permission they need to hurt you.

Everything in this world wants to hurt you.

In the eyes of the Creator, you are no better than a piece of dirt.

It was a little disheartening to Valon, to hear the fundamental laws of the universe broken down in this way, but the Magician knew

what she was talking about. What she lacked in maternal instinct, she made up for in magical power. If she said those laws were the source of her abilities . . . well, she was probably lying, but she was almost certainly not mistaken.

For the next two years, he learned a lot, but no spells. The Magician said she would teach him, "when he could be trusted," which Valon eventually came to understand meant "never." Not that he would have time to master sorcery. His chores became more numerous and more onerous. Many nights he went to bed hungry and sore, but the Magician also expected him to keep up with his academic discipline, and beat him whenever he could not answer one of her questions.

It nearly drove him to his breaking point, but one day, a miracle happened. The Magician disappeared. He was fourteen years old, and for the first time in his life, he was alone.

At first, he naturally suspected a trap. He searched the entire house for her. He looked behind the faded drapes, donated from the castle and hung on the Magician's walls. He lifted up the floor-mats of woven reeds.

Then he searched around the house, in the herb garden, and under the outhouse, and in the isolated grove where the Magician went to meditate and "escape his adolescent man-stench."

There weren't many places to hide, and she wasn't in any of them. He considered making a break for it.

He couldn't do it, though. He wasn't entirely sure she was gone,

and even if she was, she'd still be able to track him. Besides, he didn't have anywhere to go. So, he waited for her return.

As the hours stretched into days, he began to grow comfortable in solitude. He didn't have to censor his own thoughts. He could sleep late. There was even a small amount of food left in the house. That's what convinced him the Magician's absence was genuine. If she was trying to torture him, she'd have either left no food at all, or such a large amount he'd be tempted to eat his fill. As it was, he had to ration his supplies carefully, and he could see no amusement in her teaching him to act responsibly.

As he came to appreciate the joys of privacy, Valon grew bolder. He slept in the Magician's elegant feather bed, and laughed giddily when he wasn't punished the next day. He searched through the cottage's cupboards, looking for interesting trinkets. He sampled the Magician's small stock of wine, but with his grumbling stomach, it simply made him sick. He read the books the Magician had previously forbidden.

He was especially interested in a book called, *An Account of the Fall of Golma*. He'd thought he'd read all of the Magician's history books, but for some reason, he'd never noticed this one before. It was really interesting, reading about how the Golmans invented so much of what seemed so basic, before they discovered opium, and fell into decadence and decline.

That's when it took a turn for the weird. The Golman priests practiced a strange religion. They believed that women were the earth



in human form. So, out of every generation, the most beautiful women were selected to be the temple dancers, and dressed in brown silk and gold. And at the end of each winter, the priests would hold a big, public dance, and the dancers would dance in front of everyone. The men who watched would strip off their clothes and throw them at the dancers. Then the dancers would choose "the men they liked best" (Valon couldn't quite understand why that line was italicized) and tie them to a big, stone table.

Then they would . . .

Valon stopped.

His dick had gotten hard.

That had happened to him before, but whenever the Magician noticed, she hit him until it went back to normal. This time, the Magician wasn't here. For some reason he couldn't explain, he felt guilty about that.

He gently touched his swollen penis.

It felt weird.

He touched it some more, and decided that weird was good. He kept touching it.

In retrospect, it was an obvious trap. What happened was inevitable. Valon was a young man, not healthy, but not broken. Even for him, it was natural to experiment.

And so it was, with the boy in her bed, erection in hand, that the Magician returned.

Valon panicked. He expected punishment. He expected shrieking.

He expected cruel innuendo in the poisonous Voice. What he got was worse.

"Finish," she said. She stared directly into his eyes when she said it. Her voice was harsh, but flat. Valon wasn't sure whether he was being punished or propositioned.

He tried to continue, but he wilted under the old woman's relentless gaze. The Magician beat him brutally that night. She said he was a failure as a man.

A month later, the Magician commanded him to return a book to Lord Swordswain's library. He saw, bitterly, that it was *An Account of the Fall of Golma*.

## Chapter 2

Valon slumped away towards Lord Swordswain's house. He was glad to be out of the Magician's sight. When she sent him on the errand, she told him to take the servant's entrance, because "she didn't want the nobility to know what a noxious little scab her apprentice was." She could never just give an order.

He should have been used to it by now, but it still upset him. Sniffling, he lingered in the Lord's library, drinking in the light from tall, glass windows, and running his hands along the rough leather bindings of the accumulated tomes on the clean and ordered shelves. It was a quiet, sacred place, and it was difficult for him to leave.

When he returned to the cottage, twenty minutes late, he received a beating for his delay.

His bruises were still yellow and tender when the Magician sent him back to the library, to borrow another book. Over the protests of his aching muscles, he sprinted to the Lord's manor, determined not to make the same mistake again. When he got home, the Magician beat him for taking too long.

When it was time to return the book, he ran even faster. He stumbled back into the cottage, red-faced and slick with sweat. The evil old woman grinned wickedly before raising her fist.

As he endured her blows, he realized that the Magician simply enjoyed beating him, and she'd do it even without a pretext.

The next time she sent him on an errand, he stopped in the library and browsed the titles. Even the names of the books suggested entire worlds he had yet to explore. He didn't stay for long, though. Despite his brief fit of defiance, he still feared the Magician's wrath.

On the way out, he noticed a kitchen maid staring at him. She offered him a cup of water, holding it out tentatively, as if she were afraid of him. He drank it, but couldn't bring himself to look her in the eye.

When he returned, his punishment was no worse than usual.

Valon thrilled at the revelation. He had power over the Magician. The stupid bitch was so reflexively cruel that it didn't matter what he did. He would be punished for perfection just as surely as he would for delinquency. The knowledge filled him with a tremendous sense of freedom.

For the next few months, the Magician continued to send him on various errands, and he continued to take increasing liberties with his time away. He would take the long path through the village and stare the white-hot metal on the Manor blacksmith's forge, or surreptitiously watch the farmers with their big heaps of summer produce. He would sit for hours in the Lord's library, reading everything he could get his hands on. The kitchen maid seemed really interested in him. He almost felt like a normal boy.

He wondered how it was possible. The Magician could hear his thoughts. She must have known what he was doing, but she didn't put a

stop to it. He should have sensed his danger, but his new life was so nice, he didn't dare question it too closely.

So, he let Prudella lead him behind the hedges, and the trap was sprung. He realized, belatedly, that it was all a trick. The Magician had gotten tired of tormenting him in her usual way and decided to play a game with his life. She could see into people's hearts. She knew how they would react, what they would do. She probably met Prudella at the Manor before she got the idea to send him on that first errand.

Valon screamed. It wasn't fair. No matter what he did, the Magician would make him suffer for it. And he could never beat her, could never make her understand the humiliation he felt, because she was strong and he was weak. Even if he managed to get the upper hand, she would find a way to crush him.

And that's when he had the idea. It filled him with astonishing clarity. He knew of a way he could beat her. He knew of a way he could use his weakness as a weapon.

He would try to kill the Magician. Naturally, he would not succeed. The Magician had the strength of three men and decades of experience. He was malnourished and feeble. He could never win, but his plan did not require victory.

All he would have to do is present a credible threat. She would have no choice but to end him. Inwardly, he gloated. He would force her to break her favorite toy and he would be free. He laughed at the thought of her fury when she realized he had escaped her.

He thought, with grim pleasure, about the mess his body would make when he died. As he waited for the Magician to come back from tormenting Prudella, he fantasized about spurting blood and failing bowels, and all the ways he could make his death as ugly as possible. None were practical, but they would have been satisfying.

The sun was setting when the Magician returned home. Valon felt a chill of fear at the thought of the Magician discovering his plan. He quickly mastered his thoughts and channeled his fear towards her. She would like that. She was always more forgiving when he was afraid.

She walked past him with barely a glance. "Get inside," she said blandly. "Prepare my dinner."

She paid him no attention as he boiled her nightly gruel. Valon seethed. Stirring furiously, his eyes locked on the neatly labeled clay bottles stacked carefully beside the hearth. Each one contained a different herb, preserved by magic. He read the labels one by one. *Tarragon. Cumin. Saffron. Nightshade.* His heart froze. It would be so easy. She wouldn't even notice.

The Magician sighed. "Valon, do these sudden murderous thoughts of yours have anything with how I dealt with your little pussy pal today?"

Valon cursed himself for being so sloppy. He mustered all of his anger to push his true plan out of his head. "What do you mean, Mistress," he asked through gritted teeth.

"You are depressingly transparent, boy. You think I chased away

your one true love. If you were any kind of man at all, you'd be thanking me for sparing you the lifelong embarrassment of losing your virginity to that chicken-necked hussy."

Valon grunted. "Yes, Mistress."

Later, they ate in silence, she in her fine chair of gnarly, oil-darkened wood, him hunched on the floor. Uncharacteristically, the Magician did not try to ruin his meal. When they were finished, she touched his shoulder. Ignoring his flinch, she said, softly, "You are better than her." He hated her for saying it, but he hated himself more for not throwing the words back in her face.

That night, after the Magician had fallen asleep, he crawled away from his accustomed spot at the foot of the Magician's bed. Moving carefully, to avoid the crunch of his hands and knees on the reed mats of the cottage floor, he made his way to the far end of the room, where the Magician kept her tools.

He needed a weapon. The knives wouldn't do. They were made of an exotic black metal, and were enchanted never to spill the blood of their owner. Most of the other tools were too light or too unwieldy. He settled on the fireplace poker.

Carefully, he crept towards the Magician's bed, weapon in hand. Gasping for breath, he raised it over his head. Nothing happened. The Magician snored lightly.

He slammed the iron rod down, as hard as he could.

The Magician's face exploded in a shower of blood. Valon looked down at the shattered pulp of her nose and the livid gash that

bisected her upper lip. He felt -

- Aroused.

But it was a bad time to stand transfixed. The Magician wasn't dead. She opened her eyes.

Valon tried to lift the poker for a second strike. He was too slow. Her first blow knocked the weapon from his hand. Her second slammed him to the floor.

She pinned him quickly, pressing her elbow into his throat. He started to lose consciousness, grateful, at least, that part of his plan would succeed.

The Magician had other ideas. She straddled him and held open his jaw. Her blood dripped onto his chin and into his mouth. He choked and bucked his hips into hers.

"How do I taste," the Magician gasped, grinding herself into his growing erection.

Valon was broken. He couldn't kill her, he couldn't die, and now, his traitorous body was responding to the heat of his enemy's sex. He whimpered.

The evil old woman chuckled. Though she was long out of practice, she was very experienced. She quickly had him inside her.

To his lasting shame, Valon ejaculated inside the horny old witch. It didn't take long. It was his first orgasm, and it filled him with a paralytic shiver. When he recovered, he sobbed miserably. He fell asleep on the floor next to the Magician's bed.



## Chapter 3

Valon awoke in the Magician's bed. She was already awake. She had bandaged her wounds during the night. The smell of unguents and sex filled the air.

He was naked. He felt like he had been dipped in slime.

"I- . . . Wha-" He had trouble collecting his thoughts. The Magician did it for him.

"You tried to kill me," she said. "I don't blame you, but I took my compensation from your body, regardless."

She paused, thoughtfully. "You didn't seem to enjoy it."

Valon remembered. He was too exhausted to cry out, but he felt the heaving vertigo of guilt. He was truly the Magician's creature now. After what he did, no one else would want him.

When the Magician next spoke, her tone was dull and businesslike. "Don't be such a child, Valon. I've been waiting for this day for years. I knew it was only a matter of time before you found it in yourself to take a life."

Valon was shocked, not by the insinuation about his character, but by the lack of judgment in her tone.

"I-"

"Shut up," the Magician snapped, but she did it gently. "Get dressed. Today is the day I reveal the final secret of your training."

On their way out the door, she handed him a loaf of bread.

"You'll need your strength," she said.

The Magician did not exaggerate. Together, they left the town far behind. They passed by the men working in the fields. Moved by a surge of bitterness, Valon waved at Prudella's brother. Together, he and the Magician laughed at the young man's stifled rage.

Past the fields, they brazenly trespassed through the Lord's private woods. The serenity of their surroundings seemed to have a calming effect on the Magician. Though she was by no means kind, she was unusually patient. When Valon, unused to the extended exertion, stumbled and fell, she offered him gruff, mocking assistance. When she insulted him, she did it playfully. She did not use the Voice to flay his spirit.

Despite his exhaustion, Valon felt good. He felt like his whole life up to this point had been a test, that the Magician, in her twisted way, was trying to help him, to forge him into her protege.

He had always thought of himself as a hero, and it stung to let go of his dreams, but being a villain wouldn't be so bad. He would learn from the Magician, and become strong. He would humiliate her like she humiliated him.

He imagined himself fighting the Magician. He would knock aside her black steel knife with a casual flick of his wrist. He'd punch her hard, in the stomach, force her to kneel before him. Then he would unbuckle his pants-

"Valon," the Magician snapped. "There will be plenty of time for that later. Now you need to concentrate. We still have a long way to

go."

And they did. The fierce autumn sun had set. The night cooled unpleasantly. The lands of Lord Swordswain were behind them. Valon was utterly exhausted. He collapsed.

The Magician knelt next to him. The walk hadn't affected her at all. She stroked his hair, and spoke to him with the Voice, but its power was mild and supportive, like a wave of warm water.

*"I'm not really in the mood to delay," she said. "I need you to keep going. I'm going to teach you a magic spell."*

Valon was dizzy and panting, and lying in the abrasive, rocky soil of the Paragadran highlands, but suddenly, he was uncomfortable. "W-why now," he mumbled.

*"Because Valon, you are very important to me. Ever since you were born, you've had a special destiny, one that will soon be fulfilled. The magic will help you. It will get you to where you need to be. It will help you reach your true potential."*

Valon groaned. He was only barely aware of what was happening, but he didn't want it to stop.

The Magician continued, *"You know you have the magic inside you. I need you to use it."*

The Magician placed her hand on Valon's chest. He shuddered. He hadn't expected it to feel so good. The old woman whispered hotly into his ear, "I can feel your heart beating. I need you to think about your heart. I need you to feel it beating. Do you feel it?"

Valon nodded.

"Good boy," she said, "Feel the blood pumping through your heart. That same blood once pumped through your mother. And that blood pumped through her mother, and on and on, back through a thousand generations. It flowed through them, an unbroken stream. It flows back to the beginning of the human race. All those people lived and died so you could be here today. I need you to feel them."

Valon tried to concentrate. His eyeballs throbbed. His mouth felt blistered and dry. His limbs felt like they were rooted to the ground. But in a strange way, his exhaustion made it easier. He felt like a mind without a body.

"I know they're inside me," he said raspily, "but I can't feel them. It's like there's a barrier between us."

The Magician glared at him. Valon could feel her scrutiny, but could not understand its aim. She apparently decided there was nothing to see. When she spoke, Valon sensed her uncertainty. "That's because your parents abandoned you. Your mind doesn't want to connect with them. Whatever you do, don't dwell on it. Just push through."

Valon tried. "It's hard," he said.

The Magician had clearly run out of patience with the tolerant approach. She went back to her strengths. She got mean. "You really are worthless, boy. Those people sold you. They gave you to me. And now they're keeping you from the power that is your birthright. And you're going to let them. You're pathetic."

"I'm not," he said.

The Magician laughed. "Then prove it. Smash through that

barrier. Reach backwards into your parents' souls and squeeze the power out of them. It's yours. Take it."

Valon focused. He gathered his anger and pushed back against the barrier. The psychic pressure felt like it would burst his eyes and push his brains out through the empty sockets. He kept pushing.

The barrier broke.

He let out a primal scream as his ancestors surged into him. The connection was immediate and complete. He knew the witch was lying.

"My parents were bad people," he whispered, "but they weren't the people you said they were."

The Magician watched him carefully. "How much do you know," she asked.

The memories were already fading. Valon grasped for details. "There was some . . . irregularity about my birth. My parents never knew me. But they had another son, someone with my own blood. I think I had a twin brother."

If Valon didn't know better, he would have sworn the Magician breathed a sigh of relief. She confirmed his theory. "You're right. I didn't buy you. I lied. I just chose the story I thought would cause you the most pain."

Valon felt himself becoming hysterical. It had cost him dearly to come to terms with the Magician's account of his origins. The truth diminished the horrors of his past. It should have been a relief, but it wasn't. His past may have been rich with demons, but they were his demons. It felt like the Magician had stolen the only

family he ever knew.

"Why would you do that," he screamed, "Why couldn't you have told me the truth?"

"My reasons were complicated," she said. "I promise I'll explain everything when we get to our destination."

Valon sulked. "Why should I go anywhere with you," he asked.

"Because I'll kill you if you don't."

Valon laughed. "I wanted to die, you know. When I attacked you."

"No you didn't," the Magician said. "You wanted to hurt me and you thought dying was the best way to do it."

"I still want to hurt you. Now more than ever."

The Magician nodded. "I know," she said, her tone even and factual. "You're a vicious little brat. But if you don't come with me, you'll never know the truth. And you know I've taken too much from you to deny you that."

Valon seethed. "I don't know anything."

The Magician continued to be uncharacteristically reasonable. "You don't know what dying would accomplish," she said. Valon couldn't deny it.

"Where are we going," he asked, defeated.

The Magician answered, "We're going to climb Mount Aran, the Star of the Crown of Storms. There's no better place to perform the most complex magic."

"What sort of magic."

"You'll find out. All I will say is that has to do with your

destiny, the purpose for which you were born. This trip is the entire reason I raised you."

Valon didn't like the sound of that. He was suddenly very afraid. "I don't want to go," he said.

The Magician sighed. "It doesn't matter what you want. If you won't walk, I will torture you until you beg me to be allowed to crawl." Valon believed her. He cried.

"Now," the Magician said. "Can you stand?"

To his surprise, Valon found that he could. He was shaken emotionally, but healed physically. He tried to search his heart once more for the power of his ancestors, but he was lost without the Magician's help. She smiled at his effort. It was completely expected.

"Walk," she said. Valon obeyed.

They walked all through the night and into the following day. Valon's muscles didn't tire, but his mind was not quite so strong. Shrinking under the heat of the noonday sun, he fell asleep. The ground cut him superficially, but painfully. The Magician picked him up and put her arm around his waist. For the rest of the day, he walked, leaning on her, in a half-dozing trance.

Before the second night fell, they were at the base of Mount Aran. It was an unearthly place, a swollen lump of dark, clouded quartz wedged into the gentle, mossy hills of southern Paragad. No natural geology could have possibly formed such an aberration. Valon shook himself awake to gaze at the narrow path cut into the side of

the mountain.

"We have to climb that," he asked in disbelief.

"What's the matter," the Magician replied. "Are you tired."

Valon thought about it. "No, I guess not. That's weird. I thought the spell would wear off."

"That's not how magic works," the Magician explained.

"So, how does it work," Valon asked.

The Magician let out an exacerbated sigh. "Once something is set in motion, it cannot be broken, except by a greater power."

"So I'll never get tired again?"

The Magician frowned. "There's more to it than that. Your soul has to be receptive to the magic, or it won't take. You need discipline to hold onto it.

"It's the first law of magic. You always give others the permission they need to hurt you. That includes yourself. You can't magic yourself unless you really, truly want it."

Suddenly, a thought occurred to Valon. It was both exhilarating and frightening. He proceeded carefully, "But the spell I just learned - I didn't know I wanted it until you taught it to me. Does that mean that you can sometimes magic a person without their permission, if they don't truly know what they want?"

The question seemed to snap the Magician out of her strange, helpful mood. "Keep asking questions and you'll find out the hard way," she barked, "Now climb."

The two climbed in silence. Because they did not need to rest,



they reached the summit quickly. Generations of magicians had smoothed it into a large, flat platform. In the center was a stone table, carved from a boulder. The moon rose in the east.

The Magician took a deep breath, enjoying the fresh mountain air. She appeared lost in thought. When she spoke, she was quiet, almost reverent.

"I haven't been here for a long time. Not since before you were born. Remember what I told you about your parents?"

Valon felt a great power gathered around him. He didn't dare to be confrontational. This place felt too sacred. "Yes, Mistress," he said reluctantly.

"The story I told you was mostly a lie, but one part was true. I used to be very famous. They called me Matronexa, the Goblin Queen, and fifty years ago I ruled most of the land you can see from here."

Valon was impressed. He'd heard of the Goblin Queen, and how her legions had swept the land from the northern highlands of Paragad, down to the very edges of Aurel itself. He almost felt honored, to be under the thumb of such a legendary tyrant. He wasn't sure why she was telling him, though.

He briefly wondered if he could do the world a favor by pushing her off the edge.

The Magician shook her head. "You may get your chance one day, Valon, but now is not the time. You need to understand what I'm telling you if you want to know your true destiny.

"You see, I ruled all of this land, but I didn't do it alone. I

had a lover. His name was Senestrion Bloody-Handed. He was, like me, a black magician, cast out of the White Council for performing magical experiments on children."

Valon interrupted, "What did you get thrown out for?"

The Magician glared at him. He stumbled backwards and tripped on the stone table. "Serial murder," she said, "I had real problems reigning in my anger. As I was saying about Senestrion - you wouldn't expect a black magician to be a very good lover, but he was.

"He was passionate and dangerous, but he was also very gentle. He pushed me, but he never told me what to do. He had a way of seeing people's true, best selves that was . . . intoxicating.

"You've probably never heard of him, because he preferred to stay in the background. He was a great magician, but he wasn't a leader. He saw the potential of the united goblin clans, but he didn't have the political skill to bring that potential out.

"So, he found me while I was on the run from the Council . . . seduced me . . ." the Magician paused to savor the memory, ". . . and introduced me to the goblin Matriarchs. Together we became the terror of the human lands."

"What does this have to do with me," Valon asked.

"Well, Valon, you might have noticed how I don't rule the continent. Our valiant little enterprise didn't last."

"Because of the High King," suggested Valon. He realized it was a foolish thing to say, but it was worth it. The Magician's outrage was priceless.

"Don't talk about things you know nothing about! The so-called 'High King' was a callow little snot who hid behind the skirts of the Wardens. He was no match for either of us."

"So, how did you lose," asked Valon. He was enjoying this.

"It was the Wardens," the Magician said. "Their behavior at the end of the war was unprecedented. Normally, they work alone. At most, they just sort of attach themselves to various human institutions, but this time was different. Somehow, they were convinced to work together, and to accept the White Council's leadership."

Valon was skeptical. "Somehow? And that somehow had nothing to do with the High King?"

"There was no High King, Valon. There were the human lands, which we'd conquered, the White Council, which we'd practically destroyed, and then there was the King of Aurel, who was no friend to either. We paid him off. There shouldn't have been a problem."

"Why would you pay him off," Valon asked.

The Magician sighed. "Because he was too much trouble to fight. Aurel is a nothing territory. Just a pretty stretch of beach and some mediocre sea food. But every member of the Aurelian royal family was a magician of the highest caliber. It would have cost us too much to beat them, and we had other enemies at the time.

"The deal was solid. King Oblexon had his own reasons for wanting the Council out of the way, and everybody knew it. We were doing so well, bribing the old king, helping him indulge his peculiar appetites while we dealt with the remaining resistance. Then the

noxious old pervert dies.

"So his son takes over. No one should have trusted him. He was a complete unknown, and his father was a traitor to humanity. But he has the Wardens backing him up. The remnants of Council and the dregs of the resistance eat it up. They name him permanent chairman of the White Council and overlord of the combined human armies.

"He was a child! They made a greasy, ambitious little shit their leader, gave him the keys to their kingdoms, and it worked! With the Wardens on their side, the human kingdoms finally found the spine to fight back, and the wits to coordinate their efforts. Everything we had worked so hard to achieve was taken from us.

"Senestrion died saving my life. We were holed up in the fortress of Koptra-Kel when we were cornered by the Wardens. He distracted them while I escaped.

"After that, I went into hiding. I swore I would one day get revenge."

So that was her story. It made Valon angry. "How does torturing a little boy all his life help you get revenge," he shouted.

The Magician stared dreamily off into the distance. "Don't you see? I can't do it alone. I need a magician by my side. I need someone powerful who I can trust. I need someone who is every bit my dead lover's equal."

Valon felt a powerful revulsion fill him. "I don't want to help you," he said. "I hate you. I want to kill you."

For a moment, Matronexa looked almost kind. "I know, dear. It's

not you that I need."

The boy stared at her in confusion. "Goodbye, Valon," she said.  
"I'm not proud of the way I treated you."

The force of the spell slid him into the center of the stone table. His world went dark.

## Chapter 4

Valon woke up sprawled on the sacrificial altar. The cold mountain air bit into his skin. His neck felt like it was permanently bent out of shape. Behind him, he heard voices.

They were two men, and they did not sound happy.

The first voice was bland, and very subtly inflected. "She got away," it said. The sarcasm was palpable.

The second voice was rich, and bone-shakingly loud. "I don't need you to tell me she's gone," it said. "I saw her fly away. I know she got away. We had the Goblin Queen in our grasp and she got away. Don't tell me what I already know."

When the first man spoke again, his tone was thoughtful. "I wonder why she risked it. Whatever she was doing, it was big and complex. To do it in this place . . . she must have known it would be like a beacon to our kind."

The second voice quickly calmed itself. It was like the man was never angry. "Do you think it's a trap?" He didn't seem worried, just curious.

"No, I don't," said the smaller voice. "She waited far too long before attacking us. Our approach was not discreet, but she didn't stop her working until the last possible moment. And when she made the decision to flee, she seemed reluctant to leave that one behind."

"So the boy's some kind of accomplice," the booming voice asked.

"Why don't you ask him yourself. He's been awake for the past

several minutes."

Valon flinched. Whoever these men were, they were no friends of the Magician. Would they believe he hated her? What would they do if they didn't? He sat up and looked at them.

They weren't what he expected. They were . . . pretty. One was thin and blonde. He wore a bright blue military uniform, like the one Lord Swordswaim reserved for special occasions. It had buttons of highly polished bronze. Its cut was suspiciously flattering.

The other was imposingly large and dressed in beautiful mahogany leather. There were lavender ribbons in his bushy red hair.

Both were clean-shaven, and neither had even the slightest blemish. Their skin was smooth and clear, their features were well-proportioned and symmetrical, and their eyes were sharp and strikingly colored, one gray, the other green.

Valon stared. "Wha- who are you," he stammered.

The two men exchanged a meaningful glance. The small one answered for them both. "We are Wardens of Nature. I am called Silver. My associate is called Forest. We find and kill black magicians."

"Are you going to kill me," he asked, wincing. They didn't feel like the understanding type.

Silver's answer was matter of fact. "It depends on whether we think you're a threat or not."

"Well I'm not a threat," the boy said. "I barely know any magic and I--"

Silver interrupted, "I really don't have any interest in what you have to say in your own defense. We have other means of learning what we need."

"Maybe I should do it," Forest said. "You never really understood the human psyche." Silver nodded.

Valon's vision blurred. He felt like his head was being compressed. He looked desperately at the Wardens. Their shapes had become indistinct. Where they stood, he saw only light. It was painfully bright. It was the light of creation, the power that primed the sun. Helplessly, he covered his eyes and whimpered.

Something was trying to enter his head. He felt it seeping around his ears and nostrils and mouth and eye-sockets. It was an acid, pressing sensation. He knew, instinctively, that it was another mind, big and powerful and old. Valon's heart raced. He couldn't breathe. He pushed back against the invader, feebly.

Forest laughed heartily. "The boy's resisting pretty well. He's got the makings of a powerful magician." It was said with the same admiration a man would use when wrangling with a prize fish.

Silver stared dispassionately at the gasping, flailing young boy. "Does that mean he has something to hide," he asked.

"No," said Forest. "It's not anything like that. It's reflexive. They don't like having their minds touched. I just have to push a little harder."

Silver took a moment to ponder this new information. "Don't break him if you don't have to," he said.



Forest nodded. "I've been doing this for a long time."

Valon's thoughts were in utter turmoil. Nothing the Magician had done to him had ever been like this. She could see his thoughts, but she had always been limited to the surface. The Warden saw deep, deep down, to the bottommost core of his soul.

He tried to calm his panic by remembering what the Magician had taught him. You always give others the permission they need to hurt you. The first law of magic. Permission could be withheld. The Warden could not hurt him. All he could do was look. His mind was his own, just totally and painfully naked.

Valon gave himself completely to the Warden. It hurt too much. Soon, it was over. He curled up on the stone and cried.

"There's a definite twist to his soul," Forest said, "but it's nothing that can't be straightened out, in time. His hatred of Matronexa goes as deep as any I've ever seen."

"That could be dangerous," Silver said.

"Yes," agreed Forest, "but it could also be useful. If he could get over his fear, he'd be a powerful ally. Matronexa has been training him for years."

Silver appeared thoughtful. "Why would she train a magician that hated her?"

"It's hard to say, but the boy is a natural born magician. It's deep down in his blood. Maybe she thought he'd be easier to control if he was trained."

"That makes sense," Silver said, "but it doesn't explain why she

wanted him in the first place."

"That I can't say," Forest replied. "You know how needlessly complex human magic can be. We'll have to ask the White Council."

"That sounds like a good plan. He should be ready to travel soon."

Valon had, indeed, recovered, and was not thrilled about being discussed so callously. He clumsily climbed to his feet. His face was red with frustration and fear, and his whole body throbbed from the trauma of the Warden's psychic assault. He tried to scream defiantly, but he could only manage a breathless wheeze. It was still pretty defiant, though.

"Just who do you think you are," he said. "I never agreed to do what you say. You may have scared away that bitch, but you don't own me. I'm my own person, and I deserve to be treated with respect."

He trembled when he said it. Whether it was weakness or fury or fear, none could say - probably because it was all three. The Wardens were visibly confused. Silver looked towards Forest for guidance, but the big man's knowledge of the human condition was not really up to the task.

He tried anyway. "It really would be best if you gave us your help willingly," he said.

The effort was awkward, and Valon would not be placated. "Fuck you both," he said. Then he stomped away. He was angry. He didn't understand anything that was happening to him, and yet everyone took his cooperation for granted. He would show them. He would find a

place where they'd never heard of goblins or Wardens or magic, and . . . and . . . become a farmer or something. The fuckers could stay behind and kill each other for all he cared.

The Wardens watched him stalk away.

"We can't allow-" Silver shouted, but Forest interrupted him.

"You'd better let me. I have a pretty good notion of what motivates him."

Forest yelled down the mountain pass, his booming voice echoing between the boulders, "If you leave us, she'll find you. Matronexa escaped. Whatever she wanted from you, she didn't get it. She'll try again.

"It was only by luck that we found you. The Goblin Queen miscalculated. She didn't think we'd still be looking, but we were.

"There are other places she could have chosen. Places that are not quite as powerful, but much more hidden. If she took you to one of those places, we'd never be able to rescue you.

"She escaped us twice before. We don't know where she went or what form she might have taken. If you don't accept our protection, she will find you, she will take you, and she will have her way with you."

Valon stopped. He marched back up the path. He glared at the Warden. The overgrown, red-haired goon flashed him a goofy smile. Valon felt utterly alone. He hated the man, but he couldn't say he was wrong. He needed their protection.

"All right," he said, trying to hold back the tears, "You made

your point. I'll come with you."

"Excellent," boomed Forest, clapping his hands in pleasure.

## Chapter 5

Mount Aran stood at the southern edge of the Paragadran highlands, where, with the exception of a single anomalous peak, the northern hill country leveled off into the expansive plains that marked the heart of the human lands, but first they would have to pass through the great Hanverian forest.

The forest stretched from the shores of the Western Sea to the slopes of the Goblin Mountains. Its farthest reaches were deep and dark, but the travelers' route was surprisingly tame. Hunters' paths crisscrossed the main road and villages were never more than a couple of days apart. It was pleasant, beautiful, prosperous country.

The third day of the trip, Valon collapsed. The Wardens looked at him in surprise. Forest knelt beside him and placed his massive ear to the young boy's chest.

"What's wrong with him," Silver asked.

"I don't know," Forest said. "I haven't noticed any unusual viruses or bacteria. Certainly nothing an earthy lad like him wouldn't have fought off before. And I know he doesn't have a congenital condition." The big man stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"When was the last time you saw him eat," he asked.

Silver paused to consider the question. "I hadn't really noticed," he said. "I always assumed they took care of that sort of thing on their own."

Forest frowned. "They usually do. Why don't you go and find some

food, and I'll speak to the boy."

"Besides the stuff they grow on their farms, what do humans eat," asked Silver

"That's a good question," Forest mused, "The woods are full of edible flora, but even humans sometimes have trouble identifying them. It's probably best if you just bring back some meat. Mostly it's the plants that are poisonous."

"Is there any particular meat that's the best," Silver asked.

"No," said Forest. "They're pretty much all the same. Just bring something quickly."

"Understood," said Silver. "Let's just hope there's nothing else this human is forgetting. I don't want to have to remind him to defecate."

Forest chuckled. "You won't. Trust me. Now, get going, and bring back some water while you're at it."

Silver bound into the woods, his stride graceful and animalistic. He would have no trouble running down his prey.

"BOY," Forest bellowed, rattling the trees with the force of his shout. Valon started into consciousness. He was pale and weak. His voice was hoarse with thirst. His hands shook.

"What do you want," he asked bitterly.

"Silver is going to get you some food. For the last three days, you've forgotten to eat."

"What," said Valon. He could not have been any more confused.

"You haven't eaten since we met on Mount Aran. I've never known

a human to forget for so long, but I couldn't really think of another explanation."

His chest heaving breathlessly, Valon took a long moment to respond. When he did, he growled, "I didn't eat because *I didn't have any food.*"

Forest shook his head bemusedly. "Foolish boy," he said. "Why didn't you say something in that last village. We would have bought some food for you."

The boy wheezed in disbelief. "I thought you were doing it on purpose," he said, "Withholding food in order to teach me a lesson."

Forest let out a hearty laugh. "Why on Earth would we ever do something so colossally stupid?"

"Mistress - I mean Matronexa - used to do it all the time."

Forest's expression turned instantly grave. "Matronexa is a black magician, the Goblin Queen. She is wicked and depraved. Silver and I are Wardens of Nature. We would never intentionally starve a human."

Sensing Valon's confusion, Forest softened his approach. "Wardens don't need to eat. These bodies you see are just an illusion. They're clothes, made of meat, that we wear when we're in the world of men."

Valon remembered his vision on the mountain. "You are a light," he whispered, "from outside the world."

"That's pretty good," Forest said. "We may make a magician of you yet. Ah, here comes Silver with your food."

Silver strolled casually out of the woods. In each of his hands he held a live squirrel. They chattered and writhed.

"I found these two mating," he said. "Their distraction made them easy to grab."

"Why are they still alive," Forest asked.

"I didn't know whether the human would prefer to kill them himself."

Forest rolled his eyes in an exaggerated gesture of disbelief. "The boy's not a housecat. Humans like their food dead."

There were two sharp squeaks as Silver closed his hands around the squirrels' backs. Forest continued, "How could you not know that? You work with the High King's general staff."

Silver responded sarcastically, "I didn't want to make any baseless assumptions. Until today, I assumed humans were capable of feeding themselves, and we both know how accurate that turned out to be."

"Leave the boy alone," Forest said. "He's not well."

"Well, who's fault is that, then," Silver quipped. Forest glared at him, his eyes a silent rebuke. Valon sensed a deeper communication pass between them.

"Message received," Silver said blandly. "Is there anything else I need to do to these animals before they can be consumed? And before you say anything, I'm a strategist, not a chef. I'm usually working when the General staff takes their meals."

Forest nodded in acknowledgment. "They need to be skinned,



guttled, and heated with fire. I'll do it. I used to eat all the time when I was with the Paragadran Forward Infantry."

"Really," Silver said. "Why?"

"Everyone else was doing it, and it seemed unsociable not to. Turns out it had an unexpected benefit. It's a lot easier to reweave the flesh when you already have all the necessary proteins inside you. Of course, when the war ended, the unit broke up and I wasn't being stabbed every other day, so I didn't see much point in keeping up the habit. It was kind of fun, though."

"I ate an apple once, back in Golma," Silver said wistfully.

Valon reeled at the mention of the name. It brought up complex emotions. He didn't want to remember, but he couldn't help but be curious. In the distance, Forest was ripping the skin off a squirrel. He could either ask or watch. "You were in Golma, the fabled city of opium," he asked weakly.

Silver seemed to be surprised by the question. "That was a long time ago."

The boy gasped, "That was four thousand years ago. The White Council hadn't even been formed yet."

"I know," said Silver, patronizingly. "That's what it means to be immortal. You live for a very long time."

The Warden's sarcasm was too gentle to have much of an impact on Valon. The prospect of talking to an actual witness to history was too exciting. He pressed the issue as much as his half-starved body could stand. "What was it like," he asked.

Seeing the boy's interest, Silver tried to answer as best he could. "The priests were very passionate about the civic architecture. In retrospect, it was all very primitive, but at the time it was exciting."

"Is it true, what I read about the . . . religion?"

"I couldn't say, without knowing exactly what you read," replied Silver.

Valon sighed. "I mean, did they really . . . you know . . . do it . . . s-sex, in public?"

Silver stared at him quizzically.

"Adolescents have an increased interest in mating," Forest explained.

"Oh. Right. I knew that." Silver turned to Valon. "Sorry," he said "but the stories have been exaggerated. The Golmans didn't have the same sort of taboos you have now, but that was mostly because half the population were opium addicts. The actual sex shows were performed according to a strict ritual calendar.

"The priests believed the shows enhanced the fertility of the fields. I tried telling them, on several occasions, that they weren't necessary, but the priests kept scheduling them anyway. I think they must have enjoyed them."

The immensity of the understatement stunned Valon. The Wardens genuinely did not understand what it meant to be human. They weren't trying to torture him. They simply didn't know any better. He found it charming.

"I'd say that's a pretty good guess," he said, smiling. The smell of roasting meat filled his nostrils.

"I've never had squirrel before," he called out hoarsely.

"Don't worry," shouted Forest. "You'll like it. We may not eat very often, but we do have a sense of taste. I know how to cook."

To Valon's surprise, the Warden was as good as his word. The squirrel was hot and greasy, but delicious. Within a few bites, Valon threw up. Silver shot an accusing look at Forest.

"That's completely normal," the big man said. "When a human's been on a starvation diet, rich food can upset the stomach. We just have to keep feeding him."

Despite his sickness, Valon continued to eat, devouring the food with a ferocity he had not expected. He felt ill, but he could not stop. The perversity of his desire was a familiar sensation, but he felt too bad to feel guilty.

Silver watched him with curiosity. "Is he going to be all right," he asked.

Forest laughed. "Yeah, he'll be fine. He's a strong lad. It's gonna take a lot more than this to do him in."

## Chapter 6

Valon awoke in the Hanverian forest with a new perspective on life. As the sunlight filtered down through the dark pine needles and gently brushed aside the chill of an early-morning breeze, he felt . . . happy. Well, cautiously happy, but happy nonetheless.

He suddenly tensed, and peered warily into the woods. Then, he scolded himself for being so paranoid. It was unlikely that the Magician would suddenly jump out from behind a random tree. Unlikely . . . but not impossible.

It was an incredibly stupid line of thought, and Valon knew it. He decided to focus on the positive.

He would be going to meet the White Council! It would be a grand adventure. With the Wardens by his side, he would cross the continent, all the while meeting strange, new people and exploring the exotic cultures of the southern kingdoms. It was going to be the sort of trip that changed a boy into a man, and Valon was looking forward to it.

The journey was largely uneventful. The wide, flat plains of the Anolosh grasslands were as civilized as civilized could be. They occasionally saw some cattle. They stopped at an inn that served a delicious beef stew, but Valon was too shy to meet any strange, new people.

The country was big, and the distances long. Mostly, the roads

were empty. For the greatest part of the trip, Valon was alone with the Wardens. He found them odd, but pleasant company.

They didn't snap at him for breathing too loud. They didn't hit or poke or trip him. They didn't mock him for asking questions. Not once did they respond to his thoughts instead of his words. It was quite relaxing.

In the days immediately after his recovery, the Wardens treated Valon with exaggerated care, like a troublesome pet. Over time, as it became clear that he could take care of himself, their attention softened into benign neglect.

The Wardens did not possess the human need for small talk, so the long walk through the bucolic countryside was filled with silence. Valon found it fascinating.

He would amuse himself by asking them questions. When called upon to give an answer, their features would animate. When they spoke, they made jokes, held opinions, and affected mannerisms. When they finished answering, they . . . went away.

He didn't know how else to describe it. They didn't relax, and they didn't turn their attention elsewhere; they simply went from emotive to neutral, often with startling alacrity.

For hours, he would watch them march down the roads in mechanical silence, yet when he drew their attention, even for a moment, they seemed almost human. Valon wondered how much of it was real. Their personas were consistent, but they seemed to adopt and

drop them like masks.

Still, they were better company than the Magician. And every day, as he got stronger and more confident, he felt an ever-increasing gratitude for being out from under the old woman's thumb.

It was a peaceful, relaxing, albeit often boring, journey, but it couldn't last. For weeks, they had been marching south, racing the onset of winter. And they won. They gradually left behind the temperate interior heartlands for the balmy wetness of the coasts. Aurel approached daily, and the countryside bore the marks of its proximity.

The towns became more numerous, and closer together. The houses were made of elegant brick, and the roads were paved with worked stones. The people were well-dressed and cosmopolitan.

The civilized world owed a debt to Heural the Farsighted, and the High King had taken great pains to make sure its gratitude was more than symbolic. Wealth flowed into Aurel, and it showed.

The capital of Aurel was recently renamed *Heuralesta*, the Last Free City. It was completely open. There were no guards to keep visitors away. There were no walls to keep invaders out. Such was the High King's confidence that the White Council could defend the human lands.

The trio crested a hill outside the city. In the bright light of the noon sun, the brown sandstone bricks glowed gold, and the tile roofs in red and white formed a cheerful patchwork mosaic. Wide

streets ran from green hills down to the very edge of the bright, blue sea. Everywhere, there was movement and noise and life.

"It's beautiful," Valon gasped.

Silver cocked his head quizzically. "You should have seen it a hundred years ago. You'd have seen a veritable catalog of all the ways in which mud hut architecture could fail to uplift the soul."

Forest guffawed. "Don't mind him, Valon. Silver hasn't been impressed by anything since the invention of the longbow."

"I'm only impressed by things which have the potential to last."

"Aw," scoffed Forest, "that's only because you hate change."

The big man turned to Valon. "What you see below is a miracle of human industry. When Matronexa was cast down and Heural declared the High King, the newly unified human kingdoms pooled their resources to build a capital worthy of the glorious new age."

"Yeah," said Silver, "It's a shame Matronexa is still alive."

Valon felt a shiver of fear. Forest slapped him heartily on the back.

"Ha," he laughed. "That old witch is as good as done for. You see the White Council building down there?" He pointed at a delicate looking white-marble structure, nestled gracefully between the vine-covered hillsides and the glittering sea.

"Our boy Valon here is going to take it by storm. By the time they're done training him, he'll be able to smash a dozen Matronexas."

Valon was pathetically grateful for his words. He smiled weakly

at the big man, but the Warden had already retreated inside himself, and didn't notice. Embarrassed, Valon reminded himself not to take it personally. It still hurt, though.

As they walked through the streets of the city, Valon paid no attention to the exotic storefronts displaying wonders and curiosities from around the world, or to the strange, but enticing aromas wafting from the carts and stalls of the street vendors, nor did he notice the explosive and vibrant intermingling of accents and fashions and customs. He was pensive.

"What will happen to me," he asked.

"You will be examined by the White Council," replied Silver, "and if you are deemed a suitable candidate for training, you will live on the grounds for six to eight years as they teach you everything you need to know to be a full magician."

"What if they don't think I'm a suitable candidate?"

"Well -" Silver began, but Forest interrupted him.

"There's no way that'll happen," he said. "I've seen inside you. You already know more than people who've been there for years. They'd be fools to turn you down."

"But I was trained by a famous black magician. What if they think I'm one too?"

Silver and Forest exchanged a private glance. "Don't worry about it," said Forest.

Valon could tell the conversation was over. It had not allayed



his dread. Panic gripped him as he approached the palace of the White Council. Would the High King see him the way Forest had seen him? How would the Council react to the murder he planned? To the things he did afterward?

The memory made him feel slimy and small. He wanted to run away, to forsake the future in front of him and find somewhere hidden and safe - somewhere he could disappear into and rot away. He couldn't stand the thought of the Council judging him.

The Wardens continued to lead him through the city, seemingly oblivious to turmoil inside him. Valon hated them. The Magician used to scold and berate him whenever his thoughts turned to self-pity and despair. He missed her.

Valon screamed, much louder and much higher than a boy should. The unrestrained power of the Sorcerous Voice carried its anguish into the hearts of all who heard it. The Wardens were stunned with confusion. The street around them emptied.

He hated himself. How could he miss her? After the things she had done, how could he miss her?

She was his mother. She was his lover. She was the only person who ever really understood him. Valon saw himself then, and he knew he was the most wretched, pathetic, laughable creature on the planet.

He wept, openly and bitterly.

"Do something," muttered Silver. Forest shot him a nasty glance, let out a resigned sigh, and approached the boy. He stretched out his hands in front of him, like a man trying to calm a dangerous animal.

"Valon," he said gently, "you seem overwrought. Maybe you should calm down."

Valon gasped incredulously. "Calm down," he said. "How can I possibly calm down when the White Council is going to kill me?"

Forest chose his words with care. "Why would you think the Council is going to kill you," he asked. It was a conscientious non-denial.

"How can you ask that," Valon shrieked. "You saw inside me. You know I'm the same as her. The Council is going to see it too. They're going to see that I'm a little mini Matronexa and squish me before I become a threat."

Forest laughed. "See, Silver, I told you he was good."

He frowned at Valon, his mood shifting instantly. "You presume too much," he said. "We Wardens see more than you can possibly imagine, and I saw strength in you, Valon. I saw the part of you that Matronexa could never hurt. I know that you will never go bad unless you choose to go bad."

Valon wanted to argue, but he was exhausted, emotionally drained. "All right," he said. "Take me wherever you want. I guess it doesn't matter what happens to me."

"Good," said Forest. "I'm glad you finally decided to listen to reason."

Valon let out one final sob. Thereafter, he made his best attempt at being stoic. In the company of the Wardens, he sniffled and snorted his way to the palace of the White Council.

## Chapter 7

The meeting chamber of the White Council was designed to intimidate. Visitors would enter from below and climb a long, steep staircase, only to find themselves in a large, circular pit. The thrones of the Council would look down on them from chest level. A visitor of average height would have to strain his neck to see anything but the magicians' feet.

Valon didn't bother. The Council's power terrified him. He stared at the ground, hoping that whatever they decided, they'd do it quickly.

The White Council filed in. Fourteen men and four women, they were the greatest sane magical minds humanity had to offer. Between them, they had the power to topple nations. They took their seats.

The chairman entered last. He was Heural the Farsighted, King of Aurel, High King of the Combined Human Protectorate, Perpetual Chief of the Council of White Magicians. He was beautiful.

His was not the plastic, affected perfection of the Wardens. He was flawed, but he had a rich, human quality that transformed those flaws into marks of character. The High King was more than eighty years old, but he looked to be on the cusp of middle age. The light dusting of gray in his short beard spoke of a charming lack of vanity. The fine wrinkles around his eyes suggested a life rich in laughter. He looked like he would be a perfect father. Seeing him broke Valon's heart.

The Wardens stood in front of Valon. They were unimpressed.

"What have you brought us," asked the High King. For appearance's sake, he used the Voice to sound regal and commanding, but none present were much swayed.

In his social element at last, Silver answered, "Four and a half weeks ago, there was a major magical disturbance on the peak of Mount Aran. As the Wardens closest to the disturbance, Forest and I decided to investigate. It was Matronexa, the Goblin Queen."

He paused to give the council time to absorb this information. They didn't seem particularly surprised.

Silver continued, "When we arrived, she was in the middle of a potent working. It was of a type we've never seen before, so its purpose eluded us, but it seemed to center around the boy there. He was unconscious on the Altar of Arana-Aran."

This revelation provoked a response. No one spoke, but Valon could feel the force of their thoughts as they flew from magician to magician. It made him dizzy.

The High King raised his hand, calming the telepathic furor. "We all knew something like this would happen," he said reassuringly. "The Goblin Queen was never a coward. She wouldn't have stayed hidden if she didn't have a long-term plan."

But the magicians would not be so easily reassured. Their thoughts buzzed through the room once more. One of their number, Ordin, the Sea's Breath, leaned forward to ask a question. His voice was gentle and comforting.

"Tell me, child - did Matronexa ever try to . . . touch you . . . in an adult way?"

Valon's stomach heaved. How did this magician know? Did he pluck the secret from his mind? The touch was so light he didn't even feel it. Who were these people? What sort of powers could they command?"

"I - uh -" gasped Valon.

Ordin looked upon him kindly. "There's no need to tell me," he said. "I can tell by your expression that she did."

The High King interrupted. "Do you have a theory, Ordin, or are you just tormenting the boy for no particular reason?"

Ordin scowled at the King in annoyance. "One way to make goblins is to conceive in the presence of magical energies. Arana-Aran is a powerful locus of fertility. And we can all tell from the way he's been swooning under our thoughts that the boy has some serious magical talent. I think she was trying to use him as a Goblin Grandfather."

All eyes turned towards Valon, appraising him in light of this new theory. The High King broke the silence.

"That makes sense," he said. "Considering how she was defeated last time, she may well have wanted a new breed of goblin with a magician for a Grandfather. So I'll ask the Wardens: did it look to you like she was preparing to have sex with the boy?"

Silver shrugged. "I'll have to defer to my colleague's superior expertise," he said, gesturing to Forest.

Forest mulled the question. "It's hard to say," he answered.

"Now that you mention it, there was a degree of sexual anticipation in the air, like Matronexa couldn't wait to jump on the boy. But Valon here had all his clothes on when we found him, and from what I understand, it's usually customary for humans to mate in the nude."

There was a titter from one of the thrones, because even magicians can be immature. The High King cocked an eyebrow and it immediately died down.

Heural turned to Valon. "Did she say anything to you about what she was planning," he asked.

Valon was shocked by the question. "W-we weren't friends," he stammered. "I hated her and wanted to kill her. I wasn't her helper."

Heural smiled patiently. "I'm sure you weren't an accomplice. I just wanted to know if maybe she gloated to you before she started her working."

Valon relaxed. He tried to remember exactly what the Magician had said to him. His time on the mountain was fuzzy. The memories did not come easily.

"I'm not sure," he said, "but she told me all about her dead husband, and how she still wanted revenge. And she said she needed help from a powerful magician, but . . ." Valon searched for the correct wording. "She said it wasn't me that she needed."

The High King hummed thoughtfully. Without words, the Council exchanged their thoughts on the situation.

"Will you turn around for me," Heural asked. Confused, Valon spun awkwardly in place.

Eventually, Heural raised his hand. "I've seen enough. I think I know what Matronexa was trying to do."

Valon wandered the halls of the White Council's palace. He had been thanked for his assistance and politely expelled from the main chamber. He was insulted, but also relieved. His meeting with the Council of White Magicians was not nearly as bad as he'd anticipated, but it was far from fun.

They were discussing him. They were deciding what to do with him. The idea gnawed at him. He decided not to think about it.

He chose to admire the architecture instead. It was a masterpiece of artifice, a cunning fusion of pragmatic coastal open-air villa and post-classical geometric design that seemed to embrace the temple's natural surroundings while simultaneously keeping them at a comfortable distance.

Valon paused. In retrospect, it seemed strange that the Magician let him read as much as she did. She was always so scrupulous about denying him other pleasures. Unsanctioned study was the one thing he could get away with more often than not.

The thought troubled him. What did the High King think she was trying to do? Until a few weeks ago, he believed that calling him her apprentice was the Magician's idea of a joke, but he had just walked fifteen hundred miles in a little more than 30 days. He was fairly sure that was something most people couldn't do. Maybe he was her apprentice after all. That was not a fact that bode well for his

treatment at the hands of the Council. He wondered what they were saying about him.

Valon cursed himself. He used to be able to muster his thoughts, even to the point of being able to fool the Magician's eavesdropping, but ever since she caught him with Prudella, he'd been an emotional wreck. The constant threat of violence used to focus his mind wonderfully. Without it, he felt like he had no self-control at all.

Valon took a deep breath. He was missing the Magician again. Another outburst wouldn't be far behind. He couldn't stop it; the wave of self loathing was much too great, but he'd be damned if he did it in public again. He'd hold back until he found a closet, at least.

In the closet, Valon cried. He wondered what was wrong with him. He didn't love the Magician. He hated her.

She would spit in his food while he watched. She would pull his hair whenever it looked like he was getting too comfortable. She would yell at him whenever he had a thought she didn't like.

He couldn't forget the terrible things she did to him, but he felt . . . incomplete without her. It was like she was the whole of his strength, and without her, he was a ghost floating through life, just the smallest, most insignificant scrap above nothing at all.

Valon rubbed his eyes. They stung. He was ashamed to admit it to himself, but it felt good in the closet. There was nothing in the space besides himself. There were no eyes on him. He didn't need to look at, or even think about, anyone else. He was alone. He was



completely and utterly himself.

Valon let out a measured breath. His tears had finally finished with him. His mood was as low as it could go. It was almost as good as being rational. He allowed himself to think about the Council.

The thought made his head throb. He did not look kindly on them for that. Those nineteen men and women held his fate in their hands, and there was nothing he could do about it. The logical thing to do would be to run. He could leave before the Council had a chance to pass its judgment.

Except that Forest warned him. Matronexa was still out there, and Valon didn't trust himself to stay away from her. He needed the Council's shelter. He needed to learn what they had to teach. He needed time.

He closed his eyes. How could he get what he needed? A bitter smirk leapt to his lips. The Magician never had any trouble getting exactly what she wanted. What would she do?

In his heart, Valon knew the answer. She would not let her enemies dictate the terms of her defeat.

Valon barked out a short laugh. These people had *beaten* the Magician. At the height of her power, they destroyed everything she ever built. The best she was able to do was flee, and plot her revenge from the shadows. If she were in his position, she'd run away.

That option wasn't open to him. He'd have to change the rules in another way. As far as he could tell, there was only one thing he

could do. He would not let them decide his fate without him. He would return to the Council chamber and make his case personally.

Intellectually, it made a certain amount of sense. Either they were planning to spare him, or they were planning to kill him. If they were planning to spare him, it couldn't hurt to give them more reasons to do so. If they were planning to kill him, reminding them of why he deserved to live might be his only chance. Either way, it was better to act than to wait.

Knowing that didn't help. The Council frightened him. He remembered their judging eyes and the cloying heat of their power. They were the people who wrote the laws that others obeyed. The life of one boy couldn't mean much to them. He felt sick.

It would be so much easier to wait. It would be peaceful. He wouldn't have to expose himself. All he had to do was let the future happen. Whatever the Council decided, it would be over quickly enough. He didn't have to face them.

Valon sighed. Would his emotions always rule him? He could see the rational course in front of him. All he had to do was choose it. It was not easy.

The frail, young magician threw open the door to the closet. With hands shaking and eyes rimmed with red, he marched to the meeting chamber of the White Council.

The doors to the Council chamber were unsealed, but heavy. As Valon strained against them, he heard voices.

He didn't recognize the first voice, but it sounded oily. "I thought the Wardens had a mandate," it said.

Silver's calm, even tone replied, "We do, but we have discretion in how that mandate is carried out. The High King makes a reasonable point."

The first speaker did not give up. "As long as the boy exists, he's a threat."

A woman's voice cut in. "Threats can be managed, Octavus. Matronexa will do much to get him back."

Octavus' response was thick with insinuation. "You seem certain, Ratia. Maybe you could share with the rest of us the secret of the boy's appeal."

Ratia burst out in anger, "You're out of line, Octavus."

This time, it was Octavus' turn to get angry. "No," he shouted. "This whole plan is out of line. The boy is Matronexa's creature. She's spent his entire life shaping him into a slave. You might think we can use him as a tool, but we'll never be able to break the hold she has over him."

Forest's deep, grumbling voice rose up. "I've seen inside his soul. He hates the Goblin Queen as much as any of us."

"Yes," hissed Octavus. "We've all heard your report, but you don't understand humans half as well as you think."

Valon's fear quickened into fury. How dare he say those things! He was probably right, but he wasn't *right*. Or whatever. Nuance was the farthest thing from Valon's mind.

Grunting, he heaved himself against the doors of the chamber. Reluctantly, they opened. He began to storm through, but had to stop when they slammed shut again. He managed to scramble out of the path of their crushing weight. He was in, but his entrance was ruined.

"I deserve to be heard," he shouted. He breathed heavily into the silence for a long moment before he realized they were listening.

Chastened, he continued meekly, "Octavus may have had a point about the Mi- About Matronexa, but she was black magician. You are the White Council. You're supposed to be better than that.

"Whatever it is you think I'm going to do in the future, I haven't done it yet. I haven't done anything but be brutalized by the woman you allowed to escape. I deserve a chance to prove that I'm better than what she made me.

"You have some sort of plan to use me to get to her. Good. You should use me. I want to be used.

"I swear to you, if you protect me; if you teach me what I need to fight her, I will devote my life to making sure she never hurts anyone again.

"You can kill me if you like, but I want to help you."

Valon stood, shaking, on the chamber floor. He was red-faced, flush with embarrassment and rage.

The thrones above were silent. Valon could feel their thoughts in the air. In that instant, he knew it was all theater. They didn't bother with telepathy when they were alone. The revelation did little to comfort him. Despite their affectations, their power was all too

real.

Finally, the High King spoke. "Before I reveal the Council's decision, I would like to clear up a misapprehension young Valon seems to have about who we are and what we do.

"Though the White Council is committed to doing whatever it takes to protect humanity, we are not monsters. We are not in the habit of executing children."

Heural stared accusingly at Valon. "If you are to live here in the Temple, it is important for you to understand this about us."

Valon caught his breath. The High King continued, "Yes, it is my pleasure to announce that the Council of White Magicians has decided, by general consensus, that the boy, Valon, will be housed and trained in the Council Temple. If there are any who would gainsay the justice of this decision, let them voice their objections now."

No one spoke. "Let it be remembered," the High King said, "that none present objected." He smiled at Valon.

"Ordin has volunteered to take responsibility for you. He will provide for your food and shelter, and be your primary teacher. You will learn from the others as necessary."

The High King stood, and with great dignity, left the chamber. After a respectful wait, the other magicians followed. Valon was left alone with the Wardens.

Forest grinned broadly. "Congratulations, boy. I knew they'd accept you. Don't worry about Ordin. I've known him since he was your age. He's as good as they come."

Silver was thoughtful. "It'll certainly be a change from living with Matronexa," he said.

Forest laughed. "That's for sure. We can only hope that Valon doesn't turn into a complete wild-child under the tutelage of that gentle cub of a man."

Valon scowled. "What are you talking about?"

"Nothing, really," said Forest. "Humans are hard or soft to varying degrees. You grew up with one of the hardest humans imaginable, and now you're getting ready to enter the custody of one of the softest. It'll probably be a pretty rough transition for both of you."

"Oh," said Valon. "You don't think I'm good enough to live with him?"

Forest stared at him, confused. "What I think is that you'll be exactly as good as you choose to be. It'll be up to the both of you to decide whether that's enough."

Silver sighed. "While I'm sure this is a satisfying and fruitful line of inquiry, we have to go."

Forest's mood changed instantly. He seemed saddened by the imminent parting. "Goodbye, Valon. We probably won't see each other again for many years. I usually work around Mount Aran, though, so if you're ever in the area . . ."

Valon's internal landscape was not quite so flexible. He was still peeved. He stood in stunned silence while his emotions realigned themselves.

"I don't know what to say," he said. "You two are the best friends I ever had."

Silver shrugged. "It's not as if you've had a vibrant social calender," he said.

"Silver's right," Forest agreed. "You're sure to make friends with the other apprentices. Why, I'm sure it's only a matter of time before you're so popular, you won't have time to think of us at all."

Valon was skeptical, but kept his opinion to himself. He wasn't sure what difference it would've made.

"Goodbye," he said, "and thank you for saving my life."

## Chapter 8

Ordin, the Sea's Breath, was chubby and pink. His short, gray hair was inexpertly groomed. He had a jolly face and sad eyes. He flashed Valon a lopsided smile.

Valon ignored him. Though he knew the man was doing him a favor, he couldn't help but feel like a piece of unwanted baggage - like something to be passed around until some poor sap got stuck with him. He was, in a distant, abstract way, grateful, but he did not yet trust himself to say something nice. So, he said nothing at all.

Ordin stared helplessly at the boy. This was not going well.

When he spoke, it was with forced cheerfulness. "I've lived alone for a long time," he said. "So I may have some habits you find annoying. I want you to know that while I may be your teacher, this place is your home. You don't need to be afraid to complain if I do something you don't like."

The old man laughed. "I can't guarantee that I'll change, but I promise to at least try."

Valon's anger softened. A part of him felt sorry for this hapless little man. He gave him an encouraging smile. It was a sentiment he could not feel, but it was one he wanted to.

Ordin seemed grateful. Valon wondered if he was really so easy to fool. The silence between them begged to be filled. Neither of them felt comfortable being the one to do it.

Valon looked around. The magician's quarters were large, but sparsely appointed. The contrast with the chaotic, organic



surroundings of his youth was stark. Everything was neat. There were no cluttered memorabilia or half-finished projects. It looked as if Ordin preferred cleanliness to possessions.

Ordin sighed. "It's still a couple of hours before we eat," he said. "So if you want to be alone for a while, I can take you to your room."

Valon nodded. The two walked together in silence. The suite was comfortably large, but not immense. It didn't take them long to reach the room. It only felt like it did.

Like everything else in Ordin's quarters, the bedroom was sparse. It had a long, narrow bed, a sleek, black wardrobe, and a window that overlooked the gardens. Other than that, it was completely empty.

"I know it must seem like a cell," Ordin said, "but that's just the way I happened to keep it. Once you've been here awhile, you'll accumulate some things of your own, and you'll be able to decorate it however you want."

"Thank you very much," said Valon.

Ordin smiled and backed out of the room. Valon was left alone.

He sat on the bed. He opened the wardrobe. He closed the wardrobe. He stared out the window. He sat on the bed again.

He wondered if he should go out and see what Ordin was doing, but he wasn't comfortable enough with the relationship yet. He thought about going out into the city, but he had no idea about what

to do once he got there. He flopped down on his back and tried, fruitlessly, to sleep.

Dinner was simple, but rich: stewed lamb and asparagus followed by olives and honey. Ordin was clearly not used to entertaining. They ate at a table in the kitchen.

"This is really good," Valon said.

"Thank you," said Ordin.

The two resumed eating, maintaining between them a sustained silence.

"Your training begins first thing tomorrow," said Ordin.

"Oh, good," said Valon.

The food was soft, so their chewing was not loud. Halfway through his lamb, Valon gulped when he swallowed. He flinched as soon as he did it. Ordin noticed, but said nothing.

"Can I ask you a question," asked Valon.

"Of course," answered Ordin. "But I can't promise you a satisfying answer."

"I understand," said Valon, "but I was curious. What's a Goblin Grandfather?"

Ordin visibly blanched. "You're wondering about my speculation at the meeting today. The answer is complicated."

"Is it secret?"

"No, but you really don't need to know it yet. My theory was wrong."

"If it's not too much trouble, I'd like to hear it anyway."

"All right," sighed Ordin. "When a man and a woman want to make a baby--"

"Excuse me," interrupted Valon. "But I already know where babies come from."

"Okay," said Ordin. "But do you know where goblins come from?" Valon didn't answer.

"I didn't think so," said Ordin. "Well, the two things are related. It's normally impossible to use magic to alter a person against his will. But there's a window of vulnerability, after the life has quickened in the mother's womb, but before it begins to dream on its own. During that time, the human has no individual character, and only the dimmest, most malleable soul.

"A goblin is created when a black magician exploits that window of vulnerability to transform that life into something it was never meant to be.

"Anyway, the man who provides the seed is called the Goblin Grandfather, and the woman who provides the womb is called the Goblin Grandmother."

"Oh," said Valon.

They ate the rest of their meal without saying a word.

The next day, Valon followed his new teacher out into the gardens. Though it was approaching midwinter, the air was only slightly cool, and the still-green plants sparkled with a delicate

morning dew.

The temple of the White Council was not densely populated, but neither was it abandoned. Magicians and their students strolled through the gardens, some to learn those lessons that can only be taught out of doors, others to take their leisure before returning to the study of magic.

Ordin did not begin until he found a suitably isolated spot.

With only the slightest hint of pomposity, he said, "Before I can teach you, I have to find out what you already know."

Valon considered the question. "I don't know. The Mi- Matronexa didn't trust me enough to teach me any spells. She mostly taught me about herbs and poisons and identifying wildlife. The only really magical things I learned were the three laws of magic, and one trick she taught me on the way to Mount Aran, right before I was rescued."

"Maybe we'd better start with the laws of magic. What are they?"

"The three laws of magic are as follows," recited Valon.

"Firstly: You always give others the permission they need to hurt you. Secondly: Everything in this world wants to hurt you. Finally: In the eyes of the Creator, you are no better than a piece of dirt."

The elder magician's face darkened. "She told you those were the three laws of magic," he asked grimly.

Valon shivered in the brisk morning chill. Suddenly, he was no longer sure of the kindness of his reception. "Y- yes," he answered.

"I knew she was sick," growled Ordin, his kindly face twisted with disgust, "but to teach you that kind of perversion - it's such a

pointlessly destructive thing to do to such a promising young magician. You'll have much to unlearn."

Valon stared uncomfortably at his would-be mentor. Ordin sighed and composed himself. "So, what was the trick you mentioned?"

"I actually think it may have been black magic," Valon said nervously.

Ordin smiled. "It's all right. I'm not going to hold your upbringing against you. You can tell me."

Gritting his teeth and closing his eyes, Valon took a chance. "She taught me to feel inside my blood and to take the power of my ancestors. She said the magic would keep going until some other power broke it."

The old man appraised Valon carefully, not bothering to conceal his surprise. "That's pretty advanced information. She wouldn't have told you that unless you were already far along in your training. Are you sure she didn't teach you anything else?"

"It's funny," Valon said sarcastically, "the Mistress was always calling me her apprentice, and Forest was convinced that I was a highly trained magician, but the only thing I can remember ever learning from that cunt was how to stay out of her fucking way."

"Did she hit you often," asked Ordin. His tone was sensitive, but his eyes were calculating.

"No," said Valon, "only every miserable fucking day of my miserable fucking life."

"Did you ever get seriously injured?"

It was not the question Valon was expecting. It astounded him that he had never really thought about it. "A couple of times," he answered sheepishly.

"When I was really little, we were out picking fruit, and she broke my arm when I tried to sneak a blackberry. And once . . ."

He paused in bitter recollection. He choked a bit as he searched for a way to answer the question without revealing too much.

". . . When I was fourteen, she . . . beat me, really bad."

Ordin did not pry for details. "But other than that," he asked.

It took Valon a moment to emerge from the darkness of his memory. "Other than that, she mostly just liked hearing me scream. I guess she didn't want to hurt me bad enough that she would have to take the effort to fix me."

"Hmm," Ordin mused. "Did you ever get used to it?"

"What? Get used to it? I don't know. I don't think I got used to it. I think I just came to accept it, to look at it as just part of life. And it wasn't as bad as some of the other things she used to do. But it still hurt, you know?"

Ordin gently placed his hand on the boy's shoulder. Valon flinched and backed away.

"Don't you dare pity me," he said.

"Okay," said Ordin, "but with your permission, I have a theory I'd like to test."

"What sort of theory?"

"I'll tell you after the test. If I tell you before, it might

mess with the results. So, if it's all right with you, I'd like to try and touch you."

"Touch me how?"

"It's nothing to worry about, just a light tap on the top of the head. And I want you to try and avoid it."

"All right," said Valon. He didn't really mean it, but he didn't know what else he could say.

"Good," said Ordin. "Do whatever you have to to avoid my hand, but stop when you feel it touch you."

Ordin carefully reached out with his right hand. Valon stepped backwards. He easily ducked under the left hand that tried to surprise him from the side.

But the left hand was a feint. Ordin's right shot towards him once again. Valon tilted his head to the side, avoiding it.

Valon's position was not good. He was squatting and the old magician had linked his hands behind him. As Ordin brought his arms to his chest, the boy fell on his back and rolled away.

Ordin smiled as Valon found his feet. He stepped forward and launched a barrage of attacks. Right. Left. Right. Left. Left. Right. Valon dodged them all, but the effort was starting to take its toll.

Valon scrambled away. "Are you toying with me," he shouted.

"No, I'm testing you," answered Ordin, just before he lashed out with his fastest attack yet. Valon could only barely avoid it.

"You're doing pretty well," said Ordin.

Determined to keep his distance, Valon backed away as quickly as

he could. Ordin stalked after him. The boy managed to stay out of arm's reach, but could not get away.

Then the magician started to sing. Valon felt the old man's Voice wash into him, beautifully, mournfully, powerfully.

*"For all things born . . .*

*For all things known . . .*

*For all things loved . . .*

*For all things lost . . ."*

It was barely a tune, but the words were hammered out with the force of a sledge on iron. Valon found himself stumbling.

*"The heart is much too small*

*To hold onto them all."*

He knew it was just a metaphor, but Valon felt his chest constrict. Could this magician really be as harmless as he looked? What did he know? The distance between them closed.

*"What will you forget?"*

The wheat would be cut by now, and the first snows fallen. The warmth of the hearth would make it feel just like home . . .

*"What will you reject?"*

Prudella . . .

*"What will you deny?"*

In her own way, the Mistress loved him . . .

*"What will you let go?"*

And Ordin was on top of him. Valon cursed himself for falling for such a basic trick, and clumsily ducked under the magician's



hand. As he prepared to retreat once more, he felt a tap on the back of his head.

"Well, I guess I fail," he said, tears running down his face.

"Actually, you did incredibly well. I'm a little ashamed that I used the Voice to subdue you, but you were so fast I figured that Matronexa probably had to resort to it all the time."

Valon wiped his eyes. He was angry and humiliated, but those feelings were rapidly overshadowed by curiosity. "What's going on," he asked.

"I'll tell you in just a minute. I'd like to make one more test first, although I should warn you that it'll probably hurt a little."

"What, like that last one didn't?"

"Fair enough. May I hit you?"

"Why do you want to hit me?"

"I want to know how hard Matronexa habitually struck you. So I thought I might punch your arm a few times, and you can tell me whether she hit you softer or harder. Is that all right with you?"

Valon thought about it. He nodded. He barely felt the magician's first punch.

"Harder," he said. The second punch was not much more noticeable.

"Harder," he said.

Slam. "Harder."

Thunk. "Harder."

Thud.

"Okay, that one stung a little."

Ordin looked at his fist. Then he looked at the boy. His face was a mask of concentration. He was clearly calculating.

"I don't think I can escalate any more without hurting you," the magician said, "but it doesn't matter, because I think my suspicions have been confirmed.

"Either Matronexa was very carefully training you by gradually increasing the hardship you had to endure, or she was very sadistically torturing you by gradually increasing the pain you suffered. Knowing her, both theories are equally likely."

Valon didn't know what to say. He wasn't sure which one he wanted to be true.

"You still have a long way to go before you can match Matronexa or the High King," continued Ordin, "but when it comes to defensive concentration, you're already as good as some of the people we let graduate."

"Really," said Valon.

"Yes," said Ordin. "You're sloppy and you lack technique, but you're strong. If you can learn control, you could one day be a candidate for full membership in the Council."

Valon tried to stop himself from feeling too flattered. He knew there would have to be some sort of horrible catch.

"How do I learn control," he asked.

Ordin looked down at the ground and rubbed the back of his neck. "That part you're not going to like," he said. "What you're in for is

a long, grueling process, where I take everything you think you can already do and make it completely useless. Then, when your mind, body, and spirit are ground down as low as they can go, I'll slowly build you back up so that you can do on purpose what you're already doing by reflex."

Valon was confused. "But you said that in some ways, I was already as good as a fully trained magician."

Ordin looked embarrassed. "Yeah, I'm sorry about that. The bad news is that you're going to have to work especially hard to unlearn your bad habits. Although, the good news is that if you can do it, you'll wind up especially strong."

"I think I understand," the boy said.

"I don't think you do," replied the magician.

"No, I do. I've read about this sort of thing. You're going to give me some sort of crazy task to complete that seemingly has nothing to do with magic, but was secretly designed to force me to overcome my greatest weakness."

"You're wrong," said Ordin

"Oh," said Valon, disappointed.

"It was never meant to be a secret."

## Chapter 9

The wind was warm and moist, and smelled of summer, but it had a relentless, penetrating persistence. The large, elegant balcony offered no shelter at all. The view was lovely, though.

Valon contemplated the ocean as he waited for his new teacher. Near the coast, the waters were a live and friendly blue, almost green in their clarity. As they stretched out to the horizon, they gradually darkened into a cold purple.

There was something sinister about that. Valon wondered; if he could see far enough, would those waters eventually turn black? And was that blackness the true heart of the sea?

Ordin strode confidently up the stairs and placed a large, clay pot at the feet of his apprentice. Valon eyed the jar. The old man chuckled.

"We'll get to that in time, but first we have to discuss the three laws of magic," he said.

"I already know them," Valon said.

"No, you don't," said Ordin. "Before we can do anything, I have to correct Matronexa's poisoned teachings. Otherwise, you won't really understand how we get our powers."

Valon nodded solemnly. Ordin smiled.

"So what did you think was the first law of magic again?"

For some reason he couldn't explain, Valon felt embarrassed, as if being deceived was a moral failing. "You always give others the permission they need to hurt you," he said.

The magician shook his head. "That is an unfortunate distortion of the real first law: nothing can magic a soul against its will.

"It's about more than just hurting. You can't help a soul against its will, either. Magic can only take hold if it's in fundamental agreement with a person's deepest, most basic self.

"That's why most magic only affects others indirectly, through things like the Voice. It's too difficult to know what another soul will accept, so you change yourself instead."

"But the Mi- M-Matronexa was going to do something to me," Valon protested.

"It's difficult," Ordin said sadly, "but it's not impossible. If you know another person really well, or if . . ."

His teacher's hesitation was not lost on Valon. "If what," he asked.

"I shouldn't say, because it's kind of an advanced teaching, but. . . after what you've been through, maybe you'll be able to handle it. . .

"Your soul isn't. . . the same thing as your mind. It's more like. . . your capacity to exist inside the world. It can want things your mind does not.

"Most magicians don't learn this until late in their careers, but that is the true meaning of the second law of magic: everything is magical. The laws of nature are simply another type of spell, and they can't affect your soul against its will.

"Of course, by default, most souls are born yearning to be human

and ordinary. That's because we are created beings, and our souls' primary purpose is to allow us be what we were created to be: human and ordinary. So, even if a mind dreams of flying, the soul wants to be bound to the earth. But, as magicians, we can change this. We can cultivate our souls to allow for miracles."

"I see," said Valon.

His teacher grinned at him. "No, you probably don't," he said. "No one ever does at first. Even master magicians spend their entire lives exploring the nuances of the second law.

"But don't worry, because where you really need help is with the third."

"In the eyes of the Creator, I am no better than a piece of dirt," Valon said.

"Yep, that's the one," replied Ordin. "Teaching you that must have been Matronexa's idea of a joke. She was never fond of the real third law: in the eyes of the Creator, everything is one."

Valon chose to ignore the old man's apparent familiarity with the Mistress. He focused instead on the matter at hand. "Isn't that basically the same thing," he asked.

Ordin chuckled. "Technically, I suppose it is, but you wouldn't want to underestimate how much value the Creator places on dirt. You aren't *better* than a piece of dirt, because to the Creator, a piece of dirt has infinite worth. But so do you.

"Although the real meaning of the third law is that there is no difference between you and that piece of dirt, or between you and

this building, or between you and the whole of the world.

"It's the third law that gives us the greatest of our powers. With training, you'll be able to reach outside yourself, to harmonize your soul with the wind or the waters or the earth, and get them to respond to its will. It's a difficult thing to achieve, but it's also magic at its most beautiful, and well worth the effort.

"I don't think there's been enough beauty in your life, Valon. That's why I'm going to start you off with something most students don't learn until their third year. It's a weak spell, but very subtle and complex."

Valon smiled. His teacher continued, apologetically, "About half of those who give up on magic quit while trying to learn it. If you don't mind Valon, reach into that pot I brought up and grab a handful of barley chaff."

Valon reached into the pot. "Be sure to hold onto it," Ordin reminded him, "the wind up here will blow it away."

Chaff in hand, Valon waited to see what Ordin would do. He reached into the pot and grabbed a handful of his own.

"Watch me," he said, and opened his hand. Despite the the wind, which was strong enough to tousle the magician's hair and ruffle his clothes, the delicate grain husks stayed put.

"Learning to do this requires a special kind of concentration. You have to feel everything. The wind caressing your fingers. The weight of the chaff in your palm. The contraction of muscles in your hand and arm as they strain against gravity. You have to be

completely aware of the contours of the husks and the pattern of the wind. And then, once you have all of that in mind, you have to choose not to let it go. Why don't you try it?"

Valon opened his hand. The chaff instantly blew away.

"It took me a year to master this. The trick is to be intimately aware of your body and how it feels, but to be completely unaware of a self that is distinct from whatever it is that does the feeling.

"There should be no barrier between the mind and the world. The chaff should feel like a part of your body."

Valon tried again. He didn't do any better. Without prompting, he tried a third time. And a fourth. Ordin smiled at him.

"If it makes you feel any better, the thing Matronexa taught you, feeling your ancestor through your blood, is usually considered the more difficult task. If you can learn to hold onto the chaff, most of the rest of your training will be details."

It only made him feel better at first. As time passed, and he failed time and again to hold onto the chaff, it filled him with a deep sense of shame.

What if he could never do it? What if *complex and subtle* were completely outside his power. Was he nothing more than the big, clumsy ox of the magical world, only able to perform the most brutish and unsophisticated of tasks?

It surprised him how much he came to despise the kindly, old magician. Each morning, Ordin would escort him to the roof with a



full jar, and each evening, he would take him home with an empty one. The magician never criticized, and never failed to offer words of encouragement and sympathy, but he left Valon cold. It was like he expected him to fail.

One night, after a month of futility, Valon could no longer take it.

"What's wrong with me," he cried out.

Ordin looked at him with concern. "Why would you say that? Nothing's wrong with you."

"There must be something wrong with me. I've been doing this for a month, and I'm no closer to succeeding than I was when I started."

"It takes time. You're attempting a very tricky and delicate bit of magic."

"That's easy for you to say, you're the Sea's Breath."

"I didn't get that nickname because I was particularly good with this spell. In fact, I was pretty bad at it. Most people take three to six months to learn it. I took a year."

"Oh," said Valon. "So it's like calling a big man 'Tiny'?"

Ordin glared at the boy. "No, I'm a magician of the White Council. We don't get ironic nicknames. I'm called 'the Sea's Breath' because there's no one better at listening to and controlling the wind.

"Although, in a way, it was my ineptitude with this test that got me my nickname. I was furious that the other apprentices were passing me by, so I became obsessed with the wind. I kept looking for

some trick or shortcut that would help me pass."

"Did you find one?"

"No. I eventually learned enough to keep the chaff in my hand by diverting the wind away, but my teacher wasn't stupid. In the end, it wound up costing me more time."

"How did you finally pass?"

"By learning how to do it the right way."

"No kidding," said Valon, caustically, "but how did you learn, and how did you succeed after all that time?"

Ordin closed his eyes. "There was something," he said. "I suppose we can take a break tomorrow and see if it works for you too."

## Chapter 10

The palace of the Council of White Magicians was deceptively large. When he first saw it from the hills outside the city, Valon would not have said it sprawled unduly, but even after a month of living within its walls, he had still not explored it all.

It was a cool, wet winter day when Ordin led him into one of those unexplored regions.

"Where are we going," Valon asked. He didn't really care, but it felt like a good thing to say. As long as there wasn't chaff, he'd be happy.

Instead of answering, Ordin gestured to the end of the hall. There was an ornate door, like the one leading into their shared quarters. Valon looked at him questioningly. The magician nodded.

Valon went to the door and knocked. When the door opened, Valon froze. Behind it was the most beautiful creature the boy had ever seen.

She was a little gangly, not yet grown into her adult contours, but she had a radiant quality that made her ageless. Her penetrating green eyes seemed to dissect the world, and her full, flush lips seemed to laugh at what she saw. Valon was speechless.

Ordin strolled casually up to the door. "Hello Sharel," he said. "Could you please tell Ratia that Ordin and his apprentice are here to see her."

Sharel smiled. Valon's heart dropped into his stomach. "Of course, your honor. Ratia the Swordsmith would be glad to entertain

the Sea's Breath."

As she led them to the guest lounge, Valon gasped and fluttered. He felt like his feet barely touched the ground. Ordin flashed him a knowing smile.

The sting of embarrassment jolted his awareness. Taking a deep breath, he reminded himself he was in the company of magicians. He would have no secrets unless he buried his feelings deep.

It was difficult. He had never felt this way before. He'd almost made love to Prudella, but that was different. She wanted him, and her excitement excited him. He had no idea if Sharel had even given him a second thought, but her presence thrilled him nonetheless.

The sensation was completely unprecedented. He wondered if this was what people meant by "love." It was fierce and saturating. He felt it from the flats of his feet to the brim of his scalp. It was a hot, heady feeling.

And it became even more overwhelming the longer he felt it. Except for his anger towards Matronexa, nothing he'd ever experienced even came close. He had no idea how to express the depth of his desire without sounding insane. So he retreated into himself, determined to let nothing out.

In the visitors' lounge, Sharel bid them to sit with the grace of an accomplished hostess.

"Her honor, the magician Ratia, will be with you shortly," she said, her tone sweet and even. Valon caught her eye and smiled. When she returned his gesture, he felt like he would burst.

Ordin bowed respectfully. "Thank you kindly, Sharel." Turning to Valon, he asked, "Valon, would you like to thank Sharel for her hospitality?"

He could have killed the old man at that moment. "Thank you," he mumble. Sharel chuckled at his discomfort.

"You are too generous," she said. "I've done nothing but what was expected of me."

"Of course," said Ordin, "but it a rare hostess who can transform the obligation of hospitality into a joy for all concerned."

Sharel looked away shyly. Valon suddenly wished he was half as smooth as his teacher, but before he could explore that chain of thought more fully, the conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Ratia.

"Ordin, you dirty old man, are you flirting with my apprentice," she asked in mock outrage. Valon warmed to her instantly.

Odrin was unfazed. "Why Ratia, I see you're as diplomatic as ever."

Ratia smiled. "That wasn't a no, you sad, deluded old lecher."

Ordin was smiling too. "I know. I didn't want to embarrass you by dignifying your ludicrous accusations with a response."

"Really? If I'm being so ludicrous, then why are you here?"

"It's purely a social call. My apprentice is attempting to master the Practice of Stillness in Union and was getting a little frustrated. I thought he could use a break."

"So you brought him here," Ratia asked.

"That's right," answered Ordin. "I thought he might enjoy meeting someone his own age."

Ratia turned to Valon. The scrutiny of her magical sight was painful in its intensity. Though he could not match her power, Valon tried to return the favor.

Like all magicians with any degree of experience, she was older than she looked. Valon searched carefully for the signs that would betray her appearance of comfortable middle age. He found nothing in her subtly fading brown hair, nor in the settling and widening of her once athletic figure. Her eyes were cutting and clear, but Valon wasn't sure whether that was a trait common to all magicians.

The only flaw he could notice was with her hands. They were too young and delicate. Valon knew their magic had to be immense.

"He doesn't look that frustrated to me," announced Ratia.

Ordin responded on his behalf. "He's very good at keeping his thoughts to himself."

"Of course," said Ratia, "He'd have to be to live with Matronexa for any length of time."

A new thought seemed to occur to her. "Is he stable," she asked.

Once again, Ordin answered, "That's a very rude question, Ratia. If you insist on asking it, you should address it to Valon himself."

If Ratia was at all offended by being so scolded, she didn't show it. She stared directly into Valon's eyes. "Are you dangerous," she asked.

Valon scowled. "Are you," he responded, not bothering to conceal his annoyance.

"Fair enough," she said. "It was a rude question. Ordin wouldn't have brought you if he thought you were a problem, so you should be all right, but if I'm going to leave you alone with the High King's daughter, I need certain assurances."

Valon was startled. "I didn't know she- I mean, yes, I understand."

Ratia shot him a suspicious look before turning to Ordin. "Well, I'm convinced," she said. "Would you like to give these two some privacy so they can socialize in peace? I've acquired a new heart-crystal of extraordinary clarity."

Ordin nodded. "That sounds wonderful. I'd love to see it," he said. Once he was on his feet, he offered his arm to Ratia. She took it.

"We will be back in about an hour," said Ratia. "I trust you'll be able to amuse yourselves until then."

Sharel looked disappointed. Valon tried not to read too much into it. Soon, they were left alone.

The silence that followed was deeply uncomfortable. It clearly grated on Sharel's well-bred manners. She tried to fill it.

"Ordin seems like a good teacher," she said.

Valon had to remind himself not to stare. He knew that was not how normal people acted. Though it went against his deepest instincts, he forced himself to make small talk. "Maybe he is," he

said, "but I wouldn't know. He hasn't taught me anything yet."

Sharel nodded sympathetically. "That's unfortunate, but I thought I heard him mention the Practice of Stillness in Union. That's some complex magic."

"Yeah," said Valon, "but that's the first thing he tried to teach me, and I haven't learned it yet."

Sharel took a moment to reassess the bony young apprentice. For the first time, she seemed genuinely interested in the conversation. "That's impressive. I'm still learning the basic concentrations. It'll be another year at least before I'm ready for the practices."

The unconcealed admiration in Sharel's voice scared Valon. He wanted to puff himself up and crow, but he knew he would look stupid if she asked him for specifics.

"It's no big deal," he said. "Ordin said he wanted to undo the training I got from Matronexa."

As soon as he said it, he knew it was a mistake. The darkness he had spent the last month fighting threatened to seep into the front of his mind. He tried to laugh it away. "Who would've thought a black magician would teach magic the wrong way?"

"I didn't want to bring it up first," said Sharel, brightly, oblivious to the forces she was dealing with, "but I was really curious when I heard about you. What was it like being trained by the Goblin Queen?"

Valon's heart raced. The subject of his childhood was too painful to talk about, but Sharel was too beautiful to deny. He



stared at her depthless black hair and the creamy sheen of her flawless brown skin and tried to weigh his anguish against them.

"I'd rather not talk about it, but if you really want to know, I'll tell you," he answered, with frightening intensity.

Sharel caught her breath in surprise. "That's all right. Maybe you can tell me what to expect when I start the practices," she said, laughing nervously.

Valon's enchantment with the princess deepened. He thought she was trying to spare his feelings.

"It's a complete pain," he said. "You have to stand on the roof for hours, trying to become one with the wind without wasting too much chaff."

"What do you mean by 'become one with the wind'? Is that something Ordin told you to do?"

"No, not really. I was just simplifying. He told me I had to be aware of everything and then choose not to let the stuff go."

"Hm. Is being aware of everything anything like the Concentration of Flies Lighting in Sunshine?"

Valon knew something like this was inevitable. He'd just have to take his licks like a man. "I'm not sure," he said. "I don't really know what the White Council calls things."

"Oh, right. That's what we call it when you expand your field of vision so you can see behind your own head."

"That's cool. Did Ratia teach you that?"

"Yeah. Would you like to see me do it?"

Inwardly, he choked. "Yes, I'd like that," he answered hoarsely.

Sharel stood up and turned around. Valon caught himself before he checked out her backside. The magic was probably permanent.

"Can you see me," he asked.

"Yes I can, and I'll prove it. Raise just one of your hands."

Valon complied.

"That was your left," she said, obviously proud of herself.

Valon smiled mischievously.

"You had a one in two chance," he said.

"You bastard," Sharel squealed in protest. "You know perfectly well that I can see you. The smirk on your face is a mile wide."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Valon said.

"Okay Valon, I believe you," she said sarcastically. "How about another test, then? Hold up any number of fingers."

"Okay," he said.

"You're holding up seven fingers. Three on your right hand and four on your left."

"Close, but wrong," Valon lied.

Sharel spun around. "That's not funny," she screamed, playfully.

"I know. I'm sorry," he said with transparently false contrition. "I was just jealous."

"You can't do that," Sharel asked.

"Nope," answered Valon, "but I'm not a princess."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. It's just it seems like it would be an especially

useful skill for royalty to have. Because of, you know. . .  
politics."

Realization dawned on Sharel. "I'd never thought of it that way. Do you really think that's why Ratia taught it to me?"

"It depends. I don't know how the White Council usually does things. Everybody probably learns it eventually, but maybe you learned it sooner than most. Or maybe you didn't and I'm just crazy."

Sharel thought about it. "No," she said. "That sounds like something Ratia would do. She's really paranoid about my safety."

"She can't be that paranoid; she left you alone with me."

"Why," she said, smiling, "are you dangerous?"

"Uh, no. I'm not really. Ratia just thought I might be because I was raised by a black magician. . ." He regretted it as soon as he said it. She was probably trying to flirt with him. Her question was asked without challenge, but he panicked and took it seriously. He felt like a complete fool.

"I know," she said. Luckily Valon was able to conceal his humiliation. There was an unpleasant pause in the conversation, but it didn't last long.

"So what can you do," Sharel asked, breaking the silence.

Valon desperately wanted to impress the princess. He searched his memory. After what bordered on a too-long delay, he hesitantly offered an idea. "Most of what I learned, I hope to never use again, but I might- No, never mind. It's too risky."

Sharel was intrigued. "Why don't you tell me what it is, and

I'll decide whether it's too risky or not?"

Suddenly, Valon had second thoughts. What he had in mind was insane, but it was already too late to back down. He felt queasy. He ignored the fluttering, boiling feeling in his stomach and chose to go forward.

"I might be able to do the Sorcerous Voice," he said. "I've never done it on purpose before, but I've heard it enough that I think I have it figured out. Except that I'm not really sure it's a good idea, so forget I mentioned it."

"I'm not sure I can forget it," she said. "It's not every day that such a young magician makes such a bold claim. I might almost be concerned if I thought you could back it up."

Valon was rattled. "I'm certain I could do it," he said, "but I'm worried it might not be safe."

"So you're a chicken."

"No," said Valon. "I'll be fine no matter what happens. It's you I'm worried about. The Sorcerous Voice might, you know. . . drive you insane."

"Oh, so I'm the chicken?"

"Um. . . Apparently not. If you think you can handle it. . ."

"If there's anything to handle, I'd be very surprised."

Inwardly, Valon swooned. Sharel's confidence was making him tingle in places he didn't even know he had. It was almost too sexy. He knew he had to match it.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," he said.

"Quit stalling," she said.

The Voice was a conduit of pure emotion. It worked by eliminating all equivocation and diffidence from a magician's words. It gave the message weight, the persuasive power of truths spoken with absolute conviction.

Valon gathered his concentration. His education under Matronexa had prepared him well for this. He knew an absolute when he saw one. He could speak lies with conviction.

He wanted to declare his love for Sharel, to unleash the passion that had steadily been building inside him, to make her see with unflinching clarity the certitude of his desire. But it was too soon.

Instead, he opened his heart to the old fear. He channeled his frenetic lust into an icy, stalking dread. It took him a moment, hissing quietly through his teeth, to find the correct resonance, but when he did, the change was dramatic.

The room darkened. The lanterns on the wall flickered and sputtered. Shadows played across Valon's face, deepening his already penetrating stare, and erasing even the memory of his warmth.

"*Do you still think this was a good idea,*" he said in a deep, predatory rumble.

Sharel recoiled in fear, and suddenly the spell was broken. She looked at the dopey, eager face that had so recently been so impossibly menacing and laughed.

"That was amazing," she said. "I don't think I've ever been so scared in my entire life."

Valon stared at her in helpless bemusement.

"Was that really your first time," Sharel asked.

"Sort of," he answered. "I've done it a couple of times before, but always when I was focusing on something else. That was the first time I set out to do it beforehand."

"Then you must have a knack, because that was very good. Can you do anything besides scary?"

Valon thought about the question. There wasn't much brightness in his past. He knew he could do demeaning, and insinuating would probably be pretty easy, but neither seemed particularly fun.

He could do bird calls. The Magician loved bird calls. She hated birds, but she loved calling them. She never called them for anything good, but the princess didn't need to know that.

It was sloppy at first, but he quickly got the hang of it. The birds were easy, but he found he couldn't stop there. The more he used the Voice, the more he realized the breadth and depth of its power.

He added the sound of the wind. And then the rustle of leaves overhead and the crunch of leaves underfoot. And once he figured out the trick of it, he wove in the nuances of day and night and of summer and winter and of the passage of years.

Around him, the palace disappeared. The sound of his voice filled Ratia's lounge and transformed it. Closing her eyes, Sharel swore she could smell the earthy perfume of growing wood and feel the chill of a gentle breeze over freshly fallen snow, so complete was

Valon's illusion.

But he couldn't keep it up. His overworked throat began to feel sore, and his lips were numb from their unfamiliar contortions. Reluctantly, he let the dream fade.

Sharel was in a daze. She opened her eyes slowly. "That was. . . intense," she said.

"It certainly was," said Ratia. The apprentices had not noticed her return.

Valon blushed, as if he were caught in a compromising position. Which, of course, he was. Sharel quickly composed herself.

"Ratia," she said, "I thought you were going to be busy for at least an hour."

Ratia looked at her curiously. "I was, but Ordin had some interesting insights into the origin of my crystal, so we took a little longer than expected."

Sharel's confusion was obvious. "What? I don't understand. If your business took longer than expected, why did you come back early?"

Ratia's was unreadable, but she didn't sound happy. "I was more than a half hour late. And I've been standing here for about ten minutes."

Valon and Sharel stared at her in disbelief. The princess turned to Valon. "What did you do," she asked, shocked.

"I don't know," said Valon. "It didn't feel that long to me either."

Now it was Ratia's turn to use the Voice. "*Clearly,*" she said, with the deepest motherly authority, "I have been *remiss* with my training. That will soon be *corrected.*"

Seeing Sharel petrified by the magician's power, Valon realized for the first time the strength of his own resistance. Ratia wasn't nearly as good at this as Matronexa. He took a deep breath and prepared to counter her influence.

But he never got the chance. Ordin interrupted, "I seem to remember a certain young lady who went a little overboard when she first learned to use the Voice. If I recall, we couldn't sleep for the eager young suitors pounding on the Council's doors."

The sudden embarrassment snapped Ratia out of her anger. "You would bring that up, old man, but that was a long time ago, and this is serious."

"I agree," said Ordin, "but you know as well as I do that underestimating the power of the Voice is an ancient rite of passage for young magicians. Just send Sharel over to me for a couple of weeks and I'll teach her the concentration she'll need to keep it from happening again."

"But-," said Ratia.

"Valon will be busy on the roof for another month at least, and resistance develops faster if the student learns from someone with a truly excellent command of the Voice's power."

Ratia was visibly annoyed, but she had no choice but to relent.



## Chapter 11

Walking back through the airy halls of the Council's palace, Ordin spoke to Valon quietly.

"I know it's only natural to want to experiment, but I feel like I should warn you. Abusing the Voice is manipulative and cruel. It's only really appropriate in certain rare situations."

Valon didn't care for the magician's accusation-by-euphemism. "I wasn't doing anything wrong," he said defensively.

Ordin would not be provoked so easily. "I know," he said. "There's a reason the White Council teaches its students the Voice. Like long life and extraordinary strength, it's a form of magic that comes naturally. Every magician learns it eventually. Some sooner than others, and some more powerfully than others, but even if someone deliberately tried to avoid it, it would still slip out from time to time.

"We can't help it; the Voice is what happens whenever a magician speaks with strong emotion, but it's important to learn control. Normal people don't have the defenses we do. It will become far too easy to hurt them by accident.

"Let me put it this way - If you study here for long enough, you will eventually become strong enough to break a normal human's bones with the slightest effort, but just because it will be easy, doesn't mean it will be right.

"The Voice is like that. You will have the ability to strongly influence people's emotions, so you have an obligation to influence

them only for the better. You will have the ability to get others to place special trust in your words, so you have an obligation to speak only the truth.

"Do you understand?"

"I think so," said Valon, "but I have a question. Why did you use the Voice to take me down on my second day here?"

If Ordin was unprepared for the question, he didn't show it. He answered carefully, "I did it for the same reason I punched you - to test how much you could withstand. Sometimes you have to hurt someone in the short term to help him in the long term."

"How will I know if I'm helping," asked Valon.

"If you're careful, and you truly mean well, you're probably helping."

That night, Valon slept fitfully. He dreamt of Matronexa.

The next day, on the roof, Ordin was in an unusually cheerful mood. When Valon reached for his first handful of chaff, the magician stopped him.

"You don't have to start right away," said Ordin. "In fact, I'd like to stay and chat a little first, if you don't mind."

"I guess it's all right," Valon said.

"Good. First things first; how are you feeling? Refreshed and well-rested?"

Valon grunted.

"That's unfortunate. I think you're about to enter a new phase

of your training, and it would've been nice if your first day was a pleasant one. Oh well. Did you enjoy spending time with Sharel yesterday?"

The mention of Sharel's name triggered a flood of emotion within the boy. She was so perfect. Raven-tressed Sharel. Curvaceous Sharel. Sharel.

He wanted to be with her instead of standing on the roof all day, throwing garbage away one handful at a time, but he dared not let Ordin know that. He couldn't stand the old man judging him.

"Yeah," he said.

Ordin continued, "She was really pretty, wasn't she?"

Suspicion tore through Valon's heart. How much did the old man know? Was he teasing him, or just making small talk? Was Sharel pretty? Yes! Yes! A million times, yes! But that was a weakness he wanted to keep to himself. He calmed the screaming inside and answered, "Was she?"

But evasion would not sway Ordin from his interrogation. "You two talked for quite awhile. Did you notice how smart she was?"

Of course he noticed. He wished the magician would get to the point.

"Uh-huh," said Valon.

"Did you like her," asked Ordin.

"She's nice," answered Valon.

The two looked at each other for a long moment. Valon bent all of his power towards maintaining a mask of hardened neutrality. He

could tell the old man was nonplussed.

"I guess I misread you, Valon. I suppose it wouldn't be the first time. Maybe I should just go ahead and say what I came up here to say."

"That would be nice," Valon said.

"I know you've been having trouble with this Practice. I had a lot of trouble too. In fact, it wasn't until I had been trying for ten months that things started to turn around for me."

Ordin waited for the boy to say something, but it didn't look like it was going to happen. "Would you like to know what happened," he asked.

Valon nodded carefully.

"Well," said Ordin, "I fell so far behind that a younger apprentice caught up with me. One day, I came up here and found another person practicing right next to my usual spot.

"I would've been angry, but this person was the most gorgeous girl I had ever seen. At first it was humiliating, being so far behind, but she was really cool about it. She teased me at first, but once she started failing too, she turned her wit against the teachers and the school. She was really funny, especially when she was angry.

"Pretty soon, we were having a great time, cracking jokes and goofing off, and just generally not taking the test too seriously. It wasn't long before I was madly in love with her.

"And that really worried me, because this girl was a great magician. Better than most, actually. I didn't know how I could live

with myself if she left me behind.

"So I started sneaking out to get extra practice, but it wasn't easy, because the whole time I was doing it, I was thinking of her.

"When I was supposed to be working, I fantasized about her instead. I imagined the chaff was a handful of her hair, and that the wind on my cheek was her caress and that the smell of the ocean was her perfume.

"But it turned out that that wasn't such a bad thing to do. Because I was thinking about the girl I loved, I really wanted to feel as much as possible.

"And it was in the middle of one of my daydreams that I first felt the magic. It was weak, and it didn't last very long, because I was doing it completely the wrong way, but once I knew what I was looking for, I was able find it again much easier.

"I didn't let on right away that I could do it, because I wanted to spend more time with my new friend, but she didn't take long to get the hang of it either. I like to think she discovered the same trick as me, but the way things worked out between us, I doubt it."

Despite himself, Valon was curious. "What happened," he asked.

Ordin shook his head sadly. "I'm sorry, Valon, but that's too personal. Maybe when we know each other better."

Valon understood the magician's reluctance, but it angered him. "You never seemed to have trouble asking me personal questions," he said.

Ordin looked chagrined. "You're absolutely right," he said.

"It's not fair that I would expect you to tell me about your past without me having to tell you about mine.

"For a brief a brief time, we had a relationship, but she turned out not to be the person I thought she was and things got ugly. She eventually left me for another man."

"What was her name?"

The magician sighed. "Her name was Belari, the Flame of Truth."

"What happened to her?"

A dark look crossed the magician's face. "I don't know," he said. "I haven't seen her in more than seventy years."

Valon was suspicious. The magician wasn't telling the whole truth, but since Ordin never pried too deeply, he decided to return the favor. "If it was bad, why did you tell me about her," he asked.

"Because it wasn't all bad, and the part that was good really helped me when I was in your position. That's why I introduced you to Sharel. She has a certain predictable effect on young men and I thought--"

"Wait," interrupted Valon. "I don't appreciate being manipulated. The Mistress used to do that all the time. I won't go back to being a magician's puppet."

"I see," said Ordin, apologetically, "I'm very sorry, Valon. Now that you know my motives, do you regret meeting the princess?"

Valon really hated magicians. The old man had a point. "She didn't do anything wrong," he said.

"Still," said Ordin, "I own you an apology. I shouldn't have

taken your feelings for granted. If you're willing to forgive me, I'll offer you one last piece of advice - Just try to love the world around you as much as possible."

"Thank you," said Valon. He was on the verge of tears. Ordin pretended not to notice.

"You're very kind, Valon. I'll leave you to practice now. Sharel should be arriving for her lesson soon."

He had forgotten about that. It didn't seem fair that he should be stuck on the roof while the love of his life studied with his teacher. He shouted to the already retreating magician.

"Can I-" he started to ask.

But the magician didn't even turn. "No," he replied.

That day, thoughts of Sharel gnawed at Valon. She was in the suite he shared with the magician. She would see where he lived, where he ate, maybe even where he slept. What would she think? Would she even think of him at all? Would sharing a teacher bring them closer together?

The questions racing through his head completely ruined his concentration. Handful after handful of chaff disappeared into the wind, untouched by even the faintest of magic. He couldn't even follow Ordin's advice. Every thought he had of Sharel made him wish he was somewhere else.

He rushed through his exercises. He didn't care whether he was doing them right; he just wanted to get to the bottom of the pot as quickly as possible. When he dispersed the last handful of chaff, he

bolted through the halls of the palace, hoping to catch Sharel before she finished for the day.

As he passed through the entrance of Ordin's chambers, he overheard the princess' training. The sound chilled him.

"*You're pathetic,*" a voice said. It was acid in its cruelty, but otherwise sounded like Ordin. "I can't *believe* I'm looking at *royalty*, but then again, *I imagine that even noblest lineage has its castoffs.*"

Valon couldn't believe what was hearing, but he was not prepared for the reply.

"I'm sorry," said Sharel. She sounded small and wounded. It broke Valon's heart. He burst in on them.

Sharel was on her knees. Snot flowed from her nose. Her eyes were swollen from crying. She shook with exhaustion and fear.

Ordin looked angry to see him, but it was nothing compared to Valon's fury.

"How could you do this," he screamed.

The magician was scarily calm. "It's all part of her training. She has to learn to defend herself."

Suddenly, the magician's voice changed. It became gentle and quiet and sad, filled with a bottomless and endless compassion. It was laden with magic.

"*I just want to protect her. You know what I mean, Valon. You've been where she is, but you didn't have anyone to protect you. Do you remember what Matronexa did to you?*"



Valon stopped, as if struck. He could feel his past churning inside him, but then he looked to Sharel, and he knew he couldn't succumb. He reached deep into himself, for the blackest pit of his anger, and with it summoned the power of his own Voice.

**"No,"** he shouted. The walls shook with the force of it. **"You will not** make me go to that place. *You don't have the right.*"

It may have been his imagination, but he thought he saw the magician shrink from his declaration. Regardless, when the old man next spoke, it was in his normal tone, and directed towards the cowering princess.

"Do you see now," said Ordin. "That is why you need to learn resistance. Valon was able to keep his head and respond effectively. One day, you'll be able to the same." Weakly, Sharel nodded. She was already recovering.

"I'll let you compose yourself," Ordin said. "Valon, I'd like to speak to you alone.

In the privacy of the foyer, Ordin's demeanor was stern. "You're home early," he said.

Valon was confused. For some reason, his anger was rapidly turning to shame. "I know," he said. "I went through the chaff quicker than usual today."

"I'll bet you did," said Ordin, "but there's something you should know. In case it happens again. The training that Sharel's going through will leave her exposed and vulnerable. She'll need her privacy.

"So, no matter how quickly you might finish in the future, I don't want to see you around here until dusk at least. Do you understand?"

Valon understood very well. The more he thought about it, the more he realized he should have expected this. He felt like he had conspired to spy on her naked. He was the world's biggest asshole. He ran to his room and cried.

## Chapter 12

Valon woke to calmness. Sleep had soothed his conscience. Then he remembered the previous day. He skipped breakfast and slumped his way to practice.

On his way, he ran into Sharel. He couldn't look her in the eye.

"I'm sorry about yesterday," he mumbled.

The princess was subdued. She sounded tired. "You were very stupid," she said, "but it was amazing the way you were able to stick up for me. I hope to be that strong someday."

Valon didn't know how to feel. For hours afterwards, he analyzed the conversation in every way a conversation could be analyzed. She didn't seem angry, but she didn't seem grateful either. He was stupid, but she envied his strength. He couldn't decide whether it was a win or a loss.

His distraction did not help his magic, though it did help him to kill time. He didn't return home until after dark. Ordin was waiting for him.

"You don't need to overcompensate, Valon."

Valon wondered if that was what he was doing. "I was thinking," he said.

"You made a mistake. You don't need to be ashamed of how you feel."

"I don't know what you mean."

Ordin sighed. "I'm not Matronexa," he said. "I'm not going to punish you for liking girls."

Valon froze. Until that moment, he had not known he could be so angry. "Are you looking into my thoughts," he said.

"No Valon, I'm not. This is your new home. I want you to feel safe here. Looking into someone's thoughts without their permission is a disgusting, dishonorable practice. It's something a black magician would do. I am not a black magician. You will always have as much privacy as you want."

Valon was unconvinced. "If that's true, then how do you know so much about the way I feel, and how do you know so much about the way Matronexa treated me?"

"I guessed," answered Ordin. "For one thing, I used to be a young man myself. For another, I know Matroxia very well."

"How do you know her?"

"She wasn't always a black magician. She used to be a member of the White Council."

For a moment, time stopped. There was something brittle in the boy that came very close to breaking. He probed it gently and was fascinated by the pain he felt.

Of course it made sense; they were both magicians. It wasn't surprising that they knew each other, but the Mistress had always felt like his personal demon. He couldn't believe that she was real to anyone else.

"What was she like," he asked. He didn't really want to know.

Ordin tensed. "I'm not sure it's such a good idea."

Valon agreed. "I think I have to know," he said.

"I understand," said Ordin. "I'll do my best, but it won't be easy. She was a . . . complex person."

Valon found it odd that the magician would choose his words so carefully, but he was too ashamed of his own curiosity to make an issue of it. He beckoned the old man to continue.

"She was a beautiful, energetic, talented young woman," Ordin said. "Although I suppose, even then, there were signs of what she would become. She was brilliant and knew it. She thought it was funny when other people got hurt or looked stupid."

"But her real obsession was the Council. It dominated her life. She was always talking about how she would advance politically, or about her latest scheme to expand the Council's influence."

"She was determined to carve out her place in history, and she had no trouble finding people to help her. Especially men."

Suddenly, Ordin looked uncomfortable. "I don't think I should say any more," he said.

Though his common sense urged him to relent, Valon could not help himself. Whatever the magician was holding back was surely too awful to leave to his imagination. "Please, go on," he said.

"She used to brag," said Ordin. "If she was telling the truth, then half the Council was in love with her, and the other half wanted to bed her. I . . . I believe it."

"She was so . . . competent. Everything she did, she did with unrestrained intensity. She couldn't stand the thought of being second best."

"I think that's what drew men to her, especially magicians. They could sense that she was uncompromising and passionate and ambitious, and among our kind, ambition is the ultimate aphrodisiac. I have no doubt that if she hadn't been thrown out, she would be running the Council today."

Hearing the magician's account nauseated Valon. He was certain that Ordin was telling truth, but he wondered if time could really change someone so much.

When he had known the Mistress, she didn't seem energetic or ambitious. Except for the very end, he had never seen her do anything but hide in an isolated village and torture her adopted son. Had defeat broken her? Or was his life another one of her ambitions?

He knew the answer.

She had told him herself, on the peak of Mount Aran. He was destined to help her return to power.

But that destiny was interrupted.

Unless . . .

He didn't want to think about it.

"Why did she do it," he asked, mostly to keep his mind focused on practically anything else.

"What do you mean," replied Ordin.

"She told me she killed some people, and that's why she was cast out, but if all she cared about was the Council, why would she throw that away?"

"What, exactly, did she tell you," the magician asked.

"She said she was thrown out for serial murder, that she had trouble controlling her anger."

There was a long pause, as Ordin took time to consider his answer. "She may have been telling you the truth," he said. "I'd have believed it, but as far as I know, the Council only caught her once.

"The man's name was Hardesh, I think. He was her lover, the latest in a long line of gorgeous non-magicians. The condition of his body- It was not easy- He had been beaten as badly as a person can be beaten. It was ugly.

"It was an odd trial. The Council didn't take long to throw her out. I never really understood why."

A wave of shock and horror overcame Valon. It felt like betrayal. "Why wouldn't the Council throw out a murderer," he asked, reeling from the sudden sensation of moral uncertainty.

"I'm not saying they made the wrong decision," answered Ordin, "but given what the rest of us knew about the issue, it was a strange decision.

"It's an ugly truth about our profession, that sometimes things happen. Learning magic is difficult, but once you've learned it, using it easy. Sometimes it's easier than holding back.

"When a magician deals closely with a non-magician, accidents are inevitable. Maybe you get distracted and misjudge the pressure of a handshake or maybe someone deliberately provokes your anger and you go a little too far with the Voice or maybe you forget yourself in the middle of making love . . . Things happen.

"We try to teach discipline, but we're still human. That's why the Council instituted the tradition of the blood price. When a magician hurts a non-magician, unless the circumstances are especially offensive, it is customary for the magician to pay a sum of money to the victim, or to the victim's family.

"Hardesh was hurt bad, but it wasn't beyond the sort of thing that the blood price usually covered. We all thought it was strange that the Council would vote for her expulsion, considering how popular she was.

"You said she told you about multiple murders. Maybe the Council found out about that and didn't say anything. She was with a lot of men. It could be that there was a reason they didn't stay in her life for long.

"As much as I was willing to believe any unflattering rumor about her, that theory never occurred to me. It makes sense, though."

Valon was now disgusted *and* confused. "If murder wasn't enough to automatically get someone kicked off the Council, then what did you think was going on?"

Ordin couldn't look at the boy. "The politics of the Council have always been complicated," he said awkwardly.

"What do you mean," asked Valon.

"Before . . . Matronexa was kicked out, she was very popular, but her ambitions towards the Council were purely professional."

"I don't understand," the boy said.

"She was with a lot of men. Men who were not magicians."



Valon's eyes narrowed. "What are you saying," he asked.

"It's not something that's talked about, but one of the . . . benefits of being a magician is that normal people are often drawn to us, to our power. Some take advantage of this. They have their pick of the most desirable women, or, for the lady magicians, the handsomest men.

"It's an embarrassing practice, but it's something that we let happen because there's no way to stop it from happening. We're still human, and the lure of . . . Well, it's hard to resist.

"It's probably true what she told you. The Council probably looked into her thoughts and saw that Hardesh was not the first man she killed. She was still young. She wouldn't have been able to fool them for long.

"But I can't lie to you. At the time, there was speculation that their decision was influenced by . . . Matronexa's romantic activities."

"Why would the Council care," asked Valon.

"They were wise, but they were just men. Matronexa was very beautiful. She could have had any magician she wanted. Some people resented the fact that a magician was not what she wanted."

"I thought you said she was popular."

"She was. If she wasn't so popular, no one would have cared."

Valon stared at the magician. "I'm not sure I like how the Council operates," he said coldly.

"Look," said Ordin. "You know Matronexa better than anyone. Was

she a black magician? Did she deserve to get thrown out?"

"Yes," Valon said. "She did."

"So they made the right decision. They usually do. People on the outside can't help but gossip, but if the Council is doing the right thing, it's probably not by accident."

"You're on the Council," Valon said. "Does this sort of thing still happen?"

"I don't know, Valon. The rest of the Council seems wise to me, but if they weren't, who would be able to tell?"

The boy scrutinized Ordin. He wished he could see into the magician's heart, to cut through the obfuscation and discern what was real, but he didn't know how. He wasn't sure how he could trust him.

"Why am I here," he asked. "What does the Council want from me?"

"The deliberations of the Council are secret. I can only speak in general terms. We thought that you would prove to be a strong magician, that you would be uniquely motivated to fight Matronexa, and that if we sheltered you, there was a chance she would come out of hiding to get you back."

"So I'm bait," said Valon. He considered the prospect. "I don't mind, but why do you think she'd risk it?"

Ordin did not answer right away. "Do you think she would voluntarily let you make a new life? Or do you think she would want to avenge the insult of losing you?"

Valon could sense the magician's evasion. "I don't know," he said. "Is that what the Council thinks?"

"If it were," said Ordin, "I couldn't tell you. The Council's deliberations are secret."

"Gee," said Valon blandly, "I can't imagine why the Council is subject to such scandalous gossip."

Ordin smiled. "I have a feeling, Valon, that you'll eventually prove to be wiser than any of us."

## Chapter 13

Picking up an object and holding onto it with the power of the mind alone was called the Practice of Stillness in Unity. Despite the deceptive simplicity of the spell, it was an important foundational pillar to many of the Council's greater powers. Learning it was very tedious.

Valon was a good student, but he was not immune to the corrosive boredom of the Practice. Once he got over the excitement of that business with Sharel, desperation really started to set in.

He started fantasizing about the Mistress. He wondered how hard she would have to hit him before he attained inner peace. It was funny, but he never laughed for long.

Sometimes, he would follow Ordin's advice and think about Sharel. He liked the princess, but she scared him. The Mistress scared him . . .

It was a worrying line of inquiry.

By the time two months had passed, he had come to dread his days on the roof. The susurrations of the waves were like laughter, mocking his failure. The cruel coastal wind gave him no respite. It stripped away his hope as surely as it stripped the barley chaff from his hand.

He pitied the grain husks. They had no weight, no ability to resist the forces that would scatter them. The wind blew, and they blew with it.

It was the perfect metaphor for his life. He cried, mostly for

himself, but also, stupidly, for the chaff.

It was nearly a minute before he realized that it wasn't blowing away.

Through his tears, he laughed, and the chaff was gone.

What had Ordin told him? "Just try to love the world as much as possible." That was how people usually did it. Apparently, that wasn't the only way.

It must have been the third law of magic. He felt sorry the chaff, and he felt sorry for himself, so the chaff stayed. Everything is one.

Suddenly, he had a plan. Before he reached into the jar, he thought, once more, about the test. He hated it. He hated the sky and the sun. He hated the chaff for wasting so much of his time. He hated himself for taking so long to figure it all out.

The chaff stayed put. He yelped in celebration, and it blew away, but it didn't matter. He knew how to do it now. As long as he felt a single emotion intensely enough to encompass the whole world, the chaff remained in his hand.

With practice, he found he could do it with anger and heartache and fear . . . but not with love.

That scared him. When Ordin gave him that advice, he made it sound so easy. Just try and love the world. He couldn't do it, though. Not that way.

In the end, did it really matter? He'd passed the test. So, he couldn't do it with love. Hatred got the same results. He decided to

treat this like a victory.

Despite his earlier resolution, Valon found it difficult to take pride in his accomplishment. As he performed the spell for his mentor, his thoughts turned to despair. Was this how black magicians got started? When they stared out into the world and achieved oneness, did they see only their own darkness staring back? Did they accept power at the price of their own happiness?

This whole train of thought was, of course, a ploy to prime the magic. Valon transferred his self-loathing and doubt into the grain husks, and they huddled in his hand, afraid to touch the wind.

Ordin clapped.

"You mastered that remarkably fast," the old man said.

"It's like you said, Matronexa's been training me for years," replied Valon. He had not yet recovered from casting the spell.

Ordin reached out to put a hand on the boy's shoulder, but stopped himself when he saw Valon pull away. "Don't give her too much credit," he said, hands behind his back. "You'd have been great anyway. You've got a natural talent for this sort of thing."

Whether it was a new power, unlocked by his recent revelation, or simply a product of his growing familiarity with the magician, Valon couldn't say, but he heard something in Ordin's words. It was a buzzing, like a message beneath the message. Unprepared as he was, he didn't catch it, but he instinctively knew it was the old man's thoughts, and that they didn't match the words he spoke.

He quickly grabbed hold of his rising panic and shoved it down deep, where it wouldn't show. He would have to play this carefully. "How can you be so sure of that," he asked, with affected sullenness.

Ordin's answer was guarded, but not unusually so. "Magical ability is a lot like strength or swiftness - anyone can develop it with effort, but some people are born with greater potential than most."

Valon listened for the buzzing, but the more he concentrated, the farther away it seemed to get. He was about to give up when he caught his teacher's eye.

The noise crystallized into words. *Please, let him be satisfied,* it said.

His churning horror was difficult to contain, but he managed it. "Oh," he said. "That explains it. Thank you."

The buzzing soothed to a hum as Ordin examined his apprentice. "Are you all right," he asked.

"I'm fine," Valon lied. "I think I need some time alone - if that's all right with you."

There was a long, painful pause. Valon smiled wearily at his master and tried his best to ignore the cloying swarm of unspoken questions that pressed against his eyes and ears and throat. He didn't know how long he could withstand the onslaught.

Luckily, he didn't have to wait long.

"Okay, I'll see you for supper," said Ordin. He was obviously doubtful, but underneath his concern, Valon could sense his relief.

Alone, once more, on the roof, Valon cried. He felt like he owed the Mistress an apology. Telepathy was not what he imagined. He always thought it would be like eavesdropping, that he would hear another's thoughts like he heard the monologue in his own head.

It wasn't like that at all.

He couldn't put it into words. It was a sense, not quite hearing, not quite vision, not quite smell. And it was powerful. For some reason, he'd expected it to be weak and distant, but Ordin's thoughts had pressed against him as relentlessly as an overbearing cologne.

He didn't know how the Mistress had ever tolerated him.

Valon ground his teeth. She wasn't the Mistress! She was Matronexa. She was Matronexa! And he now had a new weapon to use against her, if only he could learn to wield it.

Ordin could probably teach him, but he wasn't sure he could bear the force of the old man's secrets. He needed advice from someone who knew this world, from someone who didn't work for the Council, from someone he could trust. He decided to find Sharel.

Slouching through the halls of the Council palace, Valon tried his best to stay calm and avoid overhearing too many thoughts. It wasn't easy. The mild Aurelian winter was cool and inviting, and both magicians and their apprentices enjoyed relaxing in the fresh air of the high-ceilinged passages.



He couldn't decide which he hated more. The magicians' minds were powerful, but well-shielded. They hummed and buzzed and roared, but as impossible as they were to ignore, at least they were difficult to understand.

The apprentices had no such control. Their minds whispered and whimpered, but he could see the meaning wriggling inside them. He knew Elgen had a crush on Phasia, and that Barrod was afraid of learning the Concentration of Breath in Darkness. He knew Yarna wanted a new master and that Solep missed the dry heat of his homeland. He knew none of them liked him very much.

He hadn't been introduced to any of them.

He had to find Sharel and take her somewhere isolated. He could only hope that she might have a more permanent solution.

On some level, namely the conscious, he knew it was a stupid plan, but there was no one in this place he felt safe turning to. At least with Sharel, he'd feel unsafe for definable reasons.

It was with that thought in mind that he knocked on the door of Ratia the Swordsmith. He wasn't expecting the magician to answer it herself.

She was wearing a thick, leather apron, and there was soot under her fingernails. Her eyes were tightened into an unhealthy-looking squint. Valon told himself it came from looking at a forge.

"I'd like to see Sharel," he said, ignoring the not-quite-hostile-but-clearly-less-than-friendly crackling that radiated through the magician's thoughts.

"If that's all right," he added, in hope of mollifying her. It didn't work.

"Sharel's busy," she said, not cruelly, but with distressing finality.

"I understand," said Valon. "But this is really important. I- I have to ask her something."

The crackling of the magician's thoughts mellowed into a dull hiss, and Valon swore he could see in them the shape of resignation to an inevitability.

"I suppose, this too, is something she must learn to deal with," said the magician. Valon was too distracted by his own problems to understand what she meant.

"Go on in," she clarified. Grateful to be out of the halls, Valon obeyed with stunning quickness. It would have been unseemly if it wasn't so cute.

Sharel was in the lounge. She stood on one foot, and her free leg curved up behind her back. Her thoughts were calm and quiet and clear. For a moment, Valon's mission was forgotten, lost in the elegant beauty of the High King's daughter.

It didn't last. She could see behind her own head, and it didn't take long for her to notice the young man staring at her. Valon cringed at the shrieking dissonance of her interrupted meditation. He tried his best not to look into the streams of worry, confusion, and annoyance pouring out of her, but she was still just an apprentice, and her heart was naked and vulnerable.

*What does he want, it said. Why did he have to come to me? What if he-*

"I have a problem," shouted Valon. It didn't drown out the princess' thoughts, but it did surprise her enough that he could proceed with a clear conscience.

"I have a problem," he repeated in a more normal tone. "And you're the closest thing to a friend I have."

"That's really sad," replied Sharel. Valon could tell from the harmony that she really meant it.

"I've been hearing people's thoughts," said Valon.

The princess started. *Oh shit, she thought, I hope- Oh shit! Oh shit! Oh shitty-shitty shit shit!*

Valon felt like a total sleaze for causing her such worry, but he had to admit it was a pretty catch tune. Still singing in her head, Sharel strolled towards him and put her hand over his eyes.

Instantly, the voices stopped. Valon sighed in relief and allowed himself to enjoy the feel of the princess' cool hand on his overheated face.

"All right," said Sharel. "Are you feeling better? Are still hearing . . . things?"

"No," said Valon. "I mean yes. I mean yes, I'm feeling better, and no, I'm not hearing anything I'm not supposed to." He felt the princess relax.

"That's good," she said. "Did you hear-"

"I didn't hear anything worse than what people have said to my

face," interrupted Valon.

"Um . . . okay," replied the princess. "I'm going to take my hand away. Try not to panic."

When the princess removed her hand, Valon kept his eyes firmly closed. It didn't matter. The noise came flooding back. He couldn't pick out the same specifics as he could with his eyes open, but he could hear the general tenor of Sharel's thoughts. It wasn't a happy sound.

In the darkness, there was a long rip. Moments later, Valon felt a strip of rough cloth wrap around his head. Once again, his telepathy stopped.

"This is one of those *political* things we princesses have to know," explained Sharel. "Your eyelids, or even your hands, won't stop telepathy. They're too much a part of you."

Sharel laughed. It was a bright, short chuckle, moved primarily by relief, but not bereft of mirth. "Of course, to be completely safe, I should wrap you up so that no skin shows at all, but somehow I doubt you're a psychic mastermind." She laughed again, and Valon laughed with her. He wasn't sure why.

"So why are you here," she said after catching her breath.

"I told you why," said Valon.

"No, I meant, why are you here and not at home? Ordin would have been a lot more help than me."

"Oh," said Valon. "I guess it's because . . . when it first started happening . . . I saw Ordin think something . . . It scared

me."

Valon couldn't see Sharel's reaction. He wasn't sure whether she was shocked or offended or secretly rolling her eyes at him. The extended silence was less than reassuring. Eventually, he had to break it.

"Will you please say something," he said.

"Oh, right, sorry," said Sharel. "Are you absolutely positive that you overheard his thoughts?"

"I'm as sure as I am that I heard your 'shitty-shitty shit' song."

Sharel had the good grace to sound embarrassed. "Okay, so you have some skill, but Ordin's a master magician. He's not going to just let something slip."

"They're still human," said Valon.

"What's that supposed to mean," Sharel asked.

"It's something Ordin told me. I was asking about - something - and he was trying to explain why the Council looked so weak. He said they were still human. I think Ordin doesn't like to lie, and that's why his thoughts betrayed him."

"I'm not sure I really follow you, Valon."

"Maybe I'm not saying it right," Valon admitted. "It's the first law of magic. You can't magic a soul against its will. So, if a person really doesn't want to tell a lie, maybe the soul will rebel and drop the shield a little. Magic can only be as strong as the person underneath it, and we all have our weaknesses."

"I never really thought of it that way. So what is this big lie that Ordin didn't want to tell you?"

Valon considered his answer. He could remember how he felt when he heard the old man's thoughts. He could remember the chill of realizing that his tentative trust in the man may well have been unjustified. He couldn't remember exactly why he felt that way.

"He . . . complimented me. When I asked about it, he said that some people were born more magical than others, but that was a lie. I saw him think about wanting me to shut up about it."

Sharel sounded confused. "What Ordin told you wasn't a lie, Valon. I mean, look at me. I'm a princess of Aurel. That means that I, and everyone in my family, going back more generations than I can count, are natural magicians. We're born with the gift."

"I know what I saw," said Valon.

"Do you," asked Sharel. "You just developed this new power. Maybe you made a mistake."

"It didn't feel like a mistake," said Valon.

"If mistakes felt like mistakes, nobody would ever make them."

Valon thought about that. He felt stupid. Of course he was probably misinterpreting the situation. What could Ordin possibly have to gain by lying to him about something so simple? Sharel was so smart.

"I'm such an idiot," said Valon. "I shouldn't have run away. I'm just so used to . . . never mind."

Sharel didn't pry. He couldn't see her through the blindfold,

but as grateful as he was for her discretion, he half-hoped that she struggled to maintain it.

"Can you walk me home," he asked, after a long moment had passed.

"Sure," said Sharel.

The princess took his arm and led him out of Ratia's quarters. It was a simple, kindly gesture, but it overwhelmed Valon. He tried not to think of the pressure of her flesh against his, or of the heat and smell of her closeness, but he wanted to remember everything as accurately and as richly as possible. It was a war in his heart, and he didn't know what side he wanted to win.

In contrast to his ponderous dread, Sharel's footsteps were light and cheerful, and she led him with a gentle, but firm insistence.

"What should I tell people when they inevitably start gossiping about this," Sharel asked brightly.

It was not a question Valon was prepared for. It had never occurred to him that he was important enough to be the subject of gossip.

"M- maybe we're practicing a spell," he said.

"That's a good answer, but not nearly saucy enough. I think I'll say it's some kinky sex thing."

Valon stiffened.

"Relax," said the princess. "I'm just kidding. I'll tell people you were blinded by my beauty and needed to convalesce."

"That doesn't make any sense," said Valon.

"I know, Valon, but it amuses me, and it will drive people crazy."

He didn't know what to make of that, so he kept his feelings to himself. He smiled and made inexpert small talk the rest of the way home.

Ordin was waiting for him. He couldn't see the old man, but he felt his presence. He hadn't the slightest clue what to say.

"Hello," the magician said slowly. "I- I guess I have to ask the obvious question."

Valon stood silently, searching futilely for the magical set of words that would unwind his embarrassment and allay his fears.

"You should tell him the truth," said Sharel, squeezing his arm as she did so.

Valon was not encouraged, but he was now more afraid of disappointing Sharel than he was of upsetting Ordin, so maybe it was an encouraging gesture after all.

"I think I- uh . . . accidentally saw into your thoughts," he said.

"What did you see," asked Ordin. He sounded worried.

"It's not important," said Valon. "I didn't mean to spy, and I don't know how to stop."

"How did you find him," the magician asked Sharel.

"He came to me," the princess answered.

"Ratia let you talk to an uncontrolled telepath?"



"Ratia didn't know," interrupted Valon.

"That- that's hard to believe."

"You didn't know," Valon said.

"True," admitted Ordin. "I guess I underestimated your powers. Matronexa's training was more advanced than I thought."

"So he doesn't have a natural talent," asked Sharel. Valon thought he could hear an unfamiliar edge in her voice.

"He probably does," said Ordin. "But his skills are too developed to be untrained. Valon, I'm sorry I wasn't more forthcoming. I didn't want to upset you."

Under his blindfold, Valon cried. "I'm so relieved," he said. "When I saw you think about my . . . talent, I thought you were hiding some terrible secret. Can you forgive me for not trusting you?"

"Of course," said Ordin. "And don't worry. I'll teach you the control you need."

## Chapter 14

Valon looked out his bedroom window and into the palace gardens. The spring bloom had finally come, and the tolerant Aurelian climate could support flowers from all across the human kingdoms. In a triumph of the landscaper's art, the diversity of shapes and textures and colors sat side-by-side in harmony, when they could easily have been a riotous mess. It was all very beautiful. Valon was lonely.

He'd been in isolation while he mastered his new abilities, but that wasn't the reason. Isolation, he could handle. In a way, it was better, because at least he had an excuse. It was when he had his freedom that he felt loneliest.

Ordin did not require him to stay in his room. He could have walked the grounds. He could have visited the city. He could have made friends. He just didn't want to.

Or maybe he did. He couldn't tell.

In the garden, a young couple tumbled to the moist earth in a laughing embrace. Valon looked pointedly at a handsome ten-year-old Paragadran Rosebush. He couldn't trust himself not to stare.

He wanted what they had, but the desire frightened him. How could he want anything normal? Where did he get the right? He was tainted by evil, and he would spread that taint to anything he touched.

That's what he told himself, anyway. He wasn't sure he believed it, but it comforted him. It made his fear a noble impulse, and his loneliness a kind of stoic martyrdom. It was better than being a

coward. And that, secretly, was what he feared he was.

Valon ate breakfast alone. He and Ordin had stopped taking their meals together. It was much easier for them both.

As he chewed his tasteless barley mash, he thought about the old man. He was . . . nice. He didn't trust him, but he was nice. No, not just nice, but harmless. Those were good traits to have in a captor.

He slammed down his spoon in frustration. Why did he have to think that way? For all his doubts and neuroses, he had only one true enemy. Intellectually, he knew that. He just wished, for once, that his intellect would rule his feeling.

He picked up his spoon and stirred his gruel. He scooped out large spoonfuls and let them glop back into the bowl, watching the craters they made with hopeless fascination. Of all the things he could be doing, this was among the most pointless. The thought was pleasantly numbing.

There was a knock at the door. The suddenness of it shook Valon out of his meditation. He spilled his gruel. The knocking continued. It was deep and loud, like an ax against timber. Whoever it was obviously wanted to leave no doubt as to the importance of their visit.

Valon cleaned up his breakfast. Ordin would answer it. It was probably for him anyway.

He was elbow deep in a slop bucket when he glanced up and caught Sharel's eye. The princess tactfully attempted to conceal her mocking

smile. Behind her, Ordin's grin was scarcely more comforting.

"Feeling better," she asked. Her eyes never left him. He couldn't tell whether she was being friendly or not. Well, he *could*, but he wasn't doing that anymore.

"Much better. Thank you," he replied. Something didn't feel right, but he couldn't put a finger on it. He'd just have to wait it out.

"I'm glad to hear it, Valon. Ratia told me you finished with your telepathy training two weeks ago. I'm a little hurt that you haven't come to see me."

Now Valon knew she had to be playing some kind of game. Last time he saw her, she wasn't particularly happy to see him. Why should anything have changed?

He didn't dare say that, of course. Even he knew it sounded pathetic.

"I've been trying to cleanse my spirit of disturbing influences," he lied, ignoring Ordin's amused disapproval.

"So I'm a disturbing influence," said Sharel.

A clenching fist of embarrassment tightened around Valon's heart. He'd somehow maneuvered himself into a trap. Desperately seeking a way out, he stuttered, "Th-that's not what I meant."

Sharel laughed. "Relax," she said. "I'm just teasing you. I understand being a little shy after what you went through. That's why I thought I'd invite you to come with me to the Penny Trick."

Seeing his look of confusion, she clarified, "It's the pub where

all the apprentices go to cut loose."

Valon didn't know what to say, so, like a frightened idiot, he nodded.

The *Penny Trick* was a small, cheerful building in Heuralesta's New City. Children stole fruit from the grape vines that grew along its south wall, and adolescents whispered and flirted in the shade of its long eaves. It was a cozy, homey place, filled with happy, friendly people.

Valon was intensely uncomfortable.

Seeing his hesitation, Sharel grabbed his arm and dragged him inside. It was a playful gesture, and Valon knew it, but he couldn't help feeling like he was being led into an abyss. Nonetheless, he allowed it.

Inside, it wasn't so bad. Valon found the quietest table he could and plopped himself down. Nobody seemed to care that he was with the princess. In fact, nobody seemed to notice him much at all. It was probably as much as he could hope for.

"Thanks for inviting me," he said half-sincerely. The princess smiled at him, and suddenly he wished his frightened half would just shrivel up and die. It didn't.

"No problem, Valon. You strike me as the sort of guy who never really learned how to relax."

"That's an understatement," he said, laughing. He stopped when he saw the pity in Sharel's eyes. Avoiding her gaze, he traced his

fingers along the knotholes in the table.

"Barkeep! Two beers," shouted Sharel. Valon started, cracking the wood under his hand with a sudden jolt of superhuman strength. Sharel laughed, and Valon joined her. The other patrons smiled appreciatively.

One of the apprentices stood up and raised his glass in a mocking salute. He was lean, and fiercely handsome, and he eyed Sharel with a confident hunger.

"Let us toast the Flower of Aurel - may she always have the biggest mouth in the Kingdom," he said, to general laughter and the merry clinking of glasses.

"You wish, Ardoc," Sharel hollered back. The impromptu audience hooted and whistled, but Ardoc just grinned and tilted his glass.

Sharel hurriedly sat back down. Her caramel cheeks glowed with just the slightest hint of pink.

"Who was that," Valon asked. He couldn't understand why he said it. He was certain he didn't want to know, but the words came anyway, driven by some instinct deeper than thought.

"He's nobody. Just some guy," said Sharel.

Valon felt relieved. He looked down at the table. It still stood, but it creaked under the slightest pressure. "Am I going to get in trouble for this," he asked.

"Don't worry about it," said Sharel. "This sort of thing happens all the time. That's why all the apprentices come here. They overcharge us for beer, but they don't get the Council involved."

"That's a relief," said Valon. He smiled at her. She smiled back. It was communication, of a sort. Thankfully, their beer arrived to break the silence.

Valon took one sip and decided to be a teetotaler. "People actually drink this," he said.

"It's traditional," replied Sharel.

Valon took another sip, just to be polite. "Mmm," he said, "It definitely tastes like something that's been passed down through the generations."

"Don't be an asshole, Valon. Not everybody likes it."

"Do you like it?"

"What, beer?"

"No, the fact that I'm an asshole."

Sharel grinned. "I kinda do. It's a nice change from your usual panic."

"Like a flower blooming in winter," said Valon.

"I wouldn't have put it quite so . . . poetically, but yeah, like that."

"Flowers like that die," said Valon, darkly. Staring deep into her eyes, he waited for the moment when he saw her uncertainty turn to defeat. Then, he laughed.

"Just kidding," he said. Sharel slammed her fist on the table, cleaving it the rest of the way. Their beers tumbled to the floor, to the sarcastic applause of the rest of the room. The princess curtsied.

"I'm going to get you back for that," she muttered. Strangely, Valon wasn't worried. He could hear the admiration in her voice.

"I'll sleep with one eye open," he said.

They walked back home in sticky, soggy shoes. As Valon prepared to part ways, she put a hand on his shoulder. His heart stopped.

"Actually, there's one more place I wanted to take you," she whispered. It was not at all fun-sounding.

"Where," said Valon. For no reason he could name, he was disappointed.

"To the Council archives."

"Why didn't you mention this earlier," Valon asked.

"First of all, maybe you could pick up on the signals I'm sending you and keep your voice down, and to answer your question; I didn't mention it because I wanted our trip to be a secret."

"Why," whispered Valon.

Sharel nodded approvingly. "I think you may have been right about Ordin. When you've lived around magicians as long as I have, you learn to recognize half-truths, and he was full of them. I tried to ask Ratia about it, but she was just as evasive. I think the Council might be hiding something from you, and if they are, the archives are the best place to look for the answer."

"Why do you care," asked Valon. He could tell it hurt her, and he hated himself for that, but he had to know.

"I like you, Valon. You're a little hopeless sometimes, but I



think you're a good person. If the Council is manipulating you, you deserve to know about it."

"Okay," said Valon. "And I'm sorry I doubted you."

"Don't apologize," said Sharel. "I think, in your situation, a little doubt is a good thing."

The Council archives rested in a large series of chambers underneath the palace. As the two teenage magicians crept down the stairs, Valon felt an itchy tingle across most of his body.

He stopped and looked around suspiciously. He tried to say something, but his mouth felt gummy and dry.

Sharel scratched her shoulder. "We just crossed into the archive's enchantment. It's meant to protect the books from the elements, but it tends to make people uncomfortable." With a single finger, she touched Valon's arm. He leapt away from the spark that crackled between them.

"Miniature lightning," she explained, smiling. "It builds up down here, as a side effect of the magic. Just try not to touch anything metal."

Before he could retaliate, a voice interrupted from down below. It was cold and oily, and it spoke with a practiced disrespect. "What are you *children* doing here, so late at night?"

Sharel ground her teeth at the sound of it. "Greetings, Octavus the Scribe," she said. "I've come to ask you a favor."

Octavus let out a dirty chuckle. "It's pretty serious business,

becoming indebted to a magician, especially for a princess. What could possibly be important enough to make it worth the risk?"

Valon really didn't like the tenor of Octavus' question, but Sharel seemed to know what she was doing, so he kept his mouth shut.

"It's not really that dramatic," Sharel said. "I just want to look at a book without my father or Ordin finding out about it."

"I'm intrigued," said Octavus, "but of course I would have to know the name of the book before I agreed to anything."

Sharel turned to Valon, and said, in a low voice, "Well, it's your life. Do you want to take the chance that Octavus will blab, or do you want to walk away?"

"I'm following your lead," said Valon. Sharel nodded.

"I want to read Matronexa's entry in the Tome of Infamy."

Octavus sneered. "Worried that your boyfriend might have some unresolved mommy-issues, or did he put you up to this? He's obsessed with her, you know?"

The magician's words had crossed a line. Before he even knew what he was doing, Valon launched himself down the stairs. He crashed into Octavus, and together they tumbled down another flight. Sharel screamed.

Hands raised to deliver a crushing blow, Valon turned. Within seconds, he was on the ground, pinned beneath Octavus' bony knee.

With the red-faced boy still struggling to get free, the magician turned to the princess. "So Sharel, do you still want to see the book?"

"Y-yes," said Sharel.

Octavus rose to his feet. "I guess I'll go get it, then."

Valon huffed and wheezed as Octavus disappeared into the stacks. Sharel watched them both warily.

"What was that about," she asked, once the magician was gone.

"I don't know," said Valon. "I guess I get a little touchy when people talk about the Miss- When they talk about Matronexa. It's worse with Octavus because he argued against me when I first came here."

"Why would he do that," asked Sharel.

For a moment, Valon seethed. She had no way of knowing, but it was still a deeply personal question. He wasn't sure he was ready to give her quite so much trust. Looking at her, he lingered for a long moment on her eyes and lips. He saw only concern. He had to go through with it.

"I think he believes that Matronexa has some kind of hold on me, that I'm somehow especially vulnerable to her influence. He may even be right. . . but the last thing I need is that smug prick reminding me of it."

Sharel took his hand and clasped it to her cheek. Valon allowed himself to cry.

When Octavus returned, he carried with him two large books. Valon and Sharel tried to compose themselves, but their tear-reddened eyes gave them away.

The magician growled disapprovingly. "You two are going to need to toughen up if you plan on probing the secrets of the White Council."

"I think we can handle ourselves," said Sharel.

"I don't," replied Octavus, "but it's not my job to keep you out of trouble. Lucky for you, I know what you're after, and I approve of your desire to find it."

Sharel let out an exacerbated moan. "If you know what we're looking for, why don't you just tell us?"

"I'm a member of the Council, *princess*, and I take my oaths very seriously. I can't tell you anything, but I can bring you an extra volume that might lead you to the answer, if you have the wit to interpret it."

Reluctantly, Sharel took the books from the magician's hand. "Who's Senestrion," she asked, after reading the titles.

"You should ask Valon, I imagine he will find the read *especially interesting*."

"Just *shut your fucking* mouth," screamed Valon, lapsing into the Sorcerous Voice.

"Why, what's wrong," asked Sharel, her face betraying a frantic worry. Octavus watched impassively.

Memories he didn't want flooded into Valon. As if the past six months had never happened, he was back under the Mistress' thumb. He was weak and scared. He couldn't help himself. "*Senestrion was Matronexa's lover*," he cried.

*From The Tome of Infamy: Senestrion*

The magician who would become Senestrion Bloody-handed (may his true name be forever stricken from our lips!) was born in the year 5356 to the famed magician and White Council member, Lady Maril the Whisperer. His father is unknown, but most reliable sources agree it was probably Gard the Iron-shouldered, a fellow Council member and husband to Lady Maril's long-time rival Creshi the River-witch.

It's likely that even had the child been sired by a commoner, he still would have become a great magician, given Lady Maril's own impeccable lineage. The fact that he demonstrated a prodigious magical aptitude from a very young age was, however, a good sign that his father was similarly well-bred. (Many observers count the destruction of two great magical bloodlines among Senestrion's greatest crimes - sadly, neither his Mother nor his likely father had any other children, as both were killed by Creshi the River-Witch in the year 5371 - an act almost certainly instigated by Senestrion himself).

Senestrion was raised by his mother in the Anolosh city of Votev, a minor outpost at the edge of her ancestral holdings. Disgraced by the scandal of an illegitimate child, Lady Maril was cut out of the Ducal succession and forced to give precedence to her younger sister, Her Grace the Duchess Roan Grolavell.

Banished to the backwater environs of Castle Votev, Lady Maril became increasingly eccentric. According to her surviving servants

(who were, admittedly, of advanced age when this volume was written), she entertained no visitors for years at a time (the exception, of course, being Gard the Iron-shouldered) and forbade the castle staff from entering her private quarters for any reason. When she finally gave birth to the future black magician, she did so without assistance.

Throughout his young life, the child had virtually no contact with the outside world, and eventually came to serve as his mother's primary social outlet. Little is known about what went on behind the closed doors of Castle Votev, but if local gossip is to be trusted, there is good reason to pity even one so wicked as Senestrion Bloody-Handed.

What is known is that the child (may his name be forever cursed) bore the brunt of his mother's bitterness and resentment. As an infant, Lady Maril took him everywhere, but then seemed oddly indifferent to his physical needs. Her servants reported several incidents in which the baby's life was imperiled by his mother's inattention.

This strange juxtaposition between smothering and neglect was to become a pattern throughout the child's life. He did not learn to speak until relatively late, but even before puberty, he was the only one who could calm his mother's rages. Often, he would do this by becoming the sole target of her anger - a habit which endeared him to the hapless castle servants.

As time went on, and Lady Maril became ever-more isolated,

Senestrion was subjected to increasing amounts of physical and verbal abuse. While it is tempting to blame that for his eventual corruption, evidence suggests that even as a young man, he was a practiced hand at evil.

Certainly, there is the matter of his mother's untimely death. In retrospect, knowing what we do about the man he would become, it seems to stretch the bounds of credibility that Maril and Gard's decades-long affair would be discovered just days after the boy reached the age of majority. The fact that Creshi the River-Witch subsequently backed his suit for inheritance lends further credence to the theory that the two were in collusion.

After accepting a large payment in coin in exchange for renouncing all land and titles, Senestrion is next seen in the city of . . .

Valon stopped reading. He felt like he was trembling. He held out his hand and lifted it to eye-level. It was rock steady. He was only trembling on the inside.

Why would Octavus have shown this to him? The story was distressingly familiar. A boy growing up in isolation. A boy enduring torture. A boy capable of murdering the only family he ever knew . . .

. . . A boy who grew up to be Matronexa's lover.

Was that the punch line? Was that what Octavus was afraid of? That he would follow in Senestrion's footsteps and come to love the

Mistress?

It couldn't be. Matronexa was his Lady Maril, and in the story Lady Maril died. It had to be something else.

Was he worried that he would kill his enemy and yet still fall to darkness? Valon had to admit, that was more likely. He felt such incredible hate; he wondered sometimes that he had room in his heart for anything else. Reading about Senestrion, he could understand why one murder might not be enough.

But there was a difference between Valon and Senestrion. . . He wasn't sure exactly what it was, but he was certain that there was a difference.

There had to be.



## Chapter 15

Over the following weeks, Valon read and reread the Tome of Infamy, but even with Sharel's help, he could not figure out what Octavus was trying to tell him. The mystery kept him up at night, and his studies began to suffer. His only consolation was his growing relationship with the princess. It was getting to the point where she was actually happy to see him.

He smiled at the thought of it as he made his way to Ratia's. It was such a pleasant distraction, he completely failed to notice the High King as he passed him in the hall.

So it was something of a surprise when he heard his name shouted with a warm joviality. He slowly turned, and winced as he realized his faux pas.

"I'm so sorry, your Majesty," he said hurriedly. The High King smiled.

"Please don't, Valon. Here in the palace of the White Council, I'm just another magician."

Valon felt the scrabbling panic of a compounding error, but he forced himself to remain calm. The king did not look offended.

"Okay . . . Heural," he said. The king nodded encouragingly.

"That's better. I know my title can be intimidating, but this place has always been a sanctuary for me. It's a place where I can forget that I'm the suzerain over the whole of the known world and just relax among friends."

Hesitantly, Valon smiled. He felt a unexplainable kinship with

the High King, as if they suffered from the exact same set of problems - except, of course, for the part where they were completely opposite.

"I'd like to count you among those friends, Valon," said the King.

Valon didn't know what to say. Aside from Sharel, who terrified him, and Ordin, who didn't count, he didn't really have any friends. The High King's offer both humbled and gratified him. He would have to accept.

"I'd like that too," he said.

The King's smile widened. "Great," he said, extending his hand. Valon took it and relished the feeling of the King's warm, brown skin and expertly calculated grip. It was his first time, but Heural the Farsighted made him feel like he'd been doing it for years.

"Now that we're friends," the King continued, "perhaps you'd like to confide in me. Maybe about certain late night trips to the archives?"

Shame stole through Valon. "You know about that," he said.

"My daughter doesn't have any secrets from me," replied the King.

Concealing his disappointment with the princess, Valon meekly asked, "Are you mad?"

The King shook his head. "What kind of friend would I be if got mad at you for this? It's completely natural for you to be curious. I'm just worried you might not like what you find."

"Like the secret the Council is hiding from me," Valon said.

"That's right," said the King.

It was shocking to hear confirmation. For once, his paranoia was justified. The accumulated frustration of the last few weeks boiled over into anger.

"What could possibly be so bad," he growled. "What secret could possibly be so damning that the entire Council had to be sworn to silence?"

"Those are fair questions," said the King, "and I can see how, from your perspective, we must seem like we're conspiring against you. That's why I've decided to override the Council's decree and tell you what we've been hiding - if you're sure you want to know."

"I-" said Valon

"But I should warn you," interrupted the King. "That we've only kept this secret to protect you. The truth will hurt."

Valon closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He was unused to people wanting to protect him. He wasn't sure he believed it was possible. "I know how to handle pain," he said.

"Okay," said the King. "We haven't told you about who Matronexa was before she was thrown out. Her name was Belari, the Flame of Truth, and she and Ordin-"

Valon never made it to Ratia's.

The smell of onions and stewed lamb filled the air as Valon stormed into the apartment. Ordin gingerly removed a bubbling pot

from the hearth.

"Would you like some dinner," he asked.

Valon stared at him. He was disgusted. And jealous. And disgusted at himself for feeling jealous. And angry at the magician for making him jealous. He felt strangely connected to the old man. He felt betrayed. He wasn't sure by whom.

"You lied to me," said Valon, with dangerous softness.

Ordin looked, for a moment, like a trapped and wounded animal, but he composed himself. "I'm not sure--"

"Matronexa was Belari," interrupted Valon.

"Oh, that. It's a fair accusation," Ordin admitted. "Though it would be more accurate to say that I omitted a portion of the truth."

"Why," said Valon.

"That's kind of a broad question."

"Why did you keep it a secret?"

"Oh," said Ordin. "I didn't tell you because I wasn't sure how you'd react. The Council chose me to take care of you because I used to live with Matronexa, and I know how she can get her hooks into people. I agreed because I wanted to help you recover from what she did to you. We thought the whole story would confuse you. I never wanted to lie to you."

"You didn't want to lie," cackled Valon. "Of course you wanted to lie. I'll bet you're lying now. You're a sick, evil old man, and you still love her."

"You want to be with her again, and you thought that maybe if

you took care of her puppet, she would take you back."

Ordin looked at him with concern, but he did not interrupt. His silence enraged Valon.

"No," the boy screamed. "You're sicker than that. You probably fantasized about having a family with her. Papa Ordin and Mama Belari and baby Valon. You want her to love you. You want her to give you a big hug and tell you she's sorry for leaving."

Ordin waited.

"Ha! She never loved you. She used you like she used me. But maybe that's what you want. Maybe you like being used. Maybe you were happier when she was using you.

"What did she do for you? Sex? I'll bet that's it. I'll bet you miss having sex with her. I'll bet you remember those piercing blue eyes of hers, and the way they'd watch you, the way they'd take you apart and see right to the core of you. I'll bet you got off on it. I'll bet you got off on being her personal toy.

"Do you still think about fucking her? Do you still get hard at the thought of it? I'll bet you do. I'll bet you get hard in the middle of the night and all you can think about is Matronexa standing over you, riding you with that evil, twisted look on her face.

"You're sick. You're disgusting. You're a bad, wicked, pervert, coward, liar. You're sick, sick, sick, sick, sick, and I'll never forgive you for loving her."

Valon looked at the magician in disgust. He was out of breath and his throat was raw, but still Ordin said nothing. The boy saw his

placid, caring face, and felt the anger rise in him once more.

"Why won't you defend yourself," he rasped. "Why don't you tell me I'm wrong? I dare you. I fucking dare you to tell me I'm wrong."

"You're wrong," said Ordin.

"How can you say that to me?"

"I can say it because it's been a long time. Seventy years ago, maybe I couldn't say it. She had a way of hurting people that made them think they deserved to be hurt.

"I told you she left me for another man. That was true. Think about how pathetic I must have been, to let her leave me."

"I let her leave me," said Valon, bitterly.

"No, Valon, you failed to escape on your own. There's a difference."

"I don't see a difference."

"Did you ever try to run away," Ordin asked.

"Once, when I was little."

"What happened?"

"She caught me and brought me back."

"Exactly," said Ordin. "You were a prisoner, a captive. There was nothing keeping me with her but my own weakness. I let her convince me that she was the best I could ever get, the best I could ever deserve."

Valon stared at the floor. The old man was describing a familiar feeling, but he wasn't ready to soften just yet. "So you're saying you had it worse than me," he said.

"No. I don't know your whole past, but Forest told me a little, and I think I can guess the rest. What she did to you- There aren't words strong enough to describe how bad it was.

"What I'm saying is that I had it a lot better than you, and it still managed to damage me pretty bad. It took me a long time to get over what she did to me."

"I still don't understand the point."

"The point is, you were a little kid, held prisoner by one of the most powerful magicians alive. It's all right if your feelings are mixed up. You have nothing to be ashamed of. She confused a lot of people who were older and stronger than you were.

"She did her best to twist your feelings inside out, and yet you still manage to see her better than I did when I was with her."

Valon was starting to calm down. "Maybe you were just stupid," he said.

"I think that's pretty likely," Ordin replied.

Eventually, Valon got over it, and came to like, perhaps even love, the old man. The mystery of the Council's secret was entirely forgotten.

## Chapter 16

Seasons passed, and Valon's progress was rapid. He mastered the Practice of Ten Thousand Breaths and the Concentration of the Dormant Spider and the sonorous variants of the Imperial Voice. After another year, he could crack steel with a punch, pick a raven out of a flock of crows, and predict the weather by listening to the wind.

The training was arduous, and at times confusing, but Valon was an eager student. For weeks, he would sort piles of near-identical stones. For an entire month, he ate and drank nothing and slept twenty-two hours a day. He only had to spend a single day standing in the crashing sea spray before he learned to keep himself dry with his thoughts.

By his eighteenth birthday, he was a magician of incredible power.

In the garden where he was first tested, Valon dueled the Princess Sharel. It was a bright, wind-swept spring day, and they were both smiling.

"You'll never beat me," Valon said. "I was trained for years before I even came here."

The boast was backed with a strike of implacable force. Sharel parried, but the shock of contact sent her reeling backwards. With a delicate grunt, she straightened the kink from her sword. She looked him in the eye and winked.

"That was pretty good," the princess said, "but you'll need at



least another decade of extra experience if you want to match the power of my Aurelian royal blood."

Her counterattack was fierce. A whirlwind flurry, almost too fast for the eye to follow, inundated Valon. The ringing of blade against blade signaled its failure.

"You're getting better," laughed Valon. "I think I felt the breeze from that last one."

Sharel growled in mock annoyance. "I was just softening you up for my real attack." Suddenly, she lunged. Valon pushed the blow aside, but it wasn't enough. A thin red line appeared on his side.

"Fuck," he cursed. "It's only supposed to be practice, Sharel. You aren't really supposed to slice me open."

The princess stared at the now bleeding cut with concerned horror. "I'm so sorry," she gasped, lowering her blade.

Without warning, the point of Valon's sword was at her throat. "Wounds heal," he said. There was no trace of his prior anger.

"You bastard. I really thought I hurt you."

"That was your first mistake," said Valon smugly. "Did you really think I would let you land a dangerous blow?"

"Let me," she playfully griped. "Let me? I swear, you cocky son of a -"

"Excuse me," interrupted Valon. "But that doesn't sound like a concession to me."

The princess eyed the sword. "All right," she said. "You win. I give up."

"Good," said Valon. He sheathed his sword and bowed respectfully to the princess. In less than a second, her blade was hovering an inch above his head.

"You conniving brat," he said.

"What can I say? Politicians lie."

Valon stared resolutely at her feet. "Shall I accept your surrender now," he calmly asked.

Sharel laughed. "That's strange talk to hear from someone in your position."

"Not at all," said Valon. "You're already beaten. You just don't know it yet."

"Explain," said the princess.

"You've got no leverage," Valon said. "Your sword is an inch away from the hardest part of my body, and I've got the concentration to harden it even further. That cheap training steel is just going to bounce right off. In the time it takes you to reposition for a telling blow, I could have you on the ground."

"You're bluffing," Sharel said.

In response, Valon casually slapped her blade, sending it spinning to the ground. Before she could react, he had one hand around her wrist and the other around her throat. He pulled himself in close.

"I told you so," he said.

With her free hand, Sharel punched him, hard. Valon released her throat and trapped her arm against his body. This brought them into a

tight embrace.

"I love you," he said.

"Please don't do this," she said. Valon let her go.

"What," he said, his embarrassment suffocating them both.

Neither said anything. He stared at her. She looked everywhere but his eyes.

"You're very cool," she said, finally. "But I'm a princess. I can only be with the man my father chooses for me."

Valon looked at her pathetically. Relief was spreading rapidly through him. "I'm so stupid," he said.

"No," said Sharel, with a kind of manic brightness. "You're sweet. I just can't afford to return your feelings."

"Maybe you could," said Valon.

"No, Valon, I can't."

"Your family doesn't marry royalty. It marries magicians."

Sharel seemed uncertain. "I suppose," she said.

"If I were of service to the crown. . ."

"Don't," said Sharel.

Valon tried to read her expression. It took all he had not to look into her thoughts.

"I'm going to fight the goblins," he said. "My feelings for you don't change that."

"Why," asked Sharel.

"I don't understand," said Valon. "Why wouldn't I fight the goblins?"

Valon could see Sharel becoming thoughtful and withdrawn. "Why not," she echoed. "What kind of reason is that to fight?"

"That's not what I meant. The goblins are vicious. They're invading the human lands. And . . . I think this latest war might be my fault."

"Humans and goblins have been fighting forever, Valon. I doubt they care about you."

"Matronexa does. For the last two years, the goblin attacks have been getting worse. It can't be a coincidence. We know she has the power to influence them."

Sharel turned and stared at the Paragadran rose. With a single finger, she plucked one of its thorns. The whole plant shook.

"You need to start thinking like a politician, Valon. Individuals don't start wars. Historical and economic forces start wars. The goblins have a rapidly growing population and marginal farmland. They attack us because they need the food."

Valon gazed lovingly at the princess. She was so smart. And she was wrong. "You need to start thinking like a magician, Sharel," he said. "Forces are tools."

"You sound like my father."

"Your father is a very wise man."

"Maybe," said the princess. "But you shouldn't try to be like him."

"I won't," said Valon. "But I'd serve him even if I never met you."

Sharel sighed. "I like you, Valon. I can think of worse people to marry, but don't try to win me. The sort of things you'll have to do to impress him, they won't be very nice."

"War isn't very nice," said Valon. "I have to fight it, though."

"I suppose someone has to," she said. She stopped to pick up her fallen sword. She examined its chipped, warped surface. She looked at Valon's wound. The blood had stopped flowing.

"You're very good," she said. "I'm sure you'll do well." And soon she was gone. Valon stared at her backside as she left, but his desire was colored strongly with doubt.

Valon flopped onto his bed. The past few months had been stressful, but it was almost over. Ordin had little left to teach him. The advanced practices wielded by the Council would take decades to master. In time, Valon's abilities would grow, but the discipline to make it happen could only come from within.

He knew he was ready. He knew he had the power to change the world. He wasn't sure he wanted to.

His life in the palace was very comfortable. Fighting the goblins would expose him to many hardships. Despite what he told Sharel, it was not a prospect he relished.

He wished he could stay in Heuralesta. He could contact Silver and find work with the General Staff of the Combined Human Protectorate. It would still be a service to the crown. An arranged marriage would still be a possibility.

To be with Sharel, to live in the capital of Aurel; these were comfortable ambitions. Valon could see the arc of his life in them. He would probably be pretty happy.

He rolled onto his side and punched the wall. He didn't want to be happy. Not while Matronexa still lived. It wouldn't be right.

Over the past couple of years, his anger for the magician had cooled to become something much more precise than rage. He knew the world could never be clean while she was still in it. Even after all this time, she was his life's true purpose.

And so he could never be be happy. He would have to settle for strength. He would fight the goblins, hunt Matronexa to the ends of the earth, and win Sharel through the valor of his deed.

It would be almost as good as happiness.

## Chapter 17

"Where are you going," Ordin asked, his chubby face a mask of concern.

Valon's hand was already on the door. "I'm going to see the High King," he said. "The goblin attacks are getting bolder and more savage. I need to do my part to put them down."

"Are you sure you're ready," said Ordin.

Valon responded angrily, "You know I'm ready. I'm already stronger than magicians twice my age. There's not another apprentice that even approaches my skill." It was a vain, idiotic boast, and as soon as it left his lips, Valon felt like the world's biggest fool.

But it didn't seem to bother Ordin. "I know," the magician said proudly. "You're the best student I ever had, and I taught Ratia the Swordsmith. I meant are you ready for the things you'll have to do?"

Subdued, Valon replied meekly, "Do you mean killing?"

Ordin nodded.

Valon swallowed and took a deep breath. "I tried to kill Matronexa," he said. He hadn't wanted to confess this to the gentle old man, but he wasn't sure he had any other choice.

"That was a very stupid thing to do," said Ordin. It wasn't the answer Valon was expecting.

"I had a plan," he said, cringing at the admission.

Ordin examined him with the deep, analyzing stare of a magician. Ashamed, Valon did not resist.

"Hurt can make us do things we regret," said the magician. "If

you go to war, it should be to protect your fellow humans, not because you want revenge."

Valon thought about what Ordin had to say. "I understand," he lied.

"Very well," said Ordin. "I'll come with you. I can recommend a posting for you that's likely to result in a royal commendation."

Not for the first time, Valon marveled at the magician's insight. It couldn't possibly have been as natural as the old man claimed.

The palace of the High King was of recent construction. According to the official histories, it was built as a monument to peace.

The rare golden sandstone of its walls was made of tailings from the topaz mines of King Sereish, shipped a thousand miles across the continent and magically compressed by the Council of White Magicians. The bright, billowy curtains that fluttered in the breezeways were Paragadran linen dyed with an extravagant Skoptec purple. Hanverian copper friezes depicting the High King's triumph over the Goblin Queen, done in the Lycamian style. Cunning lamps, of Morovish design, bathed visitors in a steady, gentle light.

In their own way, each of the human kingdoms had contributed to the palace. It was a celebration of their unity, and an acknowledgement of Aurel's leadership in the face of the goblin threat. Though it was far from a fortified castle, it was imposing in



a way the rest of the city was not.

Valon was pensive as he entered. He trailed a respectful two steps behind Ordin, for whom the palace was like a second home, but the teacher's confidence could not extend to the student.

As he passed through the assembled soldiers and clustered courtiers, as he heard the clack, clack, clack of his shoes on the polished stone floor, as he tried to imitate the purposeful stride of the Sea's Breath, he knew this was not an encounter from which he would emerge unscathed.

For the first time in his life, Valon could see a future for himself. It was not a peaceful future. It was not a happy future. It was a future of blood and fire and pain. But it was, most importantly, a future he chose for himself. And he was walking towards it.

It was not the future he feared. It was the King. Heural the Farsighted had earned his nickname. He could see farther than most men, than most magicians. He noticed paths that most people missed.

Valon wondered what path the King saw for him. It wouldn't necessarily be the path of a warrior, and it probably wouldn't lead to his daughter. Heural spared him for a reason, and there was no guarantee that the King's purpose would be compatible with Valon's plans.

The two magicians swept into the throne room. The king was receiving a petitioner.

"So you see," said the balding, well-dressed, and officious old

man. "The exceptionally cold Morovian winter, combined with the new Transnational Royal Road will create problems for my city. If the local growers can sell their produce to foreign--"

"Here is my decree," interrupted Heural. "All commercial shipments using the TRR to leave Greengasp will be assessed a toll equal to five percent of their cargo's value. The honorable Lord Mayor will use the toll money to buy food from local growers at full market value. The food will then be resold to the poor at an affordable price. Any money collected from these sales will be used to pay the assessors, with the remainder being sent to the King of Morovia as emergency aid. The Aurelian Road Corporation will assign the assessorships at their next meeting. These are my words as the High King of the Combined Human Protectorate, as the King of Aurel, and as majority shareholder in the Aurelian Road Corporation. Let them be remembered. Let them be written.

The Lord Mayor of Greengasp attempted to bow respectfully, but was forced to retreat from the King's impatient stare.

Heural rose from his throne. Within moments, the entire court collapsed into a bow. Valon started to follow, but Ordin restrained him. The king walked towards the magicians.

"Hello," he greeted them. "Ordin the Sea's Breath and Apprentice Valon. Are you here to see the Chairman of the White Council or the King of Aurel?"

Valon was nonplussed. The king and Ordin laughed. "Actually, neither," said Ordin. "We're here to see the High King."

Heural smiled. "Well, that's a relief. I was worried you might have been here to see Sharel's father."

Valon felt the hot sting of embarrassment slide into him. Luckily, the King spared him. "Go ahead and ask," he said.

From the way he spoke, it was clear that it was just a formality. Ordin asked anyway. "Apprentice Valon will soon become Magician Valon. When he does, I recommend that you place him in the First Mobile Siegebreakers as a Lieutenant."

The king didn't even pause. "That's a good match for his skills," he said, "but Matronexa is still unaccounted for. He'd be too exposed as a member of the regular army. If he wants to serve, he'll be shield-bearer to General Ardent, the Warden."

Ordin froze. Valon didn't understand.

"Are you sure that's a good idea," said the elder magician weakly.

Heural didn't seem the slightest bit uncertain. "If Matronexa tries to take him, I want him to be near a Warden. And if he's near Ardent, maybe he'll learn a thing or two about battlefield command."

Ordin cast a furtive glance at his student. "But Ardent's a fanatic. If he learns of Valon's . . . past connection . . ."

"Ardent only cares about killing goblins," said the King. "He won't care that his shield-bearer was raised by a black magician."

Ordin looked doubtful. Valon wasn't sure how scared he should be. "It's all right if he's a little prejudiced," he volunteered. "I'm prejudiced myself, so I don't mind."

"Excellent," said the King. "You can go as soon as Ordin matriculates you."

Valon looked to his teacher.

"Tonight," Ordin said.

"Are you sure you want to do this," Ordin asked. They were atop the Council's west-facing observation tower. The lamplit night of the High King's city stretched beneath them. An insistent, moist wind blew in from the ocean. The master and apprentice were lit only by the glare from the clouds overhead.

Valon nodded his agreement.

"Very well," said Ordin. "Do you swear to obey the dictates of the White Council, respect the laws of your chosen country, and use your power for the good of humanity?"

"Yes," said Valon. "I swear."

Ordin looked at his apprentice with sadness. "You don't have to do this," he said. "I haven't finished the ceremony yet. You can stay an apprentice for a few more years. . . ."

Valon stare suspiciously at his master. He could see the secrets squirming behind the old man's lips, but he could not see into the magician's thoughts. Ordin was too strong.

"You wanted to assign me to a siegebreaker unit," he said accusingly. "What could you possibly be afraid of?"

Ordin turned his back on his student. "The High King assigned you to Ardent," he said.

"So . . ." Valon asked.

"So," answered Ordin. "The Wardens aren't human, but even by Warden standards, Ardent is . . . inflexible. If the High King assigned you to him, it means he has a plan for you. A plan whose end I can't foresee."

Valon could hear the truth in the magician's voice, but it was a truth carefully guarded. "You may not be able to foresee the end, but you have a prudent guess. Why don't you tell me what you suspect?"

Ordin turned to face Valon. Shame radiated from him. "I . . . I can't," he said.

Valon felt a brief pang of loss, but he didn't dwell on it. "If you can't tell me, finish the ceremony."

"You've been like a son to me," Ordin said with painful sincerity.

Thankful for the murky gloom of night, Valon frowned. Ordin's confession moved him more than he would have thought possible, and perhaps, on another night, he could have accepted it with the grace it deserved. But tonight, on such an axial moment, it felt like a stratagem, a way of delaying the inevitable.

"I wanted a teacher, not a father," Valon said.

If the magician was hurt, he didn't show it. He didn't show anything. He replied in a dull, uninflected monotone, "Do you understand that if the Council deems you an oathbreaker, your name, your position, and your life may be forfeit?"

"Yes," said Valon, "I understand."

"Then kneel," Ordin continued. "And receive into your heart the mark of the White Council."

Valon knelt, and Ordin placed a hand on his shoulder. Suddenly, the wind stopped. The crashing of the ocean faded into silence. The light of the city dimmed into blackness. A pain, like a long needle, slid into Valon's chest. He gasped for air.

And then it was over. The noise and the wind and the light returned. He could breathe once more.

Ordin continued to drone, "I pronounce you the magician Valon. Henceforth, your destiny is your own."

Valon looked up at his teacher, and saw nothing but the wall around his heart.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You've been a good friend to me."

The wall did not crack, but it buckled slightly.

"No," said Ordin. "I haven't. I'll send a message to the High King tonight. You'll be expected at the palace by dawn."

"Thank you," said Valon.

"Don't say that," said Ordin. "I'm sorry I can't tell you what to expect. If I deserved your thanks, I would've broken faith with the Council. All I can give you is general advice.

"The King is not your friend. And the Warden is especially not your friend. To them, you are a weapon. They will use you. They may even treat you well.

"But once you've served your purpose, they may decide . . . well, I can't say what they might decide.

"Accept their help if you need it, but don't trust them. And remember, there is more to your life than killing Matronexa. Try to survive long enough to live it."

## Chapter 18

The sword did not slice; it tore. The edge had ground against too much bone since the beginning of the battle. It had become dull and chipped. It was one of the burdens of being a magician. When Valon struck, he struck deep.

The goblins' blood was red, almost like a human's. Valon thought it might have been a bit darker, but it was difficult to tell. He had seen so much spilt over the past 6 months, it was all starting to look the same.

Valon's sword snapped against the skull of an enemy.

"Damn," he swore, and instantly knew it was a mistake. A nearby squad changed course, advancing on the disarmed magician.

Valon roared. He roared with the power of the Sorcerous Voice. It started low and built up to a bone-rattling fury. The squad broke and ran. Within a few yards, they were cut down by Ardent's soldiers.

He turned to the goblin who broke his weapon. It hadn't done the little bastard any good. The force of the magician's blow had snapped its neck. It was alive, but prone.

It stared up at Valon, its eyes wide. Its breath gurgled and rattled. Its chest rapidly rose and fell. Valon put his foot on the goblin's face and pressed down.

The bone of the skull cracked and splattered, but there was no sound from the goblin's mouth. He pressed down harder. He felt something . . . bend.

The immediate area was free of enemies, so Valon spared a moment



to satisfy his curiosity.

"Those crafty swine," he whispered, with a mixture of respect and disgust.

A small square of high-quality steel was screwed into the creature's skull. Valon marveled at the random malevolent sadism of the goblin Matriarchs. To mutilate one of their own soldiers on the off chance that it might inconvenience an enemy, one almost had to admire their commitment to the ideology of hatred.

But his wonder was short-lived. There simply wasn't time. He picked up the goblin's sword and charged to the south. He had promised Ardent a hundred kills by nightfall.

They were fighting a protracted series of battles in northern Paragad. The goblins swarmed out of the mountains to raid sheep and homesteads all across the highlands, and their job was to make sure the little maggots did not capture enough territory to establish a permanent foothold in the human lands.

It was weird being home. Swordswain Manor was far enough in the interior that it was at no risk of attack, but it was not so far away that Valon couldn't have visited.

He did not go back. There was nothing for him there. He felt a twinge of guilt when he remembered Prudella, but even she was just a memory, and probably better off without him in her life.

Besides, he was doing noble work, and for how little he cared to visit the site of his decade-long nightmare, he still felt a weird

kind of pride that the slack-jawed bumpkins with the selective blindness that enabled his enduring torment would nonetheless feel the positive effects of his deeds.

All in all, it had been a good six months. The victories had been more numerous than the defeats. They'd lost a company at Marrow Bridge, but they'd completely exterminated the goblin armies at Seatab and Blackmire. The collapse of their forward guard allowed the humans to push all the way through to the penumbra of Raktem Raktall, and as the only magician on staff, Valon was honored with the task of sinking the plumb shaft that would allow Ardent to call down the weight of the mountain and bury the goblin metropolis under a billion tons of rubble.

After that, the goblin campaign began losing momentum.

For Valon, the most educational part of his time with the army was seeing the different breeds work together. He had always known, in a detached, theoretical sense, that there was more than one type of goblin, but he had always pictured them as variations on a theme: short, skinny, pale-skinned, and bug-eyed.

But that was simply the most common type, the ratbody. Though physically inferior to a human, their females gave birth to litters of four to six at a time. There were also ogres, which were tall and broad and which had the strength of three men.

Then there were rockheads, which had sluggish reflexes and poor sight, but incredible endurance. They carried the goblins' baggage.

Trappers were tall and stick-like and had skin like mottled leaves. Reds were shaped like men, but went into a berserk rage whenever they were bloodied.

It wasn't long before Valon had killed them all.

Ardent the Warden was, like all Wardens, perfect. He was muscular and square-jawed, and his severely cut hair was just the right shade of steel gray. Everything about him radiated a kind of patronly strength.

His men loved him. He was not funny, nor was he warm. He was quick to discipline and slow to reward. He knew nothing of their homes and never asked questions about their families. The idea that he shared their dangers was ludicrous.

But his men loved him. They loved him for his sheer, overwhelming competence. He was patient and professional. He would rarely move without supplies, and then only at the direst need. Every risk he took was calculated. And he fought like a demon.

Valon couldn't understand Ordin's warning. He'd spent months in the Warden's company, and he found him distant, but reasonable. All the general cared about was winning. Apart from that, he seemed to have no life at all.

Not that Valon had much of a life either. Technically, he was an officer, but he didn't feel like one. He was the battalion's only magician. The other officers treated him with a careful respect. Mostly, they tried to stay out of his way.

Valon soon found himself drifting. Men who outranked him feared his power. Men he outranked feared his power and his rank. He had a luxurious private tent right next to Ardent's and the mess sergeant made it clear he could always enjoy meals served in the convenience of his own quarters. If it weren't for the mission briefings, he doubted if he would even have a need to speak.

It was an unpleasant feeling, like he was barely tethered to the earth.

He tried talking to Ardent, but payoff was hardly worth the effort. Valon had spent time in the company of Wardens, so he knew something of their peculiarities, but Ardent was on a completely different level of peculiar.

The other Wardens wouldn't initiate small talk, but they would indulge it when necessary. Ardent simply would not respond to irrelevant questions. He didn't seem to ignore them. It was more like he couldn't hear them at all.

The other Wardens had emotions and quirks that would quickly surface and just as quickly disappear. When they weren't engaged with the world, they seemed to *go away*, but there was always something definite and consistent that seemed to *come back*.

For Ardent, the transition between present and away was barely noticeable. When he spoke, he was economical with his words and consistently factual. It didn't matter if he was talking about goblin atrocities or camp sanitation; he was serious, composed, and analytical. Most people found it comforting. Valon thought it was

creepy.

He found himself wishing for battle. His time in the camp was stressful and unsatisfying, like his life was draining out into the silence that surrounded him. He couldn't relate to the other soldiers. He didn't know how to connect with them.

But he knew how to fight. He was good at it. Very good at it. He enjoyed it. Every goblin life ended was a human life spared. It felt good to be the agent of that accounting.

There were times he felt guilty. The other soldiers viewed the battles with a kind of grim dread. The danger scared them, but theirs was a fear Valon couldn't share.

The goblins were scarcely a threat. At the battle of Seatab, he was cut off from the rest of Ardent's bodyguard, and severely outnumbered. In an hour and a half of fighting, one ratbody was able to get through his guard. The creature's spear struck him straight in the thigh. The tip failed to penetrate. The goblin wasn't strong enough.

Valon ended the fight with a nasty bruise, but no other wounds. It was the closest a goblin ever came to hurting him.

It was thrilling to have that kind of power. For so much of his life, he was scared - of Matronexa, of the High King, of Sharel, but he didn't have to be afraid of the goblins. They feared him. In a strange way, he almost loved them for it.

It was a cold winter's day when Ardent's army marched into

Blueflower. It was a city deep in the Paragadran heartland, renowned for its beauty and hospitality. It was a safe place, and it was dead.

A few were hanged in the town square, on makeshift gallows. They were the special ones. The mayor and his family, the tollmaster, and the schoolmistress. The more common victims were hanged off of lampposts and merchant's signs - anything that would take a body's weight. But there wasn't enough room outdoors. Through the walls of now-abandoned homes, Valon could hear the rhythmic creaking of rafters. More victims waited inside.

It was a goblin mass execution. Hanging was the preferred method, though they would sometimes settle for live burials, if pressed. From the looks of the town, they had plenty of time.

It was a goblin hanging, so there were no broken necks. Goblins raised their victims instead of dropping them, the better to ensure death by strangulation. Many of the stronger victims had deep cuts on their hands. Goblins spiked their nooses with sharpened wire and ground-up glass.

The soldiers walked through the town in stunned horror. Some were crying. A few vomited. Ardent was not so burdened.

"Captain Fortis," he said calmly. "Please take a squad of men and search the houses for any supplies that might have been left behind. I don't think you'll have to worry about an ambush. From the condition of these corpses, it's been at least three days since the goblins were here."

With a bleak, resigned stare, Captain Fortis saluted. Valon was

aghast.

"General sir," he interjected. "Isn't there something you're forgetting?"

Ardent paused to consider. "Of course," he said. "The desecration of the bodies is likely to be upsetting. Captain, when you go to assemble your squad, instruct Sergeant Coled to gather some volunteers to remove and burn the villagers, and make sure he gets me a list their names before they start. I want every sword accounted for in the event of another attack."

Fortis gave a hurried salute and quickly disappeared into the ranks.

Watching the Captain go, Valon mused aloud, "What happened here?"

Surprisingly, the Warden answered, "A magician is trying to send us a message."

Valon felt a brief jolt of panic. "How do you know that," he asked.

"Too many men among the victims," answered Ardent.

In retrospect, it was obvious. Almost half of the hanged were men. Big, strong, farmer men. Men who should have died fighting.

"What kind of magic could have done this," asked Valon.

The Warden turned his face to the sky, and stared, unblinking, at the sun. Then he looked to the earth. "Numbers and tactics," he said, "and witch-called weather. The marks of it are everywhere. Probably a thick fog."

Valon re-examined his surroundings. Even with the training he'd received, he couldn't figure out what sort of mark fog would leave behind.

"Do you think it was Matronexa," he asked tentatively.

"No," said Ardent. "She wouldn't do things the goblin way unless she was trying to impress goblins. It was probably a Matriarch. Given the circumstances, it was most likely Zola Dagger Raktall."

"You know who did it?"

"It's only a guess," the Warden said, "but Matriarchs with the power to call weather are rare, and this is her style. She gets theatrical when she loses."

In the distance, the funeral fires began to burn. The smell of the dead filled the crisp, winter air, but Valon did not despair. He was filled with a righteous rage.

"If we know who did it, we can go after her," he said.

"No," said Ardent. "She would have made preparations for pursuit. The potential gain is not worth the threat of an ambush."

"But look at what happened here," said Valon. "Justice demands blood."

As always, the Warden appeared unmoved. "Justice is a poor substitute for victory," he said. "If we continue to Gauvrin pass, we can liberate the Dagger clan's summer pastures. That will do far more damage to Matriarch Zola's forces than anything we might accomplish by following her."

Despite his screaming instincts, Valon thought about it. "You're



right," he conceded, "but the men won't like it."

"I am constantly underestimating your instinctual group loyalty," said the Warden. "Thank you for reminding me, Valon. I will have to instruct Captain Weston to make the situation known to the company at large. Blueflower wasn't chosen at random. We were meant to find it."

Valon chuckled grimly. "At least they don't know a Warden's in charge," he said.

"Explain," said Ardent.

"It's simple," said Valon. "No human would have been cold enough to ignore this kind of trap."

## Chapter 19

For the first three days, the battle of Gauvrim Pass went well. A vicious snow storm claimed lives from both sides, but goblins are shorter than humans. The deep, loose snow slowed them much more than it did the human forces. Valon alone killed two-hundred on the first day.

But the Matriarch commander was a dangerous foe. With stolen uniforms and the cover of the storm, groups of reds were able to slip behind the human lines. By the time the storm broke, their ambushes had killed more men than the cold and the ratbodies combined.

The fourth day was clear and bright. The glare from the freshly fallen snow was blinding. This gave the goblins a powerful advantage.

Goblins were nocturnal. They lived underground. They found even normal light uncomfortable. So they carried eye protection.

In the stark, white bowl of Gauvrim Pass, the goblins' weakness became their strength. Humans didn't practice day drills. They didn't know the proper use of shade-spothers and blind-callers. It was an oversight that would cost lives.

The fighting continued deep into the night. The fourth day's reversal had not yet undone the damage the goblins suffered, and Ardent was determined to keep it that way.

By midnight, the men were exhausted. Even Valon needed to rest. Though his magic could sustain his body, his mind craved sleep. Valon confronted the general.

"Ardent," he shouted over the noise of the battle. "We need to

stop."

The Warden whipped his head round to face Valon. He silently mouthed a reply. With the subtlest of occult concentrations, Valon plucked the words from the air.

"Don't yell so loud," the Warden said. "The goblins don't need to overhear us."

Sighing, Valon whispered a response. "Okay, but I was serious about stopping. The men are on the verge of collapse."

"The goblins are just as tired," whispered Ardent. "We need to press the attack. Another day like today would be disastrous."

Valon had a hard time keeping his voice to a whisper. "You know what else would be disastrous," he said. "It would be an *absolute disaster* if half our army passed out in the snow."

With casual ease, Ardent sliced a ratbody in half. "The goblins' losses will be significantly greater," he said. Behind him, the goblin shrieked out the remainder of its short life.

"What you're doing isn't right," said Valon. The goblins he killed slid downhill, slipping on the frozen mud and gore and half-melted snow.

Ardent roared and struck a tree with his empty fist. The falling timber crushed a half dozen goblins and scattered the rest of the unit.

"Soldiers fight," he whispered. And the battle continued.

Ardent did eventually give the disengagement order, but not

until his army had destroyed the goblins' entire southern flank. The humans had started the battle outnumbered three-to-one. By the dawn of the fifth day, they'd achieved parity.

Valon woke at noon. Much of the snow had been trampled into the earth or stained rust-red, but Gauvrin pass was still painfully bright. It took him a moment to adjust his vision. After eating a breakfast of hard bread and beans, he sought out the general.

"We have to do something about this light," he said.

Ardent looked at him impassively. "We can't," he replied.

"Why not," asked Valon. "You're a Warden, and I trained under the Sea's Breath. I'm sure that we can overwhelm whatever countermeasures the goblins can whip up."

Valon had never seen the Warden angry, so though the inflection was subtle, it was, in context, like a growl. "The weather is a natural process," said Ardent. "Its mechanism has a purpose much more important than the outcome of a single battle. We cannot alter it."

"I am not bound by the Wardens' mandate," said Valon.

The Warden's response was dangerously calm. "You are bound by my orders," he said.

Valon could not believe what he was hearing. Ardent's famed logic was nowhere in evidence. "My loyalty is to the human protectorate, not to you," he said. The Warden let him storm away.

On a hill overlooking the camp, Valon stood with his palms turned to the sky. He meditated on his lessons under Ordin, trying to bring to mind the Practice of Speaking to the Wind. But first, he

would have to concentrate on what it had to say.

"*All glories to the Warden,*" it sang. Around him, the air flowed and danced. It capered and swelled and writhed. The Warden's power suffused the wind, protected it, allowed it to be the wind. Valon could not change the weather. It would be like drinking the ocean, like swallowing a mountain, like extinguishing the sun.

The magician stood in awe. It was an ecstatic feeling, touching the edges of the Warden's power. It was broad and deep in a way human magic could never be.

"*All glories to the Warden,*" Valon screamed.

As he let the wind dance around him, he smelled and felt and tasted the Warden's enchantment. Its touch was light, but its scope was breathtaking. At that moment, he knew what it felt like when the world was new.

And suddenly, it was over. The wind no longer spoke to him. Instead, he heard a voice. The general's voice.

"I require your presence," it said.

Valon looked around. The sun was behind his head. He shivered, but not from the cold. In a daze, he marched to the general's tent. When he arrived, Ardent was already addressing the assembled captains. Valon stared at him in fascinated horror.

He never really appreciated the Warden's power. On the outside, he almost looked like a human magician, but it wasn't the outside that mattered. Magic was an expression of the soul, and the Warden's soul was not . . . was not . . . anchored to his body. It sang to the

world and the world sang back.

It was a startling revelation, and Valon could concentrate on little else. He eventually realized the others were staring at him.

"Do you understand your role in this operation," the general asked.

Valon thought about it. He hadn't really heard the plan.

"I'm basically supposed to charge into the thickest concentration of enemies and kill goblins until my arm gets tired," he ventured. It was a shrewd guess.

Ardent gave him an unreadable look. "Your summary lacks nuance," he said, "but is essentially correct."

He turned to address the room at large. "It is vitally important that we push the goblins out of the pass and that we do it today. Don't hold anything back. No withdrawals until you've suffered forty percent casualties. We are racing the goblin reinforcements. If they arrive before we secure the high pasture valley, our entire attack will have been for nothing."

The captains saluted sharply, but their mood was grim.

"Do you really expect forty percent casualties," asked Valon.

"No," said the Warden, "but it would not be too great a price if it meant clearing the pass today."

The battle that day was short, but brutal. The goblins fought with an eerie fanaticism. Something had stoked their persistent hatred into a fiery rage. They did not cede ground easily. Several

units reached their casualty limit.

But the goblins suffered worse.

Of those that stayed in the pass, one in fifteen survived.

In a little over three hours, it was over. The human army stood victorious, in control of Gauvrim pass.

But the celebration was short-lived.

"We march," shouted Ardent.

The high pasture valley stretched away from Gauvrim pass, more than a hundred miles to the northeast. At the far end, it connected to the goblin lands through the outpost of Gauvrim Deprok, the traditional limit of the Dagger clan's territory.

Though it was winter, and the pasture was snowbound, Valon could feel its strength. It was a fertile land, one which fed many mouths.

The valley was civilized, by goblin standards, but the march through it was awful. The wounded were left behind with a token guard. The rest of the force raced to intercept the reinforcements that would inevitably come. Rations were sparse. Rest was sparser still.

Along the way, the army encountered the occasional goblin patrol. These were easily dispatched, but the fighting took its toll. Unusually for goblins, they fought to the last man.

It was near dusk on the eighth day when they reached the fortress of Deprok Sunchek, the watchtower which kept the passage to the goblin underground clear. General Ardent ordered a rest.

Valon was too excited to sleep. Against his better judgment, he sought out Ardent.

"Well, this is it," he said to the impassive figure of the Warden. He might as well have addressed the air. He continued nonetheless.

"Aside from the garrison, I don't hear or smell any goblin for miles around. So I guess that means the reinforcements aren't going to make it."

The Warden continued to stare. He didn't even seem annoyed. Valon knew he was talking to himself, but he couldn't help it. If he was going to talk to himself, it at least felt better to have someone else in the room.

"It feels weird," he said. "We're on the edge of this decisive victory, but I just can't see past it. We're going to win tomorrow, and then what? What will we have gained?"

Ardent looked at Valon and said, "You seem unsettled." He did not feign concern.

Valon was surprised, but gratefully took the opening. "Over the past few months, I've seen and done a lot, but I don't feel like I've changed. Most of the time, I'm empty, like I was before. The only thing that gives me any pleasure is killing goblins."

"I don't understand human emotions," replied Ardent, "but you are a valuable asset, and your morale is important. Perhaps it will give you pleasure to know that our victory here will kill more



goblins than all our swords combined."

"What do you mean," asked Valon.

"This valley supplies close to a tenth of the Dagger clan's total food supply and nearly half of their meat. The Matriarchs will not be able to cope with the population pressure. They'll have to make war.

"With the loss of their connections to human lands at Raktall and Gauvrim Pass, the natural avenue of expansion is northward, into Shield Clan territory. And because of our victories over the course of the campaign, that is a war they're likely to lose.

"Judging by the relatively small force they were able to deploy at the pass, I'd say that by this time next year, the Dagger Clan will be completely absorbed into the Shield Clan."

Valon pondered the Warden's scenario. "But wouldn't that mean we'll be fighting the same enemy by a different name," he asked.

"In the long run, yes," the Warden answered, "but it is a process that will result in a massive loss of life, and by custom, when one clan is absorbed into another, its Matriarchs are traditionally executed."

"So," said Valon. "Zola Raktall will hang like the people of Blueflower?"

"She will if the Shield Clan captures her," replied Ardent.

Valon laughed.

The battle the next day was anti-climactic. Deprok Sunchek was a

well-built fortress, but it could not withstand the might of two magicians.

Ardent charged ahead of the main force and crashed into the main gate with the force of a ram. The defenders' arrows pierced his skin, but the wounds did not bleed. Even the deepest of them did nothing more than reveal the celestial radiance underneath the Warden's shell of flesh.

Valon could not afford to be so reckless. With a running jump, he vaulted onto the castle ramparts. In that confined space, the goblins posed no threat at all. He quickly cleared the south wall of defenders.

Within an hour, the castle had fallen. By the end of the day, they had collapsed the entrance to Gauvrim Deprok. The Gauvrim High Valley was once more in human hands.

The victory was not, however, complete. For weeks afterwards, they fought the goblin stragglers and holdouts. Surrender was neither offered nor accepted.

Valon was getting restless. The mop-up operation was tedious and unsatisfying. The goblins he fought were not the cloudy-eyed fanatics of the main campaign. They seemed tired. Eventually, Valon dismissed his escort unit and started hunting them from the shadows. Making their deaths unexpected was the only way to stop them begging for mercy.

He was stalking a unit of about 20 ratbodies through Gauvrim

High Valley's man-sized snow drifts when it happened. A brown blur leapt up in a spray of fine powder and flew towards him. Too late, he noticed the flash of metal. He rolled out of the way, but the blade caught his shoulder. It cut deep.

Valon's disorientation did not last long. He drew his sword and advanced into the snow-bound meadow. He didn't see what attacked him, but he knew it had to be a magician, and a strong one. For the first time in years, he was in danger, but he was unafraid.

"Come on out," laughed Valon. "It'll be easier for both of us if you do."

The magician was unconvinced, but Valon was ready for her next attack. He whipped his sword around to intercept her. At the last second, she defied momentum and spun out of the way.

"Impressive," muttered Valon. The magician immediately struck again, but she could not get through Valon's guard.

Valon examined his enemy. This was the first time he'd ever seen a female goblin. He was surprised by how human she looked.

She was short and pale, like a ratbody, but her proportions were not as distorted. Her hair was wild, and her eyes were wilder, but in another situation, he might have found her pretty.

Unfortunately, she was trying to kill him, which rather ruined the effect. So he gathered his concentration and attacked.

She was good - almost as good as him. He could force her to give ground, but he could not land a blow. So he switched tactics. He aimed his blows to require the largest possible dodge. It was sloppy

fighting, but he was sure he could win a contest of endurance.

It was going well, until he made his first mistake. It was a small thing. A single blow, overextended slightly. His sword arm was briefly exposed. Only a magician could have exploited it. The pain of her knife across his forearm made him drop his sword.

In an instant, she was on him. Her legs clenched around his waist, she stabbed at his side. Valon knocked away her blade, but not without cutting his knuckles.

Valon punched the goblin ineffectually while she snarled and cursed and clawed his face. It was only by accident that his left hand found her throat. He closed his fist around it.

As he choked the life from her, he became intensely aware of her body, her femaleness. He felt the press of her thighs against his stomach and the roughness of her hands in his hair. He listened to her whining gasps and looked at the pleading in her eyes and his rebellious thoughts . . .

His cock gradually hardened. By the time she was dead, it was fully erect.

He collapsed against a nearby tree, relieved to be alive. He felt sick to his stomach and tried to clear his head with a series of long, deep breaths. He threw up anyway, but he felt better afterwards.

It was then, dizzy and bloody and covered with his own sick, that he could no longer deny his erection. He wanted to be confused by it, but he couldn't. It had happened before. The last time he

tried to kill a woman. He cried because it wouldn't go away.

He breathed deeply and tried to think about it rationally. It couldn't last forever. It would go away on its own.

He glanced towards the goblin's corpse. He felt a shudder of revulsion and shame. Through a tear in her tunic, he saw the underside of her breast. He tried to shout down his own thoughts.

Why did he kill her? He didn't really have a choice, did he? She was a magician. She'd have been a deadly threat anywhere short of death. He was just defending himself. He was so hard, it hurt.

The fucking erection was not going away. Valon got mad. Why should he feel guilty about killing a goblin? He'd killed hundreds of goblins. Suddenly, he was getting sentimental over a female? She couldn't even talk.

He decided to just take care of it. It was a physical reaction. There was no shame in adopting a physical solution.

As his hand drifted down to his hardness, Valon knew that it was wrong. He turned away from his fallen enemy. He couldn't look at her.

But neither could he forget her. He remembered the flex of her breasts as she struggled. Inwardly, he screamed, and forced his thoughts elsewhere.

He thought about his encounter with Prudella, about her breathless enthusiasm, and the greasy sheen of her forehead, and the unsubtle way she kept her thighs pressed tightly together, obvious to him only in retrospect. But the Mistress destroyed her, and the shame he felt for his role in her destruction brought him dangerously close

to the present.

So he thought of Sharel. Of the graceful curve of her neck and the way it seemed to travel down her shoulders and over her breasts to her waist and hips and calves as a single harmonious line. A pillar of beauty to contrast her crooked patrician nose and knowing smirk. He wanted her so badly, but he suspected the feeling was not mutual.

And unbidden, his thoughts turned to the Mistress. A surge of hatred thrilled through him. He thought about humiliating and degrading her, and almost lost himself in the pleasure it brought. He thought about choking her, and the guilt brought him crashing down.

He tried thinking about Sharel again, but the contrast felt slimy. He thought about one of the palace's serving girls, but that did nothing for him.

Once more, he thought about the Mistress. This time, it was not a fantasy, but a memory. He remembered the night he tried to kill her, and the way she punished him.

The shame he felt was different than what he felt for the goblin. It intermingled with his pleasure, growing as it grew, racing his climax.

When it finally came, it was bittersweet and intense. He groaned from the effort of it. With the Mistress' gaping smile in his eyes and her awful laugh echoing in his ears, Valon returned to the present. The sudden shock of memory filled him with abhorrent terror.

He looked down and saw his semen pooling on the ground. He

remembered the body cooling behind him. He knew he'd made a mistake he would always regret.

He placed his heel into his puddling seed and ground it until no trace of himself remained. Then he ran to the camp, to report the death of a goblin Matriarch.

Ardent insisted on seeing the body himself. Valon led him back reluctantly. The Warden didn't seem to notice. For once, Valon didn't mind the silence. He was too wrapped up in his own thoughts.

Would the Warden know? How could he not? The stale smell of sex hung around him like a cloud. To Valon, it screamed through the nostrils. He couldn't imagine it would escape the Warden's notice. Could he even understand? Would he even care?

Really, what did it matter? He killed the enemy. That was what he was supposed to do. If he could kill, then what was forbidden? If he need a release from the stress of war, why shouldn't he take it?

But it didn't feel right. As they approached the clearing where he left the goblin, his stomach churned. He deserved to be judged, but he didn't want to be.

Ardent surveyed the scene. He looked at the crumpled form of the female goblin. He listened to the breezes and to the rustle of leaves.

Valon tried to discern the Warden's thoughts, but the strength of his spirit was too great to penetrate. He shifted uncomfortably.

The waiting was unbearable. The Warden didn't blink. He didn't

breathe. He simply examined the scene calmly, unaffectedly, and without giving any indication of his progress. Valon wanted to scream. The heat in his neck and his ears and his armpits was making him dizzy.

What would the Warden say? What sanction would he impose? How could he ignore the stench of perversion in the air?

"We're done here," Ardent said. Valon visibly flinched.

"Oh," the young magician offered. The Warden didn't seem to understand it was a question.

Valon hated himself. "What's going on," he asked.

"This is Matriarch Zola Raktall," Ardent said. "The goblin forces must be on the verge of destruction if she's willing to expose herself like this. Goblins don't usually risk their magicians."

"Why not," asked Valon.

"Because," answered Ardent, "they're more valuable for their intellect than their strength."

"She didn't seem that smart to me," said Valon.

"Nonetheless," said the Warden, "without Zola, the goblin resistance is doomed. We can return to Heuralesta for reassignment."

And that was the end of the conversation.



## Chapter 20

Valon breathed in the warm, moist air of the Aurelian coast for the first time in a year and a half. It was strange, being back. It was the only place in the world he could feel nostalgic about, but it didn't feel like home.

At first he thought it was because the city was at peace; because he was a warrior, but that wasn't it. He'd known moments of peace, and though those times had made him restless, they were neither unfamiliar nor unwelcome.

It wasn't peace that bothered him, but it might have been the city's peace. It was . . . It was . . . civilization. Peace born of civilization. He could no longer understand it. He wondered if he ever had.

He watched the people of Heuralesta. He watched their haggling and laughing and casual promenading, and he tried to remember if he'd ever understood them.

He knew, from firsthand experience, that only a thousand miles away, there were those who would gleefully and remorselessly slaughter the shoppers and street performers and young couples and old men and merchants and all of their families and everyone they ever met besides. Yet they didn't seem afraid.

No one carried a weapon. They seemed to have faith that weapons would not be necessary. It was insane.

He'd seen how easy it was. Good, strong men, trained to fight. He'd seen them skewered on the spears of the goblin horde. Fucking

ratbodies! With a sharpened bit of metal, they could end the peace. How much easier would it be for a man? For a magician?

But they weren't afraid. They felt safe in their civilization, but their civilization was nothing. Laws and customs were just ideas - they couldn't stop a determined man from doing exactly what he wanted. Only strength could do that, provided it was backed by steel.

And maybe that was why the city made him uncomfortable. He'd seen reality. He'd seen the mad-eyed goblins take their tithe of blood and he knew . . . He knew! That that blood had purchased these peoples' safety.

That price, and the way it had to be paid - that was reality. Civilization was just a mask, and a flimsy one at that, for mankind's true animal nature.

These people could live because they believed in the mask of civilization. They didn't know that death lurked behind it. They were weak and foolish, and Valon had nothing in common with any of them.

He looked forward to seeing Sharel again.

The Naming ceremony was short and simple. It took place in the meeting chamber of the White Council, but lacked the somber formality Valon had come to associate with that place. The raised thrones were vacant. Magicians and apprentices and assorted friends thronged into the chamber, crowding out all but a small space in the center. In it stood Valon and the High King.

Valon scanned the crowd for Sharel, but he couldn't find her.

The effort distracted him, but he couldn't allow himself to believe that she hadn't come.

Through his divided attention, he heard the High King recite the ritual script. His voice didn't sound nearly as magically regal as Valon remembered.

Suddenly, the young magician was acutely aware of how much he had grown. It was as if the world had shrunk around him. The moment quickly passed, but it left him disoriented.

"Today, we welcome you as an equal," intoned the High King. "On the field of battle, you have proven your worth. With fortitude, you fought the goblin hordes. With courage, you have braced with the black magician Zola Raktall. You have shed blood for the Human Protectorate, and earned our lasting gratitude."

The audience loudly applauded. Valon was startled and embarrassed. He shrank from the acclaim, but he didn't want it to stop.

The King raised his hand to quiet the crowd. When they settled down, he continued, "In commemoration of your service to Aurel, the Council of White Magicians, and humanity, I present you with a magician's name."

The mood in the room became somber and expectant. Valon clenched his teeth in dread. What name could he possibly live up to?

"You have fought a goblin Matriarch," said the King. "The hidden heart of a goblin tribe, normally kept far from human eyes. It's a deed few magicians can match, and an incomparable victory for our

human forces.

"It is for this reason that I name you Valon Queenslayer."

A murmur spread through the crowd. It was a powerful name, but dark. A hundred pairs of eyes focused on Valon, waiting to see his reaction.

Valon swallowed dryly. The King looked at him expectantly. He didn't know how he was supposed to feel. He wasn't proud of what he'd done, yet he couldn't deny its importance. A magician's name was an encapsulation of his power, a metaphor for his truest self, and a pathway to greater abilities. If he accepted this designation, it would change him forever.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," he said meekly. "I will strive to be worthy of the trust the Council has placed in me."

Abruptly, the tension broke, and the assembled spectators exploded into applause. Well-wishers crowded around to shake his hand, starting with the High King himself.

When the rush of vertigo struck, it was abrupt and unexpected. Despite the smiling faces of his colleagues, he could think of nothing but the immensity of the future in front of him, and as much as he'd grown since he first stepped into the Council chambers, he didn't know if he'd ever be big enough to bear it all.

As respectfully as possible, he headed for the door.

Octavus the scribe was waiting for him in the hall. It was hard to tell where the shadows stopped and he began.

"Queenslayer," he said. It sounded like a question.

"Yeah," answered Valon. Something about Octavus' tone was making him nervous. Almost subconsciously, he strengthened his magical defenses. Octavus did not react, but he clearly noticed.

"You accepted a dangerous name," continued the elder magician. "It seems *odd* that you would so *readily* embrace the fate that awaits you."

Valon could detect in the magician's words the slithering texture of the Sorcerous Voice. Octavus was speaking from a place of strong emotion - or he wanted Valon to believe that he was. Either way, it was growing apparent that this would not be a friendly conversation.

Valon struck preemptively. He called to mind his memories of outrage and indignation, pouring as much as he could into his voice, until his words shriveled the ear like iron grinding against stone.

"I'm a **full** magician now, Octavus. Whatever it is you want to say, you don't need to **dance** around the subject."

Octavus grimaced in pain, but quickly recovered. When he spoke, his voice was thick with slime. "Goblins don't have queens," he said. "In commemoration of killing a Matriarch, you are named *Queenslayer*. You don't have to be a prophet to see the High King's plan for you."

"Matronexa," said Valon.

"Yes, Matronexa," Octavus said. "She's your only living family, isn't she?"

Valon gagged at the thought. "How could you say that," he

protested, choking.

"Don't try to deflect my question," snapped the magician.

"Valon's expression darkened and he growled out a reply, "If you knew what she did to me--"

"Please," interrupted Octavus. "I know more than you could imagine, and I don't think you have the ability to resist her. I think that once you see her face, you will fall under her spell, and the High King will have handed our enemies a powerful weapon."

Those doubts were not foreign to Valon. He'd often agonized over what would happen if he saw Matronexa again, but coming from Octavus, such doubts sounded like an attack. He struck back, "You don't understand the depths of my hatred. I swear to you. By the powers of creation. By the Wardens of nature. By the sea and the sky and the earth. I will live up to my name. The Goblin Queen will die by my hand."

Octavus appeared unimpressed. "You say that now, but will you really be able to raise a hand against the woman who raised you?"

"I'm certain I can," declared Valon.

"Then I guess I'd better wish you luck," said Octavus, before disappearing into the shadows.

It wasn't long before Valon was pulled back into the Council chamber. The conversation with Octavus had troubled him, but he couldn't escape the celebration in his honor. He quickly found his way to Ordin and the Warden Silver. Ordin beckoned him welcome.

Silver didn't seem to notice.

"The general staff is quite animated about the possibilities presented by your apprentice," the Warden said to Ordin, oblivious to Valon's presence. "It's rare to see a white magician with such a natural talent for mayhem. They can't wait to unleash him on the goblins again."

Ordin sighed. "Silver, it's considered rude among humans to talk about someone as if he wasn't present."

Valon laughed. "Don't worry about it, Ordin. It feels like old times."

Silver shook his head. "No, your master is right. I've been trying lately to master your inane customs, and I haven't been doing too well."

"But I thought you Wardens were super-competent at everything," Valon said, smirking.

"That's the impression we try to convey," replied the Warden dryly.

"Yes," said Ordin, "and speaking of impressions, I think Valon would be interested to hear what you were telling me earlier." Unsure of what was happening, Valon nodded in agreement.

"You want me to repeat myself," Silver asked.

Ordin rolled his eyes. "Just summarize," he said.

Silver rolled his eyes. Valon had to stifle a laugh. "The general staff has been reading Ardent's reports," said the Warden, "and apparently, he's been very impressed by your performance,

Valon."

The young magician gaped in disbelief. "I didn't think Ardent was impressed by anything."

"I know," said Silver. "It came as quite a shock to us too, but if there's one reliable thing about Ardent, it's his love for anything that kills goblins."

"Why does Ardent hate goblins so much," Valon asked.

Silver shrugged. "You mean apart from them being an abomination unto the Creator who, if left unchecked, will overwhelm the world with their numbers until not a single pure human is left?"

"No," said Valon matter-of-factly. "That part I understand, but the way everyone talks about him, it's like they think he hates goblins even more than the other Wardens. I was just wondering if he had a special reason."

"The Wardens don't hate goblins," said Silver. "We love the world as it was originally conceived by the Creator, and we do what we can to make sure that things don't deviate too much from the sacred order. The elimination of the goblin threat is only part of what we do. Ardent simply prioritizes that particular task more than the rest of us consider strictly necessary."

"But why," asked Valon.

Silver looked to Ordin. "I think you may have missed something in the boy's education," he said. "He doesn't seem to understand that members of a general class might express individual variance."

Ordin replied coldly, "I'm sure he understands just fine."



Valon wondered about his teacher's apparent dislike of the Wardens, but decided to inquire at a more discreet moment. He instead continued his inquiry, "I was just wondering if he had a personal motive to fight the goblins."

Silver laughed. "Like maybe his family was killed and now he's out for revenge . . . we Warden's aren't like humans. We don't make decisions based on emotion."

"Yes, Valon," Ordin interrupted. "When a Warden kills you, it is without malice. He's simply decided that the world will be a more beautiful place if you weren't in it."

Silver looked impressed. "I can tell from your tone that you're being sarcastic, but that's actually a very apt way to put it."

The Warden turned to Valon and said, "Ardent prefers fighting goblins for the same reason a gardener might reject roses in favor of tulips - he simply doesn't like the way they look."

Valon thought this was a strange reason to go to war, but he was nonetheless glad the Wardens were on his side. He decided to change the subject.

"So, how's Forest," he asked. Silver's face went blank. For a long moment, he was completely unresponsive. Ordin and Valon exchanged a skeptical glance.

With startling suddenness, the Warden's consciousness returned. "I'm sure he's doing wonderfully," he said sarcastically. "If I know him - and after twenty-five thousand years, I should - he is probably deeply engrossed in learning the habits and customs of the Northern

Hanverian field mouse."

"So," said Valon. "He's in Hanveria." Ordin snickered.

Silver shot them both a dirty look, and the conversation might have taken a seriously unpleasant turn, had it not been interrupted by the High King.

"Greetings," he said ebulliently. "Ordin the Sea's Breath, Valon Queenslayer, and General Silver, the Warden of Nature. If only our enemies could witness such a gathering of might and wisdom, they would never trouble us again."

Ordin forced a smile. Valon nodded respectfully. Silver did not react at all. Heedless, the High King continued, "As much as I hate to intrude upon a reunion of old friends, urgent matters of state demand my attention, and I believe young Valon has something he wants to ask me before I leave."

If it weren't for his practice in shielding his emotions, Valon would have rapidly blushed. Instead, he exhaled the heat of his embarrassment, letting it burn his nostrils and the backs of his eyeballs.

"I'm not sure I know what you're talking about," he said with artificial calmness. The King smiled.

"Valon," he said. "Your discomfort is charming, but I was serious about having somewhere to be. So it would be a great help if you spared me the inevitable attempt to evade my foresight. I noticed you searching the audience during your ceremony."

Even with all his powers, Valon could barely conceal his

bitterness. "I didn't find who I was looking for," he said.

"I know," said the King. "About a week before you arrived, I asked Ratia to take her on an extended retreat, so that you could ask me what you have to ask me without the embarrassment of having to do it in front of my daughter."

Oh, thought Valon. He turned to look behind him and noticed for the first time the audience that had formed around him. Most were curious, some were encouraging, and a few were smiling broadly. He asked himself if he would really be more embarrassed if Sharel were there. After a moment's deliberation, he concluded that he would. Once more, the High King lived up to his reputation.

Suppressing the urge to flee, Valon spoke slowly and carefully. "Your Majesty," he said. "May I be so bold as to request—" And for a moment, he was filled with doubt. He broke and closed his eyes.

As far as he could sense the energy of the situation, this was what was expected of him, but the King spoke in innuendo. Valon could not be sure he was doing the right thing.

Still, he continued, because not to ask was to give up on his life for the sake of his fantasies. "May I be so bold as to request the honor of your daughter's, uh . . . Princess Sharel's . . . hand in marriage?"

The High King almost killed him with the unyielding silence of his response, but it was just a pause for effect. After a long, awkward moment, he grinned. "Of course, Valon. I think it's a wonderful match. She returns from her retreat in three days. Why

don't you come to the palace then, and we can inform her together."

Valon nearly collapsed in relief. For the second time in the space of a day, he was the center of a circle of well-wishers and congratulations.

That night, he stayed with Ordin. The kindly old magician seemed to have grown weary over the past year. His eyes, though still gentle, were darkened with rings of red and gray, and he seldom smiled, except in bitter response to some irony or disappointment.

"Are you all right," asked Valon, as the two magicians shared a meal of cold porridge and goat cheese.

Ordin was slow to respond. "I'm in good health, if that's what you mean."

"That's not at all what I meant," Valon said.

"I know," said Ordin, "but what's bothering me is Council business, and I still can't talk about it."

"Is that why you were acting so strangely with Silver? Because I thought you two were friends."

Ordin smiled. "A human can never really be friends with a Warden," he said. "Yes, the Wardens are part of it, but they aren't the worst part of it."

Valon scrutinized his friend for any sign of the secrets he held. He could sense them, under the surface of the old man's thoughts, but he couldn't see what they were. "Why don't you tell me," he asked.

The conflict was clearly written on Ordin's face. When he spoke, his voice cracked. "I can't go into specifics, but the war has been changing the Council, and not for the better. Magicians I've known for a hundred years have turned strange and cruel. The plans they're making . . . I can't refute their wisdom, but they feel . . . wrong."

Valon was confused. "What plans," he asked. "I was under the impression that the war was almost over."

"Valon, the Council is privy to certain information. About the future. And the present. And the past. The Dagger Clan was a deliberate sacrifice. A test of our defenses and resolve. The real war hasn't started yet."

"I see," mused Valon, "but if the war is coming anyway, doesn't it make sense to plan for the worst?"

Ordin was on the verge of tears. "That's what's so troubling," he cried. "The plans make perfect sense, but they shouldn't be coming so easily. It's like there are some who are eager for the war, especially among the Wardens."

"Ardent," said Valon.

"Obviously," replied Ordin.

"And Silver," Valon guessed.

"And Silver," confirmed Ordin.

Valon looked compassionately at his former master. "I can see why that would bother you. You're a peace-loving man, but if the goblins are determined to attack us, there's nothing to be gained by a reticence to fight."

Ordin took a deep breath. "I wouldn't say there's *nothing* to be gained," he replied, before thinking better of it.

"No, forget it," he continued. "Maybe you're right. I just don't think I'll be able to handle the darkness."

Valon didn't know what to say. He understood what Ordin meant. He had seen his own darkness, and it wasn't pleasant. He wondered how much harder it must be for someone who was used to the light.

"I know it's difficult," he said, "but it's only temporary. Things will be better when we win."

Ordin smiled. "Well, at least I have the end to look forward to."

## Chapter 21

Before long, Sharel had returned, and Valon was summoned to the palace. As he approached the throne, he felt a sharp sense of dread. Sharel stood at her father's side, immaculate in royal blue. She smiled warmly, utterly oblivious to the effect she was having on him.

When he finally mounted the dais, she rose to give him a chaste hug. He did not allow himself to enjoy it.

"How was your trip," he asked.

Sharel beamed. "It was great," she chirped happily. "Ratia taught me how to work a forge, and I made a magic ring. Unfortunately, it melted."

"Your magic ring melted," he repeated incredulously.

"Yeah," she replied.

"Because of the forge?"

"No," she said. "Because of the feedback. You see, when you enchant a magic ring, you've got to—"

"I hate to interrupt," interrupted the King, "but you two can catch up later. Sharel, Valon has something he needs to tell you."

Just then, Valon hated the King. Sharel looked at him expectantly. Though he was terrified, he mustered his will and went through with it.

"Sharel, I have asked your father for your hand in marriage."

Sharel was stunned. She looked to her father for support.

"I told him yes, of course," the king said blandly.

The princess smiled stiffly. "Well then, it is my honor to

welcome the magician Valon--"

"Valon Queenslayer," corrected the King.

Sharel gasped. "Uh, to welcome Valon Queenslayer as my future husband and father to the heirs of Aurel."

Valon got the increasing sensation that he had just made a terrible mistake. Unfortunately, it was too late. Sharel leaned in to kiss him. Gossip would later describe it as deeply unpleasant.

The King rose from his throne and all eyes turned to him. "I think the young lovers might want some time to discuss things privately. They can use my personal receiving room. While they are so adjourned, the rest of us can enjoy some refreshments and irresponsible speculation."

As Sharel led him away, Valon glanced back at the King. For a moment, he thought he could see something distinctly unfriendly in the man's friendly smile, but the moment passed, and Valon convinced himself it was his nerves.

"So," said Sharel. "What do you want to discuss first, your new name or the engagement you made with my father?"

Sheepishly, Valon said, "The engagement, I guess."

The princess stared at him impatiently. "Well, discuss," she said.

"O-okay," stammered Valon. "I was going to talk to you about it first, but you weren't at my Naming ceremony, and your father came up to me in front of everyone and--"



"-And," continued Sharel, "he did that thing where he pretends to predict your actions when he's actually influencing them."

Valon hadn't thought about it that way. "I think so," he said.

Sharel sighed. "He probably sent me away so I couldn't talk you out of proposing."

Through long experience, Valon concealed his hurt. "If you don't want to get married, we can still call it off," he said.

Snarkily, Sharel replied, "So I can choose to either marry you or dishonor myself, my family, and my kingdom by backing out of a deal?"

Valon growled back, "I'm sorry. I proposed because I love you. I know I did it the wrong way, but what's done is done. If you don't want to marry me, I'll try my best to help you get out of it in the most dignified way possible."

The tension in the air could have melted a magic ring. Sharel broke first. As the anger drained out of her, she assessed Valon with a pragmatic stare.

"I never said I didn't want to marry you. We're the same age. We get along. You're not bad looking, and you love me. You're everything I could realistically hope for in an arranged marriage."

Valon's heart swelled to overflowing. Such was his relief and gratitude and joy that his doubt was almost entirely forgotten. "That's great," he said. "We can--"

"But," interrupted Sharel, "I'm not ready to get married yet. I still have a year left on my apprenticeship, and when a princess

marries, she is expected to get pregnant right away. That means that for the entire time we're trying, and for several months afterwards, I'll have to refrain from using most magic in order to avoid poisoning the baby. I simply can't afford that kind of hiatus at this point in my studies."

"Oh," said Valon. "If that's the problem, I don't mind a long engagement."

Despite herself, Sharel was moved. "You'd really wait for me," she said.

"Of course," said Valon. "I want to be with you and I don't care how long it takes or what I have to do."

Sharel smiled guardedly. "I guess I'm pretty lucky, then. So . . . Valon Queenslayer?"

Internally, Valon relaxed, grateful that the conversation had changed to something safe.

"I didn't choose it," he said.

Sharel rolled her eyes. "I know you didn't choose it," she said. "But why did you go along with it?"

Valon started to protest, but the question was unexpectedly difficult. His first thought was to say that the name was imposed upon him, that he had no say in the matter, but even as he marshaled the words, he realized how weak and foolish they sounded.

"I was surprised," he confessed. "I wasn't in the moment, and I allowed myself to be led."

"But your name - Queenslayer . . . it celebrates murder. And

that will forever be a part of you. How do you allow yourself to get led to such a dark place?"

"I was thinking of you," responded Valon. The silence that followed was breathtakingly uncomfortable.

"Besides," he continued. "Your father knows what he's doing. My new name will help me develop powers to use against the Goblin Queen. It is sure to strike fear into Matronexa's heart."

"It strikes fear into my heart," said Sharel. "In case you've forgotten, I will be a Queen someday."

"It's only a name," replied Valon. He regretted it immediately.

Sharel laughed long and hard. Valon wanted to join in, but there was no mirth in it. Instead, he cried.

The princess stopped when she saw him, her own tears quickly joining his. She soon pressed herself into his arms, embracing him.

"Don't worry, Valon," she whispered into his ear. "I'll keep you safe."

When the royal couple joined the reception, their imperfect composure escaped the notice of most of the courtiers and gossips, but there were many powerful magicians present, and their scrutiny was thorough and intense.

Thanks to Matronexa's years of invasive caprice, Valon was unreadable. Sharel had much less practice. The judgment buzzed through the room in a cloud of low-level psychic energy. Valon would remember it as one of the worst days of his adult life.

Ratia strode towards him with the effortless authority of a century-old magician. Reflexively, Valon swooned just a bit before he remembered she was technically his equal and a close friend and mentor to his future wife.

"Queenslayer," she said. Her eyes were hard and her smile was only slightly softer.

"Swordsmith," he answered, sensing her challenge. He told himself the arousal he felt was actually his offended dignity.

Oblivious, Ratia continued, "Don't think that because you and her father have bartered her future between yourselves that that makes her your property."

Old instincts welled up in him. "Yes Mi- -gician," he stuttered. Ratia didn't seem to notice. The mistake purified his anger. "Sharel isn't even close to being my property. I wanted to marry her and I did what I had to do."

"You did what you had to do," she replied sceptically.

"I followed the custom," he said.

"The custom? Ha! Customs are for farmer's daughters and tavern wenches. Sharel is a magician, and a good one."

"I know," said Valon. "That's part of what I love about her."

Ratia, briefly, seemed mollified. Then she looked across the room and saw the princess' forced smile. "Do you have any idea what it means to be partnered with a magician?"

He knew the question was supposed to be an insult, and that he should have been angry, but it completely floored him. The only

honest answer was *no*. Without another word, he turned and left the reception hall.

There was a time when he would have found a closet and wept. He wanted to, but that part of his life was over. He'd worked hard to become strong, and he wasn't about to shame himself with weakness. He walked out of the palace and into the seaside gardens.

Closing his eyes, he retreated deep inside himself. An onlooker would have thought he was an especially realistic statue.

He didn't know what it meant to be partnered with a magician. Until Ratia said it, it hadn't even occurred to him to think of it like that.

He thought he knew what love was. Love was emptiness. It was a chasm so deep and so wide it could never be filled, and it was the knowledge that he wanted one specific person to try and fill it.

For the first time, it occurred to him how terrible it must be to be loved. How could he fill another's emptiness? What action could he perform; what behavior could he adopt that would satisfy such boundless yearning? And how could Sharel satisfy him?

Was that what it meant to be partners? Two souls bound together in mutual, hopeless need? Two hungers that could never be fed, spiraling ever tighter together in a cannibalistic orgy of unrestrained consumption?

That's how it felt, though he knew it couldn't be right. People didn't act like that. He saw men and women together, and they seemed happy, but he couldn't imagine how they got that way.

He tried to emulate the outward forms of human relationships, to strike upon the formula that would allow him to blend in. He tried to say the right words, to pursue the standard milestones, but every one felt hollow.

His only experience was with Prudella, and it was only now, when he was lost, that he realized how effectively and gently she led him. At the time, he thought he had some power over her, but he was a shadow to her reality. She was exactly as helpless as she wanted to be.

He would give anything to be led like that. Maybe that was love - a complementary transaction, obedience for leadership, helplessness for magnanimity, forbearance for power. He would give Sharel everything, and in return, she would take the emptiness away.

Yet, if that was love, then he'd felt it before. Matronexa took everything from him and he-

Valon stopped. He didn't want to think about that, so he didn't.

In the silence of the palace gardens, he calmed himself. So, he was afraid. He didn't know what to do, and it scared him. What was his fear against the measure of the world? What was his fear against the span of his life? He could figure out what to do, and if he made mistakes, so what?

Sharel was a good person, and he meant her no harm. What was the worst that could happen?

As is so often the case, the worst was something completely

unexpected. The day after the engagement, Sharel and Valon were summoned to the King's private chambers.

Though he had always seemed approachable and unpretentious, the King nonetheless looked out of place in an informal setting. Against the backdrop of the Aurelian throne room or the White Council chambers, his strength and warmth were comforting, but this untrafficked part of the palace was low-ceilinged and ordinary, and the force of his personality was stifling.

"I am completely thrilled about this match," he told them over a heavy breakfast of rich, Aurelian cuisine. Valon could sense Sharel's skepticism, but he couldn't discern its cause.

The King continued, "Skill with magic is largely heritable, so your natural talent will be an incredible boon to our line."

Sharel sighed. The King ignored her.

"Of course, I don't mean to sound like I'm breeding racehorses," he laughed. "In fact, I never thought I'd be lucky enough to find a young man who was both of ideal stock and genuinely in love with my daughter. It fills me with profound gratitude that this arrangement is more than purely practical."

Sharel was unmoved. "Then why bring it up," she asked.

The King frowned. "I bring it up so you'll understand why I've scheduled the wedding for the end of the month."

Valon gasped.

"What," hissed Sharel.

Not unkindly, the King explained, "At any moment, the goblins'

second wave could descend on the human lands, and Valon could be sent to the front. You'll have to produce an heir before that happens."

Valon was mortified. He knew he should say something, but the silence was too imposing. He looked to Sharel, who was no help at all.

"I know it's soon," said the King, "but there's no reason to look so stricken. I think you're both ready, and there is nothing to be gained by delaying the inevitable."

Once more, Valon looked to Sharel for guidance. She was nodding stoically. It thoroughly confused him.

Desperately, he protested, "But I promised Sharel a long engagement so she could finish studying magic."

"That was a very irresponsible thing to promise," said the King. He turned to his daughter. "Did you make him promise that," he asked, his handsome brown face the very picture of reasonable concern.

Sharel said nothing.

For no reason he could name, Valon was on edge. There was something familiar about this situation, but he liked the King too much to properly understand what it was.

It almost felt like Sharel was under attack. Valon was compelled to defend her.

"It wasn't like that," he said.

The King smiled indulgently. "Of course it wasn't. I can tell that you're a romantic at heart, and I'm sure it was a spontaneous gesture of nobility and grace. Unfortunately, that does nothing to



resolve our central dilemma. So, I'm afraid you're going to have to break your promise.

"But you don't have to worry about Sharel's education. The demands on a royal mother are not onerous. The servants can care for the child when she resumes her studies."

"Oh," said Valon. "If it's all right with Sharel then."

Sharel smiled wearily. "Don't worry, I'll do my duty," she said.

## Chapter 22

A royal wedding could not happen overnight. Experts and specialists from all across the Seven Kingdoms were called in to attend to the myriad of tasks, small and large, the event would require. The legendary Skoptec seamstress Shenessa Usoc was flown in, through great expenditure of magic, to design Sharel's wedding gown. The rings were made by Ratia the Swordsmith herself. In the month leading up to the ceremony, Valon saw his bride only twice.

Which isn't to say that the young magician was bored. At the High King's insistence, he received a crash course on high strategy by the Warden Silver.

It was not pleasant. The short Aurelian spring was rapidly transitioning into a wet, muggy summer, and despite his millennia of experience, Silver was a lousy teacher.

"Why am I even bothering with this," sighed an exasperated Valon after a particularly unhelpful lecture.

"Yeah," said Silver, jumping on the opportunity with his typical sensitivity. "It's not like you'll be going to war any time in the near future."

Though he found the Warden's sarcasm charming in small doses, Valon's patience had long since worn out. "That's *nice*, Silver. I suppose I should have said, 'I don't know why I, a junior officer with no command authority, am bothering to study with such urgency, considering that the goblins haven't made an even slightly aggressive move since the defeat of the Dagger clan at Gauvrim.'" "

"Then why didn't you say that in the first place," replied Silver. Valon could have killed him.

"I should think it's obvious," the Warden continued. "You're 'shacking up with the boss's daughter,' so naturally you have to have a respectable job title."

"*What* do you mean by *that*," said Valon.

The Warden laughed. "I don't really know, but everyone is saying it."

Despite himself, Valon laughed. "They are not," he said.

"No," agreed the Warden. "They're not, but it seemed like the sort of thing that would annoy you."

"Yeah, you have a knack. So, what's the real reason?"

"I'm genuinely disappointed in you," responded the Warden. "I was sure you would have figured it out already."

Surprised, Valon thought about the issue carefully. "Well," he said. "Another goblin attack is inevitable, and there has been talk of giving me more responsibility, but the situation is stable. I should have plenty of time."

The Warden smiled knowingly. "Unless," he said. "There was some sort of major event in the next two weeks or so that would seriously upset the status quo."

Though he knew it was pointless, Valon scrutinized the Warden for some hint of his intent. "Are you talking about the wedding," he said.

"Of course," replied Silver.

"What does the wedding have to do with anything?"

"I don't know, Valon. Maybe you've noticed the town criers and fast messengers, spreading the word from one end of the Human Protectorate to the other: 'Valon Queenslayer to be wed to a Princess of Aurel!' You don't think that might influence a certain black magician with ties to the boy in question and a vendetta against the girl's father?"

Valon was stunned. "What? No. The King would never use his own daughter as bait."

Silver shrugged. "How will the Goblin Queen reach her in the heart of Heuralesta?"

"I'm sorry," said Valon. "I don't think Matronexa is that stupid. If she were going to risk herself for me, she would have done it in the last campaign."

"You know her better than anyone," Silver said placatingly. "But Heural the Farsighted has foreseen it, and he's usually right about these sorts of things."

For the next two weeks, the possibility weighed on Valon's mind. He wasn't afraid or offended - indeed, the thought that his union with Sharel would move the old women to impotent fury filled him with a bitter delight. Rather, he was worried.

He was about to marry the woman of his dreams, and yet the whole procedure had an air of ruthless efficiency. He knew this was mostly an illusion, that royal marriages were always at least partly a

business arrangement, but he couldn't help but feel like a small part of an unfathomably large and complex mechanism. At times, even his love felt like a necessary grease that smoothed the friction within the High King's prophecy.

These pre-wedding jitters were worse than he ever imagined.

It would be worth it, though. Sharel was so beautiful she made his teeth ache. The day before the wedding, they had breakfast together, and he could barely eat.

It must have been the wedding preparations, or his exhausting schedule with Silver, but he couldn't remember a time when she seemed more confident, more powerful. When she spoke to him, she was distant and unreadable, with just a suggestion of an uncontrolled Sorcerous Voice. It drove him crazy.

Yet, on the day of the wedding itself, he was astonishingly calm. Everything was settled, and little could change. As the final moment approached, the number of things that could go wrong shrunk to nonexistence. Once more, he experienced the comforting sensation of knowing exactly what was expected of him.

What was expected of him was a long, intricate ceremony in front of an audience of hundreds of assorted dignitaries, where any mistake would result in a scandal that would be gossiped about for years to come, but it was still nice. Perfectionism, he could handle.

His kiss with Sharel was situationally appropriate. He liked that. He would remember it as the best kiss of his life, primarily because it was the only one where the desire was perfectly

symmetrical.

The reception was much nicer than the one for their engagement. Sharel was much more cheerful, and seemed to enjoy the music and food and general good will. She was at peace, and lovely in her joy.

Valon couldn't decide whether he preferred her stern and strong or happy and frivolous. It amazed him that a person could have such depths. There were times when he felt like he only had two moods - dour and numb.

Ordin congratulated him about a dozen times, and maybe it was simply residual stress from the excitement of the day, but Valon could have sworn the old man meant it as an apology.

All in all, Valon had never been happier.

"How do you want to do this," Sharel asked. The existence of such a question had never even occurred to him.

So, Valon stalled for time. The couple had been moved into an unused wing of the palace and given their privacy. She was sitting on the edge of their massive new bed, casual in her nakedness. He was standing some distance away, half hard and covered in goosebumps. It wasn't the slightest bit cold.

"I'm feeling a little tired," he said. "Maybe we could do it tomorrow?" Sharel looked at him as if he were insane.

She half-stood and gently pulled him closer. "We have to do this," she said. "Besides, I thought you loved me."

"I do," protested Valon. "I just never imagined--"

Sharel interrupted sarcastically, "-That I would descend from the plane of spiritual ideals and present you with carnal reality?"

"That's unfair," Valon said sadly. For a long moment, the newlyweds stared defiantly into each others' eyes.

"You're right," admitted Sharel. "I'm sorry. What's the matter?"

Valon plopped down on the bed next to her, his erection a distant memory. "Nothing really," he said, stretching his natural pause into a distinctly unnatural delay.

Then, he sighed and continued, "Back in Swordswain, there was this girl. She liked me."

"Did you like her," Sharel asked.

"I didn't really know enough back then to like her or not like her. I was mostly just thrilled that someone wanted me for something good for a change." He looked at her sheepishly and they both shared a moment of respectful silence for the awkwardness of the confession.

"She was nice," he said. "She wasn't anything like you, though."

"Gee, thanks," growled Sharel.

Valon laughed. "Fine, you were alike in the sense that you are both nice, okay?"

"Actually, I'm not that nice," replied Sharel.

"So I'm discovering. Anyway, this girl, she was nice and she liked me."

"What happened with this girl," Sharel asked.

"Well," answered Valon, "what happened is that we spent a lot of time together until one day she took me out behind her house, and

just as we were getting close, physically, Matronexa burst in and almost killed her."

"Oh, that's horrible," said Sharel, "but you can't be afraid that--"

"No, don't be absurd," said Valon. "It's subtler than that. I never imagined it be just me and another person. Alone."

"I always thought that she would somehow be here too. That she would find some way to ruin it, or that I would be dead before anything happened."

"It's stupid, I know. I thought I was doomed, but I'm not doomed, and I don't know what to do."

Sharel nodded sympathetically. "That's kind of crazy, Valon."

"I know," he said, "but do you mind if we don't do anything tonight?"

Sharel sighed heavily. "Sure, Valon, though I was kind of looking forward to having a wedding night."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," she said. "Just get your head together. We have responsibilities now."

"I love you," he said.

"I know," she replied.

They slept. For entirely separate reasons, neither slept well.

The next day was one of ribald glances and knowing smiles. Not for the first time, Valon felt like a fraud.



Sharel was unfazed, however. If anything, she thrived on the attention. Whenever anyone asked, she'd reply, "I am so fortunate that my Lord is as imposingly skilled in the arts of love as he is in the arts of war."

Valon was grateful. It was an obvious lie, but it was the lie they expected to hear.

In a perverse way, he enjoyed the secret. At any moment, she could tell the truth, humiliate him, nullify the marriage. Yet she protected him. He was completely at her mercy, and still completely safe. He was determined to try again that very night.

He chickened out.

And again the next night. And the night after. And the night after that.

Sharel was supportive, but beginning to look the worse for wear. The lies that were at first playful gradually became coldly sarcastic.

On the morning of their sixth day of marriage, he awoke to find her hovering over him.

"Good morning, Sharel," he said charmingly.

She was not charmed.

"I'm getting frustrated, Valon. We've been married for almost a week and you haven't touched me."

"Yeah," said Valon defiantly. "Well in the past four years, I also barely touched you, and you didn't have a problem with it."

Sharel practically growled. "That was *different*."

Valon knew it was disingenuous, but they were having an argument, and he wanted to win.

"Why," he asked.

Sharel sagged, her anger briefly deflated. "Because now you're supposed to touch me," she said, and as she said it, the words reminded her of her grievance.

"You're **supposed** to touch me," she repeated. "You had this elaborate long-term plan to convince my father to 'give you my hand,' as if I were some sort of tournament trophy, and my only consolation was the thought that at least my husband's love would be passionate and real.

"But now that you've 'won the prize you sought,' you've avoided doing the one thing that makes a marriage a marriage, and I'm left wondering why I ever bothered to get my hopes up."

Valon stared dumbly. Her criticism stung, but that was not what caught his attention. She was angry and thinking only of herself. He felt like he was seeing her for the first time.

He grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her roughly to the bed. As she landed on top of him, he stopped her mouth with a deep and insolent kiss.

Within seconds, he was through her clothes and biting her lip and neck and breast. He didn't really know what he was feeling, only that he would have all of her, and that she would love it.

She struggled against him, but only to find a better angle. The moment carried them both along, beyond the need for thought.

It was over quickly, before the fragile intensity of the deed could collapse upon itself. As Valon cooled, he looked over at Sharel. She seemed surprised and breathless.

He looked down at himself, unclenched his fists, and refused to recognize what he saw.

He then fled the room without saying a word.

She found him later that day, in the gardens. Valon had sensed her coming, but decided a quick reckoning was best.

"Do you want to talk about it," she asked carefully.

"Not really," he said.

"Okay, I don't really want to talk about it either."

They stood together for several long moments. The silence was enjoyably tortuous.

When she couldn't stand it any more, Sharel blurt out, "I enjoyed it, but I wouldn't want to do it that way every time."

"I don't know what came over me," said Valon.

Sharel arched her eyebrow, put her hands on her hips, and said, "I'd assumed it was uncontrollable lust for my smoking hot body."

Valon smiled. "I love you," he said.

"You keep telling me that," she replied.

He ignored the deflection and continued, "It's important to me that you know it. I don't want to go into too much detail, but sometimes I feel like my love for you is the only thing keeping me connected to reality."

"That's a lot of responsibility for one person, Valon."

"I know," he said. "It's not fair, and it bothers me, but there's nothing I can do about it. That's why anything I have is yours. Anything you want from me, I'll give to you. Anything you want me to do, I'll do."

Sharel sighed. "You don't have to--"

"Actually, I do. I was thinking; you can't practice magic while you're pregnant, so why don't we hold off on having any more sex until after you finish your studies."

She examined him intently, but he was beyond subtle. "That's sweet of you to offer," she said, "but it's too late."

Now it was Valon's turn to be puzzled. "How can you know that already? We only did it this morning."

"After we finished, I cast a spell to ensure conception."

"What," gasped Valon. "How could you do that?"

Sharel's response was firm, but mild. "You've been acting so strangely, I didn't know when I'd get another chance, so I acted in the best interest of House Aurel."

Valon protested, "But the child will be a goblin now."

"You're exaggerating," she said. "I didn't change anything; I just nudged along a natural process. I might have gotten pregnant anyway. The spell made it a sure thing."

"But I was willing to wait," said Valon.

"I know, but you haven't thought this through. Everyone thinks we're trying to get pregnant, so if I wanted to study magic, I'd have

to do it in secret. And if I were found out, everyone would assume I was using magic to avoid pregnancy.

"My honor would be ruined, I'd shame my family, and any hope I had of eventually joining the White Council would be dashed to pieces.

"It's not really what I wanted, but the only way to make the best out of a bad situation is to just get it over with as quickly as possible."

Valon couldn't fault the logic, but he thought it sounded pretty dubious. "I suppose. Though you're dabbling in black magic. What if you're found out?"

"First," said Sharel. "The magic was light gray at worst. Second, since it merely enhanced a natural process, it is virtually undetectable. Finally, I think I can trust you to keep my secret."

"Of course," he said.

"Then what's the problem," she asked.

"Absolutely nothing," he answered.

"Good," she said.

"All right," he agreed.

That night, they made love again, but it wasn't as good as the first time.

## Chapter 23

As predicted, the goblins invaded not long after the wedding. With Sharel safely pregnant, Valon was called away almost instantly.

For the first time, he was allowed to attend a briefing of the General Staff. The High King was startlingly handsome in his ceremonial uniform, and when he spoke about military strategy, he was more comfortable and focused than Valon had ever seen him before. In a room full of generals, magicians, and Wardens, he effortlessly commanded the respect and attention of his audience.

"Gentleman," he began. "For the first time in fifty years, the Goblin Queen has dared show herself openly. She rides at the head of a goblin army, from the east, into Morovia, and she has the support of the Gauntlet, Sword, and Venom clans."

The august men of the General Staff grumbled and grouched at this unfortunate information.

"That was the bad news," said the King. "The good news is that the Shield clan reconstruction is still under way, and the chaos to the north of Paragad has prevented the Garrote clan from joining the fray.

"If Matronexa had waited another year, she'd be leading five clans instead of three. It's thanks to young Valon here making the ultimate sacrifice that she hasn't"

The hoots and applause of the assembled soldiers had a distinctly sarcastic cast. It made Valon uncomfortable.

The King raised his hand, and the briefing continued. "Morovia

is still weak from the unusually harsh winter a couple years back, and the goblin forces have the momentum to simply roll through the countryside.

"So we'll let them." With a well-timed glance, he forestalled the protest of General Worman of Morovia. "By reassigning the Morovian forces to assist with the north and south pincers of the trap we're going to set for them.

"Since we know that she's going to head straight for Aurel, we'll simply allow her to penetrate deep into our territory and then envelop her flanks while her supply lines are overextended."

"But won't the goblins anticipate such a ploy," objected General Idan of Lycamia.

The High King practically cackled. "Ordinarily, they would, but Matronexa has a personal stake in this war, and so she'll be expending all of her cunning and magic to get them to ignore their common sense.

"They still think of her as the legendary Goblin Queen who led them to near-victory 50 years ago. They don't know she's become a sad, broken old woman. If she tells them to advance, they'll advance.

"And when we send Ardent and Valon in to cut off the head of the attack, they will eliminate the only person in the goblin forces who knows what a colossal miscalculation their advance has been.

"If everything goes according to plan, we'll be able to eliminate the goblin threat for generations to come."

What followed was hours of thorough and meticulous details, many

of which did not concern Valon, and some of which he did not understand. When it was all over, he sought out the King.

"You're going to send me to kill Matronexa," he asked.

The King smiled patiently. "I thought it was the least I could do."

Despite having all day to sort them out, Valon's thoughts were still in turmoil. "Thank you," he said.

"You're not having second doubts," asked the King.

"No," said Valon, too quickly. "This is what I've always wanted. I just- How do you know that she'll walk into your trap?"

"I've foreseen it," said the King.

"Yes," said Valon. "But what exactly did you see? How will I know if I'm doing the right thing?"

Heural the Farsighted answered his son-in-law as compassionately as he could, "If I tell you too much, it risks changing the future. You'll just have to trust me. Please, go say goodbye to my daughter. Tonight may be the last time you see her."

Sadly, Valon nodded.

On that, the last night before departing for war, Valon went home to make passionate love to his wife. They wound up having mediocre sex.

Valon could tell she was only doing it as a favor to him, and he didn't want her last memory of him to be the frenetic and ungentle beast he became when he was truly aroused, so the whole thing turned



out rote and mechanical.

They talked for hours afterwards, and that was nice. It was mostly ground they had covered a dozen times before, but it comforted Valon. It was like they were durably cementing their relationship.

Sharel seemed convinced that Valon was setting out on an errand of murder. She didn't understand, as Valon did, that the goblins were nothing more than monsters and animals, and that putting one down was no more murder than euthanizing a rabid dog.

But Valon let her lecture him, because this time, he was setting out to kill Matronexa. Though she was more a monster than any goblin, she was also human. Killing her *would* be murder. Justified murder.

When he left that morning, Sharel told him she loved him, but her voice was so filled with pity, he couldn't be sure if she really meant it.

Valon's unit garrisoned at the Anolosh Duchy of Balven. Steer country.

Balven castle was squat and sturdy, and completely indefensible. The designers did their best, but Balven Duchy was a continental low point, in more ways than one. From the parapets, it was flat as far as the eye could see.

All-in-all, it was a terrible place for an ambush, but an excellent place to call an advance. When they killed Matronexa, the goblins would feel confident in continuing without her.

They only had to wait. Matronexa knew where he was, the King had

made sure of it.

"The High King's son to valiantly defend the low-plains castle," said town criers throughout Anolosh and Morovia. Valon knew the old woman. Having her favorite chew toy described as the son of her hated enemy would drive her crazy.

So they waited. It was excruciating, hearing the refugees' accounts of the goblin advance, of the fire and plunder and hangings that tore a line across the continent, and knowing that their assignment was to do nothing. They comforted themselves with the knowledge that it was all for the greater good. The price paid today would help spare those yet unborn.

Weeks passed, and the goblins drew ever closer. Valon trained constantly, transforming his body and mind into an ideal killing machine. He scoured his memory for any advantage, and honed his tactics to deadly perfection.

Eventually, the day came when Arden called the attack. It was as the Warden described the series of running battles they would press against the goblin vanguard that Valon came to the chilling and stunningly obvious conclusion - theirs was a suicide mission.

After the briefing, the boy confronted his commander.

"I'm not sure I see the problem," Ardent said, with his typical even tone. "Matronexa will likely want you alive, and I cannot be permanently killed."

Valon was hysterical. "We're leading four thousand men into

certain death.”

“Death is less than certain,” said Ardent. “Those four thousand men are mostly light cavalry, and the terrain is favorable to a retreat. Goblins are poor riders. Many will escape.”

“But, but . . .” stuttered Valon. “There are twenty thousand goblins in this county alone. If the goblin commanders have even the slightest bit of sense, they'll surround and trap us.”

“My tactics will almost certainly prevent that. Besides, in the context of the larger strategy, it is a rational sacrifice. Our losses here may be more concentrated, but across all fronts, the total number will be reduced by a greater amount.”

“But those men out there don't stand a chance. They'll be slaughtered.”

Ardent didn't even pause. “My top priority is ending the goblin threat. The High King's plan is sound. We continue.”

As the four thousand horse and two magicians trotted out into the Balveni plains, and the time until they were irrevocably committed rapidly drained away, Valon descended into a panic.

There would be so much blood and fear and death, and it would be on his account. They were there because his connection to the Goblin Queen gave them an unlikely opportunity to decapitate the enemy command. Yet even if they succeeded, the goblins had too many feet on the ground. They would be overwhelmed.

They were all going to die, and it was his fault. He tried to

wrap his head around the idea. It was too big. Always, he had gone into battle with the vague hope that if he fought well, he would save the lives of his comrades. This time, the most he could expect was that their deaths would be meaningful.

He thought about somehow sacrificing himself. He could charge ahead of the unit, find Matronexa on his own, and take her out without the need for a battle.

But it was a stupid plan. In the best case scenario, Ardent would run him down and drag him back, making him look like a wretched coward. At worst, they'd continue without him and die more quickly after a less effectual attack.

What was likeliest of all was that he would escape, but fail in his mission. He was powerful, but his strength was not limitless. Without the aid of his soldiers, the sheer mass of goblin bodies would overcome him.

No, Valon would stay. Besides, it was already too late. They were upon the goblin forces.

The enemy had seen them coming, but it did them little good. Ardent's expertise was too great. He drew out their lines with harassment attacks, frustrated their archers by skirting the edge of their range, and confused their signals by rapidly changing his approach.

Altogether, it was battlefield poetry, and Valon felt honored to see it. At the end of the first day, they had taken few lives, but spilt much blood, and judging by the chorus of signal drums that

accompanied their retreat, the enemy command was getting the message.

That night, they lost five men to a goblin commando raid.

Ardent reassured the troops, "This was entirely expected. The single unit that found us is representative of the twenty that didn't. If they want to waste their best soldiers beating the bushes, I see no reason why we should discourage them."

They didn't even bother to move their camp. By the time the enemy got close enough to pose a threat, they would be ready to resume their attack.

This continued for several days. Ardent's unit came very close to throwing the goblin vanguard into complete disarray. Yet, after a week, the pursuit suddenly stopped. When the human cavalry met the enemy, they found them newly organized and uncharacteristically disciplined. Though he was not a great prophet, Valon felt an ominous premonition.

It would prove accurate. From that point on, their battles were brutally indecisive. The goblins' new formation was restrictive, and prevented them from doing more than piecemeal damage, but they could do it with minimal risk. Each attack now wore down Ardent's forces just a little, but without a compensating cost to the goblin horde. It was now a game of attrition, one which the humans did not have the numbers to win.

Luckily, Ardent identified the cause. One night, after a particularly bloody and fruitless day, he took Valon to the top of one of Balven's rare hills and pointed him at the goblin camp.

With his magician's sight, he saw her. She was dressed to kill. Her armor was far too thick for a woman her size, but she wore it like a second skin. At her side was a sword of enchanted black iron.

"Matriarch Addak Gauntlet Dendrak," said Ardent. "She is a powerful magician and a dangerous foe."

Valon could tell. She didn't have a bit of softness or hesitation in her. Her goblins obeyed her with a sort of automatic deference he had only seen with the High King, and her scarred face showed an analytic concentration he had come to associate with the Wardens.

"What does this mean," he asked.

Ardent went totally blank, lost in the strange un-presence of his kind. Valon had never seen him gone for so long. It scared him. Only after an excruciating absence, did the Warden return.

"We change our plan," he said.

The solution, when it finally came, was not elegant. One hundred men were chosen by lottery to ride to Balven castle and request reinforcements. The rest were to charge the goblins and punch through their lines at any cost. They would keep the avenue of retreat open while Valon and Ardent slipped through and assassinated Matriarch Addak. Then, any survivors would escape and meet up with the reinforcements to resume their original mission.

It would be costly, but it would probably succeed. Valon thought it was insane. So much blood for such a little thing, but the men

seemed to accept their fate. They were clearly, greatly afraid - to Valon's heightened senses, they reeked of it - but they were also determined. He admired them. When he fought, his worries were much more petty and personal. They had courage.

He supposed that was why so many had volunteered for Ardent's unit. The missions were dangerous, but they were planned by an ancient, inhuman genius. Any army could promise death on the battlefield. Only his could guarantee a man that his life would be traded away with maximally optimal efficiency.

## Chapter 24

Valon would remember the noise. The terror of the horses as they screamed on enemy spears. Men who fell butchered by many hands and small knives. The smell of earth and grass and blood. The long, gray clouds in the west.

The blood pounded in Valon's ears. He wanted to turn and help, to fall upon the goblins like a scouring rain, but Ardent pressed him forward. They had a mission.

The Matriarch's tent was rust red. Valon at first thought it was dyed with blood, but as he approached he saw that it was, indeed, rust. A small unit guarded it. For goblins, they fought well.

As the last of them twisted and gurgled inside its ceremonial armor, Matriarch Addak emerged, flanked by four reds.

She ran.

The reds were hard to put down. They fought even after they should have died. They were no threat, but they delayed the two magicians.

Ahead of them, still running, the Matriarch blew into a small brass trumpet. In the distance, a great horn answered. The goblin camp fell still.

Ardent could not be distracted from his pursuit, but Valon was perturbed. The goblins began retreating en masse, to no apparent purpose.

Confident that Ardent could handle the Matriarch alone, Valon stopped and listened.



The noise of the goblin retreat masked it at first, but Valon was powerful. Against the controlled chaos, there was a much softer counterpoint, apparent only in the interference it caused. It came from three directions. It was spreading to the fourth.

"Ardent," shouted Valon.

Surprisingly, the Warden recognized his urgency. He stopped.

"I think we may have a problem," the boy said. He was right, but he was also too late.

The things were hideous. They were goblins, but their human origins were only faintly recognizable. Smaller even than ratbodies, it seemed like all their normal growth had been diverted to their monstrously swollen neck and jaws. When they ran, they almost stumbled forward, but they were deceptively fast, as if they had somehow found a way to translate the force of gravity into forward momentum.

Valon looked to the Warden and despaired. The man's face was unrecognizable. Gone was the affectless mask he had come to warily trust. In its place was a look of naked hatred. He suddenly remembered that the Wardens could *sometimes* feel emotion.

The creatures attacked. To Valon's shameful relief, they ignored him and went straight for the Warden.

They carried no weapons, and were not strong. Individually, they were no match even for a normal human. Ardent easily slew a dozen, and Valon intercepted a second dozen. The third dozen got through.

Too big mouths on too small heads bit into the Warden. As a

spirit in human form, his resistance was strong, but the creatures' entire form was bent to this one task, the whole of their life force was devoted to this once purpose. They could barely overcome the Warden's power, yet barely was enough.

Killing them didn't help. Death triggered their bite reflex, and their dying convulsions bore a hysterical strength. Valon quickly lost his sword to an errant snap of the jaws.

He tried pulling the creatures with his bare hands, but it was too dangerous. He was forced to back away.

Through hundreds of bites, each one a nuisance, the Warden had lost most of his corporeal form. The strange, blasphemous goblins got both of his legs and his dominant arm. Half of his neck was missing and Valon could see patches of bare skull.

What remained sagged uselessly in the dust of the goblin camp, but it was not dead. Celestial radiance spilled from the wounds, gathering together the materials necessary to reconstruct the body. The Warden's eyes were clear and focused.

Valon could not look at him. He wasn't sure whether the sight inspired pity or terror, but either way, it was horrible. To spare himself, he concentrated instead on the hopelessness of their immediate situation.

Strolling confidently through the wreckage of her former headquarters, Matriarch Addak returned. Alone. Valon flexed his fist and prepared to attack.

The goblin was calm. "Matronexa designed them to seek out the

Wardens, but I'm sure they can be ordered to attack other targets."

Valon backed down.

"What do you want," he asked helplessly.

The Matriarch appeared to consider the question carefully. "What I want is both of you dead, but that would be impossible in the one case, and impolitic in the other."

Valon sought desperately for some way out of this situation. "So you work for Matronexa," he ventured.

Addak was visibly unimpressed. "It would be more accurate to say that we work together, and please, show me the minimal respect of sparing me your magician's head-games."

Strangely, Valon could respect that. "I'm just trying to survive," he confessed.

The Matriarch laughed.

Offended, Valon said, "Fine, I was just trying to be honest."

"I know," said the goblin. "It's just strange hearing those words come from an assassin."

"I'm a soldier-" Valon started, but he was interrupted by a voice behind him. It was the Warden, but his words had a strange, bell-like quality. Whatever they resonated off of, it wasn't his face.

"Valon," he said. "*You have to fly away. We can finish the mission when I reform.*"

Flying was an advanced concentration, and one of the few things human magicians could do that Wardens couldn't. Most could never

master it. Valon thought it was worth a try.

The Matriarch drew her sword. "If you try it," she said. "I swear I'll kill you and tell Matronexa it was a mistake.

Valon weighed his options. The threat was credible, but she surely wasn't keeping him alive for anything good. He decided to take his chances.

To fly, he had to scorn gravity, to hold it in such deep and utter contempt that his body rejected its hold. That's why the Wardens of Nature couldn't do it. They loved and respected gravity too much; they could never defy it.

Valon had no such problem. He thought about all the times he had fallen down, of all the high-up objects, just out of reach. He thought about the birds, and tried to cultivate for them an intense and insane jealousy. Then, he leapt.

At first, it worked. It was no mere jump. Freed from the constraints of gravity, the momentum of his initial start carried him high into the air.

But it didn't last. Magic can only endure when it takes hold of a deep part of the magician's soul, and at his heart, Valon was a law-abiding boy. He plummeted back to earth.

Addak was furious. She advanced on him with her deadly black iron sword. Valon tried to think a worthy last thought.

Then he was saved. A voice, carried by the wind, swirled around him. "Hold him there. I'll be with you shortly," it said.

It was Matronexa.

She was little changed, still vital and gaunt, with a hint of faded regal beauty. Valon had hoped that exile would humble her, but he now realized she was exactly where she wanted to be.

He cruel, blue eyes wandered over him, sizing him up like a piece of livestock. Her conclusion seemed to be favorable. The thought disgusted him.

"Valon," she said soothingly, her words positively dripping with the power of the Voice. "How good it is to see you safe and healthy."

Everything Valon felt for her was suddenly coming to the surface, but that was memory, nor magic. "That trick doesn't work on me anymore," he said.

The old magician smiled lustily. "It barely worked on you then," she said. Valon really didn't like her tone.

Even Addak appeared uncomfortable. "You promised me some greater purpose to this family reunion, Matronexa."

And just like that, the Mistress Valon knew was back in all her nastiness. "I know what I promised, *goblin*, and I know what I want. Don't make me choose between the two."

Addak flinched, as if struck. Matronexa's Voice was strong, but it shouldn't have been strong enough to hurt a Matriarch. For some reason, Valon was disturbed to see his enemy so affected.

"This is between you and me, Matronexa."

The magician did not seem angry at his defiance. Instead, she oozed towards him, beaming. "You have no idea how much I've longed to

hear those lips say my name."

Valon was nonplussed. He loathed the old woman, but some part of him knew exactly what she meant. Realizing he was rapidly losing control of the situation, he clung to the only thing he knew with certainty.

"I'm here to kill you," he shouted.

Even that didn't bother her. She smiled. "Of course you are, dear boy. I'd be gravely disappointed in you if you weren't.

"Unfortunately, I have an army of chompers and thousands of goblins and your Warden is helpless and I'm still stronger than you."

*Damn it*, thought Valon, the old bitch was right. All he could do was stall and hope that something came up.

"What do you want from me," he asked, hoping it would work better on her than it did on Addak.

It did. The magician slithered up to him. "The only thing I want from you is your body."

"What," shrieked Valon. "Is that what this has all been about? Sex?"

The magician laughed and laughed. "Of course not. Don't be ridiculous. The sex comes later. But first I need to slide a little something into your heart."

An intense feeling of dread overcame Valon. Knowing the answer could only be horrible, he asked the obvious question. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm surprised you haven't figured it out already," the magician

answered. "I'm talking about the reason I wasted 15 years of my life caring for a squalling brat, the reason you were born at all. I'm talking about restoring your true soul, the one that belonged to the original owner of that body of yours."

Valon sank into horror. A hundred little niggling questions and unsolved mysteries quickly resolved into one inescapable truth. He had been so blind to miss something so obvious. He cursed that stupid, scared, self-absorbed little child for letting him come here so unprepared.

"No," he said. "I'll resist. You can't touch my soul. You can't magic me against my will."

"Oh, but I can," she said. "I'll admit, it'll be a little more difficult than I originally planned, but a little superficial self-confidence can't undo the years I spent grooming you into the perfect vessel."

Suddenly, Valon understood everything. You couldn't magic a soul, but you could cultivate one. If you could control the environment, and you had the patience, you could grow it like a topiary garden. And when the time was right, when the shape was perfect, the magic would slip right in.

He was in serious trouble.

Grasping at whatever slim hope he could find, he tried another tack. "I've diverged. I was right five years ago, but I've changed. It won't work."

Matronexa laughed. "I was worried about that, but nothing you've

done has altered the major parameters. You're still sensitive, shy, and a remorseless murderer."

"But I never murdered anyone," protested Valon.

The magician's laughter redoubled. "Okay, Queenslayer. That trail of bodies behind you must be someone else's doing."

"But those weren't *people*," said Valon. "They were goblins."

Matronexa's smirk was truly triumphant. "You utter fool. They're as human as you are. You're a perfect copy of Senestrion. That sort of thing doesn't happen by chance.

"All it took was a vial of my dead lover's blood and a freshly knocked-up farm hag. Once I had the proper templates, it was the easiest thing in the world to swap one thing for another."

Valon gaped. He looked at the dead chompers at his feet, at the once-proud Addak standing submissively behind the magician, at the army of ratbodies in the distance.

For the first time, he didn't see monsters. For the first time, he saw their deformities as the affliction they were. For the first time, he saw fellow victims, as twisted by black magic on the outside as he was on the inside.

He fell to his knees and cried.

The magician placed a hand on his shoulder. "There's no need for histrionics," she said. "You don't have to pretend to me that those deaths meant anything to you."

She was right, of course. He didn't even know their names . . .

Suddenly, a flash of inspiration struck him. He knew what to



do.

"Zola. Dagger. Raktall," he said, standing up.

The magician was bemused. "What's that," she asked.

Valon knew that for what he had planned, the margin of error was extremely slim. He dredged up the darkest depths of his Sorcerous Voice. When he spoke, it was with unfathomable sleaze. He was arrogant, remorseless, and deranged.

"It was the name of a goblin I killed. Her death meant a lot to me. I jerked off on her corpse."

He looked into Matriarch Addak's eyes as he said it. The very instant her normally composed and collected features blossomed into shock and outrage, he charged.

He seized the brief opportunity to grab her black iron sword. Then he tried, once more, to fly.

It was easier this time. The ground was death. Gravity wanted to pull him to the ground, to death. Gravity wanted to kill him. Gravity could go fuck itself!

As he soared through the air, the goblin army mobilized beneath him. The ratbodies surged against the remnants of the human cavalry, and the chompers swarmed the ruins of the camp. In their ravenous hunger, they devoured most anything they touched, starting with the remains of the Warden, and then moving on to any organic matter he might have used to rebuild himself.

## Chapter 25

Valon tumbled roughly to the earth. He'd flown far, beyond even the sight of the battle, but he was young, and couldn't long maintain the concentration necessary to despise an abstract concept.

Much as he predicted, the magician was not far behind. He spun and leveled his blade.

"That was clever," she said.

Valon was strangely calm. "I figured a black magician wouldn't want them to be able to resist the Voice," he explained.

She nodded in approval. "Is it true what you said," the magician asked.

"I'm not proud," he said.

Matronexa cackled. "I knew I did a good job on you."

Valon sighed. "You won't be able to capture me alive."

Matronexa shrugged. "I can always disarm you and beat you into insensibility."

The boy stared. Of all the complex feelings warring inside him, he never expected that the dominant one would be contempt. He remembered her as a vicious beast, an apex predator, majestic and distant and cruel, but not that he saw her with adult eyes, with the same eyes that had witnessed real horror and genuine beauty, all he could think was how small she seemed. She was a horror, but an unambitious one, petty and stupid and mean.

"You need to die, old woman."

"That's quite an understatement," she agreed, "but it's not

going to happen. I'm going to take you, and then Senestrion and I are going to rule this world."

Valon lashed out with his sword. Matronexa dodged by the thinnest of margins before drawing a blade of her own.

The two exchanged blows of bone-shattering force. The sound of their battle rang far across the open Balveni plains.

Despite the old woman's boasting, they were evenly matched. Years of near-constant fighting had honed the boy's edge, and Matronexa was long out of practice. The fight would be decided by the first mistake.

"I swear I will end your evil," said Valon, pressing the attack.

"Or die trying," replied the magician. "That's admirable. With my evil gone, the Council will have to work twice as hard to pick up the slack."

Valon grunted derisively. "Are you genuinely that cynical, or do you just enjoy being a bitch?"

Matronexa answered with a wide sweep of her sword. He scrambled backwards to safety.

"You don't know what you're talking about," she said. "I wasted years of my life on that Council. They are a nest of rats."

So it was probably true what Ordin said about Matronexa's obsession. Relieved to know his enemy was human, he insolently asked, "How many men did you kill, Belari?"

The question seemed to annoy her. "Enough," she answered.

"Why," asked Valon, feinting towards the magician's flank.

"They didn't know their place," she said, "and I can't stand a man who won't do what he's told."

Valon shuddered. That was his life in a nutshell. The split second distraction nearly killed him. He only barely parried the magician's attack.

"Did Senestrion do what he was told," he asked, trying to regain control.

"He was different," she said. "He saw my strength. He understood it and loved it. Showed me how to turn it against the world."

She practically glowed when she said it. Despite himself, Valon wondered what the man was like. He had a dark suspicion that they had a lot in common.

"So you loved him because he let you have all the power?"

The magician chuckled. "You have a lot to learn, boy. You either have power or you don't. Nobody lets you have it."

It was a filthy, poisonous lie, and Valon knew it. For years, he let her have power over him. But not anymore.

"They can fight you," he said, deadly cold. "They may not be strong, but there's more than one kind of power. If they have right on their side . . ."

Matronexa sneered. "That's what those men thought. They insisted on denying me what was mine. Then they died.

"There's only one power worth having, Valon, and that's the power to hurt, to kill, to destroy. Those that have it can do what they want. Those that don't are victims."

"What a horrible wicked woman you are," said Valon. "People aren't like that. They don't want to hurt anyone. They just want to live their lives in peace."

The witch was unconvinced. "And how exactly are they going to do that? When someone like me comes along to cast down their works, take the best part of their land, and have her way with their families, how will they stop her? Rely on her kindness and love of justice?"

"There's only one way to make people do what you want. Even if you just want them to leave you alone, you have to be able to hurt them, and you have to let them know you can do it."

Valon couldn't fault her logic. He wanted to, because coming from her, the idea sounded obscene, but he had often thought as much himself.

Nonetheless, he couldn't let her win. "You're an ugly woman, and the only thing you see in the world is a mirror of yourself." Even as he said it, he was filled with self-loathing. He'd often looked into that very same mirror.

Matronexa quickly called his bluff. "What else is there," she asked contemptuously.

"There's love," he said, clearly desperate.

The magician, as always, couldn't resist torturing him. "If only I'd let you live a little longer, you'd know exactly how stupid that is."

Valon didn't think about what he said next. The fight demanded most of his focus, and he was starting to find the conversation

draining. "Sharel and I manage fine," he said.

"Really," said the magician. Something about her tone, and the unusual weakness of the accompanying sword blow triggered an idea in Valon. He now saw his path to victory.

"She's the love of my life," he said, dodging Matronexa's hasty riposte. His theory was confirmed.

Earlier that day, he learned he was goblin, but he wasn't an ordinary goblin. He was a copy of a man. Matronexa's man. A part of her couldn't help but see his words as coming out of Senestrion's mouth.

"She's very beautiful," he said rapturously, drawing out the magician's anger. Her attack was fierce, but her form was sloppy.

"She's the High King's daughter," he continued, knowing it would drive her crazy. Then, to twist the knife, he added, "In many ways, they're a lot alike."

It worked. The old woman's face betrayed a growing rage. He went on, "When he gave us permission, we fucked like animals."

The openings in her defense had almost widened enough to allow him a telling blow. He had to go just a little farther.

"I felt things with her I never imagined when I was with you." It was misleading and manipulative, but he said it with devastating honesty.

Matronexa screamed. Valon ran her through.

"Oh," she said. "I'm such an idiot."

The Goblin Queen fell to her knees. She was not dead, but she

was defeated. To a normal person, the wound would have been fatal, but she was a magician, too old and mean and powerful to die.

Valon had her at his mercy. He raised his sword to finish her once and for all. She stared at him defiantly.

He couldn't do it. For the first time in his life, he had the Mistress completely in his power, and she was unafraid. She filled his life with pain and fear and despair unto death, and she was unafraid. He could do *anything* to her, and *nothing* would be unjust. And she dared to be unafraid.

With his free hand, he struck her, hard. She choked and spit out a mouthful of blood. Through red-stained lips, she smiled. Valon hit her again.

"What's the matter, Valon? Are you not satisfied with my death? Do you need to rough me up first?"

Valon didn't know. He was angry, and more he looked at her, the angrier he got. It angered him that she might escape peacefully into death. He wanted her to feel what he felt, to suffer, to fear, to die bereft of hope.

"I want you to be sorry," he said.

"So you're going to torture me until I apologize," she said approvingly. "Very well, I'm sorry my working required you to go through what you went through."

Valon punched her low on the jaw. She grunted as her neck twisted painfully. "What kind of apology was that," he demanded.

"I don't have to excuse myself to you," she said. "I did what I

did. It was nothing personal."

"Nothing personal," he repeated incredulously. "Nothing personal? That was my entire life. Everything I have and everything I've done is tainted, possibly ruined, thanks to your pathetic little scheme, and it's nothing personal?" He was in tears when he said it.

Matronexa panted with the effort of staying upright. Her life was slowly draining away, and she had nothing to lose. She could afford to be honest.

"Take it or leave it," she said, "but it wasn't easy for me."

The magician's excuses enraged Valon. "I **don't. Fucking. Believe. You,**" he said, punctuating his words with heavy blows.

Her pride unbroken, Matronexa continued. "My love was dead. I did what I had to do."

Valon didn't want to hear it. He savaged the helpless old woman with his magically-strengthened fists. He didn't notice when she fell. He couldn't see through the tears.

Feebly, but without apology, Matronexa went on, "You looked so much like him. When I was hurting you, it was like I was hurting him. It killed me."

Valon screamed incoherently, trying to drown her out. Unfortunately, his hearing was too good.

"It killed me, but I knew I had to do it." Valon stopped her with extreme violence. No thought was spared for pity as he silenced the old viper's lies. When he regained his senses, his fists were bloody, and Matronexa was barely recognizable.



But mere pain could not deter her. "Recreating his childhood was the only way I could get him back," she said. "I knew our love could conquer death itself."

Valon was defeated. As he looked down at the quivering lump of meat that was once his mortal enemy, he saw that she was still smiling. At that moment, he knew that he would never get her to understand. She would never admit her excuses didn't matter.

Maybe, after some extended brutality, he might get her to say that she was a mad, depraved old woman, so steeped in atrocity that she was scarcely human, but he could never convince her it was true. She would never see herself as he saw her.

He picked up his sword from where it had fallen and slit her throat. Some time later, she died.

Watching Matronexa flop and flail as the life drained out of her, he wondered if she was right about him, if he was really a cold-blooded killer. He thought taking his first human life would feel different, but she was almost like all the others.

Then he remembered. She was *exactly* like all the others.

At that moment, he dropped his sword and resolved to walk away from battle forever.

## Chapter 26

Valon walked unsteadily back to Balven castle. He eyed the ominously layering black storm clouds in the west and wished for a cleansing rain, one that would anoint his new life and wash the blood from his past.

None came. It remained murky and overcast. Despondent, he continued his journey. After a few steps, he stopped. He remembered he was a magician.

The first few drops felt startlingly cold, but the chill was a welcome relief from the storm-charged summer air. He trudged through the rapidly growing mud and the biting grass, happy that this, at least, was going his way.

When he finally got to the castle, he slept for three days.

The sheets were of the finest imported cotton, and they wrapped warmly around Valon's naked body. He'd purposely slipped himself into a coma so he wouldn't have to think about what he'd done, but the spell was wearing off. He was well-rested, and could no longer force himself to sleep.

Matronexa was dead. He felt . . . He felt . . . a lot. He wasn't happy, but he could not convince himself that his was the noble sadness that accompanied the tragic necessity of violence. The bitch deserved to die.

But a lot of people deserved a lot of things, and his own grim satisfaction worried him. He never regretted a kill before, and

Matronexa was no different, but now, after learning what he'd learned, his lack of regret unexpectedly felt like a vice.

Goblins never- *His fellow* goblins never hesitated to kill an enemy. It was bred deep into their bones. Was he similarly depraved?

He was glad Matronexa was dead. He missed hating her. He was glad Matronexa was dead.

That was another goblin trait. Hate came easily to them. It was becoming harder and harder for him to deny the truth. He was a goblin.

Would it really matter? He was human enough to fool the White Council and the Wardens. Whatever Matronexa did to his original self was subtle. Maybe it wouldn't count.

Valon hated Matronexa. He imagined his original self, the undreaming half-formed baby inside some random farmer's stomach. Who would that Valon have become? He probably would have been pretty ordinary. Married a girl like Prudella. Became a farmer just like his father. Been killed by a goblin he wasn't strong enough to defeat.

Valon hated Matronexa, but he couldn't begrudge her his life. He didn't want to be that other Valon. That dumb, fucking hick would have been obliviously happy right up to the point where his pathetic life was snuffed out as unceremoniously as it begun.

Valon (that is the real, true Valon) was more fortunate. Despite the pain and sadness and fear, he had attained something infinitely valuable. He had the strength and the will to change himself. He would not follow the path of Senestrion.

Valon got out of bed and stretched his arms out wide. From now on, he would practice only the whitest of white magic. No more would his powers be used to harm others. He would become a paragon of gentle wisdom, who might, someday, heal the rift between goblin and man. He was really hungry.

Lieutenant General Werev Vorel stood behind a large, map-strewn table in Balven castle's main hall. Since the obliteration of Ardent's unit at the Battle of Balven Plains, he had assumed command of the entire forward army. Valon saluted him.

"Sir, I have a report," said the magician.

General Vorel acknowledged the salute. He did not look happy.

"Matronexa is dead," said Valon. "I killed her about twenty miles north of here. Unless it's been eaten by coyotes, the corpse should still be there.

"General Ardent was defeated. I had to flee from overwhelming enemy force. I don't know how the rest of the unit fared."

"They were wiped out," said the general.

Valon winced. "Ardent was afraid that might happen. I- I should tell you his death- His disincorporation was not anticipated. There's a new breed of goblins. They appear to be designed to take out the Wardens."

Valon then proceeded to tell the general everything he knew about the chompers, and about the gruesome circumstances of Ardent's demise. When he finished, the general looked visibly shaken.

"Thank you for that report, magician," said the general.

"Think nothing of it, sir," said Valon. "I do have one more matter to discuss. I would wait until Ardent reincorporated, but I'm afraid it's urgent."

"Proceed," said the general.

"I'm resigning my commission. I know it's an inconvenience, but I have personal reasons for wanting to quit."

"I'm sorry, magician, but I can't allow that. We're in the middle of a war, and your skills are too valuable."

General Vorel looked determined, but Valon could see right through to the trembling man beneath. He hated to do it, but if he was ever going to live a life free from war, he would have to get out of the army. "I'm telling you as a courtesy, sir. You don't really have the power to stop me."

The general ground his teeth. "The High King will hear of this desertion," he said.

"I know," said Valon. "I plan on telling him."

The walk from Balven Castle to Heuralesta was long. He could have run the distance in about a week, but he was in no hurry. He needed time to think.

He owed Sharel an apology. She was right about everything. War had poisoned him, and he didn't even know it. He had killed hundreds of goblins. He enjoyed it, but then he found out that their black blood flowed in his veins.

Except the blood was red. It had always been red.

She would gloat, but he didn't mind. He would be humbled, but their love would be stronger for it. No one hated war more than Sharel. She would help him adjust. Together, they would find something he could do that would aid humanity while harming no one.

Valon camped under the stars near the Anolosh city of Sere. As he settled into sleep, he heard the sounds of violence drift across the plains. A man and a woman were fighting. He wondered why they couldn't be as enlightened as he now was.

At one point, he came within ten miles of Castle Votev, the birthplace of Senestrion. He considered visiting, but he wasn't ready. That wicked old man's life was not Valon's. He was sure that he would one day have explore the details of the black magician's past, if only to understand what Matronexa did to him, but for now, he was afraid. He didn't want to know how close she came to success.

He ran from that place, as fast as he could. It shaved a week off the length of his journey.

It was an entire month before he finally arrived in Heuralesta. The peace of the city still bothered him, but now he felt like he was the one out of touch with reality. These people may have been sheltered, but the shelter allowed them to thrive. They were living how humans were supposed to live, free from the cancer of war. They

may have been weak and foolish, but they were more human than he would ever be. He envied them.

In time, maybe, he would come to be one of these people. If he worked hard, if he learned self-control, he would lose his inclination towards violence. He would settle down, raise his family, and become a respected member of the community.

He couldn't wait to tell Sharel.

## Chapter 27

As he walked through the halls of the palace, Valon saw the scowls of its inhabitants. Ordinarily, he avoided eavesdropping on others' thoughts, but the general theme was so consistent and widespread, he couldn't help but notice it.

They thought he was a deserter and a coward.

Inwardly, Valon laughed. Maybe they were right, but the world was full of cowards. What would another matter?

Besides, he had done his time. The call came, and he answered. He fought and won, and when they wanted to send him a second time, he went again.

What did they want from him? They had no idea what he suffered, or the price he paid to keep them safe. If that wasn't enough for them, well they could take up the sword and fight for themselves.

He was a man of peace now.

Valon was pensive. He was getting ever closer to the quarters he shared with the princess, and he wasn't sure what he was going to say. It sounded good in theory. He'd confess his desire to leave military life behind him, and confide in her his newfound respect for all life. Yet any particular set of words he tried sounded stupid.

*Honey, I'm a goblin*, he thought. It had the advantage of being concise. Maybe if he opened with it, her confusion would buy him the time to think of something more dignified.

But it was not to be. Before could find her, his superhuman



senses picked up something . . . strange.

He concentrated and extended his awareness as far as it could go. When he finally understood what he was hearing, his jaw dropped.

"Oh," said Sharel. "Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!"

He'd never heard her like that before, but he knew exactly what she was doing. For far too long, he stood there, listening. While he waited, his anger grew and grew. When he burst in, he was a fury.

The Voice flowed out of him, strong and clear and unstoppable. "**Get off my WIFE,**" he growled. It was a good first line, but she was on top.

Nonetheless, the Apprentice Ardoc scrambled frantically back into the wall, spilling Sharel onto the bed. When she righted herself, she covered her nakedness.

Ardoc cowered in the corner, his handsome features crumpled with fear. When Valon addressed him, his Voice was venom and fire. "*Who do you think you are,*" he seethed. "**Did you think you could steal a magician's wife? Did you think you could survive such an insult?**"

The man was now openly weeping and covering his ears. His eyes were wide, like he'd seen the very face of death.

"*You will not talk to him like that,*" said Sharel, her Voice proud and just. Valon turned to look at her, and the naked apprentice bolted for the palace halls.

"*I just wanted to know who to thank for keeping my wife's pussy well-stretched while I was away defending the kingdom,*" he said acidly.

"You *won't* talk to me like that either," said Sharel.

Valon tried to muster his discipline, but the hurt was too great and too fresh. Coherent words would not come. He charged forward and punched the wall an inch from Sharel's head. Cracks appeared in the stone.

"*Nor will you threaten me, Queenslayer.*" She was not quite powerful enough to conceal her terror.

That's probably what stopped him. He could sense her fear, and he knew that he was the cause. He hadn't changed at all.

"Why," he asked. He was calm, but his anger was unabated.

Sharel relaxed and stepped under his arm. As she picked up her clothes, she said, "That's kind of a broad question, Valon. I suppose the easiest answer is that you were gone and I was lonely.

"I doubt it will help, but I never wanted you to find out."

She was right. It didn't help.

"You're my wife," he said darkly.

"Yes," she agreed, patting her gently-swelling stomach. "And I've done my duty to you. I've given you a child and I kept my affair discreet. That's more than I ever got from you."

Valon was dumbfounded that she could dare to play the victim. "I never cheated on you," he said.

"No, you didn't, but the one thing I asked of you, the one promise you made to me, you broke as soon as it became even slightly difficult."

She was bitter, but Valon had bitterness to spare. "I didn't

have a choice," he said. "If I didn't agree to your father's terms, he would have given you to someone else."

"So," said Sharel.

"So, I love you," he desperately answered.

Sharel sighed. "We've known each other for a long time, Valon. In that time, I suppose I've come to love you as a friend, but I never felt that way about you."

"Then why did you marry me," Valon cried.

"I didn't have a *choice*," she said.

Valon knew instantly that she spoke with the authority of absolute truth. He frantically looked around the room, searching for some way he could avoid acknowledging it. He saw the splintering stone in front of him. He saw the books spilled from their shelves by the shock of his violence. He saw the door behind him, half-torn from its hinges. He realized exactly how close he had come to hurting his beloved Sharel.

He was a monster.

He fled the room.

On his way out, Valon ran into the palace guard. They were obviously terrified.

"I'm going," he said.

To his lasting shame, they looked around him, to confirm that no one had died. Sharel waved them aside.

Then, he left.

He didn't really have anywhere to go. He'd matriculated directly from apprenticeship into the army, and then was quickly married. He had no place to call his own.

Eventually, he found himself on Ordin's doorstep. As they sat down in the magician's study, the worry on the old man's face was immediately apparent.

"What have you heard," asked Valon.

Ordin looked shamefully at the ground. "I think the better question would be 'what do you know,'" he said.

Valon stared levelly at him.

The old man continued, "When you disappeared, I sent a wind to check up on you. It told me you had the look of a man who wanted to be alone. That can only mean she told you."

"Told me what," said Valon carefully.

Ordin would not be baited. "You know what," he said.

Valon was intensely peeved. "Apparently so do you."

"The High King recognized you," Ordin explained.

"Of course he did," said Valon. "How long has the Council known?"

"That's confidential," the magician answered.

Valon didn't bother to conceal his anger. "You knew this about me and didn't say anything. You owe me."

Ordin shifted uncomfortably. "Okay," he said. "We've known since the day you first came her."

Valon stared, stunned.

"Why didn't you tell me," he asked.

"The issues at work were very complex," said Ordin. "We decided it was best if nobody knew."

"You had no right to keep this from me," said Valon.

Ordin's soft, pink face was twisted with conflict. "You don't fully appreciate the difficulty of our position," he said. "You were technically a goblin, but you passed for human so well, even the Wardens could not detect Matronexa's tampering. It wasn't clear how we should treat you.

"We eventually came to the conclusion that you were fully human, just a different human than you might otherwise have been, but it was a narrow thing. Not everyone on the Council agreed.

"At the time, your supporters felt you would be better off not knowing. Not only would you be spared great emotional turmoil, but your enemies would be deprived of at least one reason to go after you.

"You see, it was argued that if you knew your origins, you'd be less loyal to the Human Protectorate. I thought it was nonsense, but some found it persuasive.

"In the end, we decided not to take any chances. As far as the Council was concerned, you were fully human, and there was nothing to be gained from talk that suggested otherwise."

"I see," said Valon. "You thought you were protecting me."

Ordin nodded. "Your situation was very precarious. We didn't

want to make it worse."

"So, it didn't occur to you that I might find out in the worst possible way," Valon said bitterly.

"I wasn't happy about it, Valon."

"Well, that makes it all better then."

"I'm sorry," said Ordin. "I was wrong and I was weak to go along with it. I hope you can forgive me."

Valon so very rarely received a sincere apology. He was moved.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "I'm just upset. I'll be all right."

"You are a generous soul," Ordin replied, on the verge of tears. "I wish I'd done better by you."

The older magician took a moment to compose himself before continuing, "At least we can be thankful that Ardent was disincorporated."

Valon felt a sudden chill. "Why's that," he asked.

Ordin didn't notice his apprentice's sudden change in posture. "Well, if he knew about you, he'd almost certainly try and kill you."

"But the Council would protect me," Valon said.

Ordin suddenly looked concerned. "There's not much the Council can do, Valon. We don't have authority over the Wardens. But why would you need the Council's protection anyway?"

"Ardent wasn't fully disincorporated until after I escaped. He knows what Matronexa told me."

"Oh," said Ordin.

A moment later, he added, "You are in serious danger."

Valon refused to believe it. "You're overreacting," he said. "We've worked together for years. He knows that I've always been loyal to humanity."

"He doesn't care about humanity," said Ordin. "He only cares about the Wardens' mandate, and if he knows what Matronexa said, then you just became part of that mandate."

"That doesn't make any sense," said Valon. "The High King knew who I was, and assigned me to him anyway. If there was any danger, he'd have foreseen it."

"Yes, he would have," said Ordin.

Realization dawned on Valon.

"No," he said. "The King's my friend. He let me marry his daughter. Why would he be so nice to me if he was planning to set me up?"

"I don't know," said Ordin. "But he is not what he appears to be. His ambitions extend farther than you or I could imagine."

Valon remembered the day of his matriculation. "You tried to warn me," he said.

"No," said Ordin. "I don't deserve any credit for what I said to you. I was trying to have it both ways. To salve my conscience while keeping my oaths. I let you walk into a trap and convinced myself you could handle it."

"I can handle it," said Valon.

"I don't see how," said Ordin. "In a couple of weeks, Ardent

will have reformed, and when he does, he'll come and kill you."

A long moment passed as Valon considered his options. He had a foreboding sense that his life, as he knew it, was over.

"I'll run," he said eventually.

Valon's life was depressingly easy to pack away. He had no real possessions to speak of, and half of his friends were present when he made the decision to flee. All he had to do was speak with Sharel.

He found her in their quarters. She was still mad.

"I'm not ready to see you yet," she said as he entered the room.

"It doesn't matter," he said.

"I'm not sorry I did it," she said.

"I'm not here to talk about that," said Valon.

Sharel turned to face him. She had been crying.

"Why not," she asked.

Valon was struck by her beauty, and by the realization of all that he'd lost, and all that he stood to lose.

"I'm leaving," he said.

"Because of what happened," she asked.

"It certainly didn't help," Valon said. "But no, I have other reasons." He then sat on their bed and explained his situation. He liked to think that he didn't make it sound too piteous.

Sharel was shaken, but not surprised.

"You have to flee," she said.



"I know," said Valon. "I was hoping you might come with me."

"Valon, I can't."

Valon stared at her. This time, he was piteous.

"You know I can't," Sharel said. "I'd have to give up everything - my family, my future. I . . . I just can't."

"I don't want to leave you," said Valon, "and I was kind of hoping to see our child."

"I'd forgotten about the baby," said Sharel. "If I come with you, your child will be a fugitive."

"We can make it work," said Valon.

Outwardly, Sharel was stoic and cool, but Valon could see the shape of her thoughts. They struggled and squirmed. She was trying to come to a decision.

"I don't want to go with you," she said.

Valon was hurt. She wouldn't have been so blunt unless she really meant it. It was worse than losing her. He understood, at last, that he never really had her.

"I never meant to impose myself on you," said Valon.

Sharel said nothing. Valon rushed to fill the silence.

"I was just doing what I thought people did," he said.

"I know," said Sharel.

Valon could no longer hold back his tears. "I don't want you to hate me," he cried.

Sharel's reserve suddenly broke, and she joined him in tears. "I don't hate you," she wept. "I just made a mistake. I thought it would

work out. You were getting exactly what you wanted, and I was getting the best I could realistically hope for. I didn't think anyone would get hurt."

Valon had so far lived a life without control. Wherever the current swept, he was carried along. He'd assumed Sharel was different, that she did not have to deal with the unaccountable, terrorizing forces that plagued him. He now knew that for her, he was one of them.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Don't apologize to me, Valon. You were always honest about what you wanted, and I could have stopped you if I wanted to. I should be the one apologizing."

"I thought you weren't sorry," Valon said.

"About that," said Sharel. "It felt good to be doing something for myself, like I was finally living as Sharel, and not as someone else's tool or toy."

It was a lame excuse, but Valon knew exactly how she felt. He could not yet forgive her, but at that moment, he knew that he would.

"But I didn't think about how it would hurt you," she continued, "and that makes me ashamed. I should've talked to you. We could've had some sort of arrangement. You didn't have to have the experience of finding me with another man."

"I'd have never agreed to an arrangement," said Valon.

Sharel smiled. "Thank you," she said.

He rose and kissed her. It was not chaste, but neither was it a

kiss between two lovers. It was exactly what they needed.

They would not see each other again.

## Chapter 28

Valon rested his back against the trunk of a tree and allowed himself to slide down to the earth. He'd made it to Dark Hanveria, the most isolated place in the human lands.

The forest was wet and cold. The tall evergreens cast deep shadows, and the moss that clung to them made them appear gnarled and wise. It was spooky.

And it was home.

It had been a hard month. No one was looking for Valon when he left, but he knew it was only a matter of time. So he stayed away from the roads, changed direction often, and ran - fast. He was fairly sure he'd evaded pursuit.

Now he had to figure out what do with himself.

Valon was not a carpenter. On three consecutive nights, his shelter collapsed on him. On the fourth night, he searched for a cave.

The first few days, he thought about Sharel constantly. He wondered how she was doing without him, if she missed him as much as he missed her. This never ended well.

He remembered her straddling that smug prick, Ardoc, and he knew she was probably happier without him. She never loved him, and his disappearance could only be to her benefit.

He hated himself for loving her. He had taken so much from her,

and she didn't deserve it. He'd allowed his emotions to blind him to reality, and there was no telling how much wreckage he caused in his blindness.

But he couldn't stop loving her. It was like a fire burning inside him, and he feared what would happen if the fire ever went out.

Valon stared into the woods. This place was his home now, and Sharel wasn't any part of it. It hurt. It hurt savagely. But he couldn't go back. He would have to forget her.

The deer's neck crumpled in the magician's grip. Almost instantly, the beast fell, as if it had just then realized its own weight. It thrashed and kicked as its failing heart pumped out its last few useless beats. Then it died.

Valon cleaned his hands in a stream. The water burned with its coldness. The blood washed away in long streamers of red. He looked at his kill.

Its dead eyes stared into nothing. They were still and calm and black. Goblin eyes didn't do that. They always looked afraid. Maybe that was what fear looked like for a deer.

Eating meat was a mistake. He covered the carcass with stones, and decided to stick to pine nuts.

Pine nut season was short. As the days dwindled, most of the trees were picked clean by the black Hanverian squirrels. Valon

spared a moment to reminisce over his first journey through these parts. He wished the little fellows well, and retreated to his cave to hibernate.

A great, brown bear had the same idea. Valon growled at it in the Sorcerous Voice, and it backed away. They spent the rest of the winter in a careful detente.

One dark morning near midwinter, Valon awoke in agony. Frantically, he clawed at his chest, searching for the icicle he was sure had pierced his heart. There was nothing there. The ice was on the inside.

He screamed. The bear grumbled and rolled onto its side.

It was over in less than a minute. In the dead of winter, the magician was covered in sweat.

He crawled out of the cave and caught his breath in the cold, crisp air. He wasn't sure what just happened, but it appeared to be over. For the next ten minutes, he cried in relief.

Then he went back to sleep.

Every eight days, the magician woke to get a drink of water, relieve himself, and to sample whatever roots or bark appeared edible. Before long, spring arrived.

He thought he knew the forest before, but that had been a dormant and weakened thing. As it shook itself awake, the magician realized it was far more vibrant and powerful than he had ever

imagined.

The magician could smell a hundred different types of pollen. He could hear the births of rodents and foxes and birds. He opened his thoughts to the world around him, and was shocked to discover that even the plants and the stones had their own dim souls.

He resolved to tread lightly upon the land.

It wasn't easy at first. At least once a week, he would break down and eat something, but before long, he learned the trick of it. He would wait until he was hungrier than he could stand, and then he would find a massive old tree and embrace it. He let his hunger flow into the tree. The tree would gulp at the sunlight and the air and the earth, and then the hunger would be gone. As long as he kept his needs small, the vast and incomparable mechanisms of nature could easily absorb them.

By the end of summer, he had learned to survive while harming no living thing. It felt good. According to his calculations, it would take ten thousand years to repay *all* of the blood he'd spilt, but at least it was a start.

That winter, the bear had cubs. He thought about naming them, but decided it wasn't his place. The next day, he found himself a new cave.

The magician sat on a rock and meditated. It was a late spring morning, over a year after he first arrived. To no one in particular, he smiled.

He'd found a strange sort of peace, here in the woods. All of the anger and fear he'd felt before had no use and no place, and so were pushed to the back of his mind. The solitude had cleansed him. He wondered why it had taken him so long to seek it out.

He chuckled and went back to work. He was trying to establish telepathic contact with the trees, to determine whether they had thoughts and emotions of a type alien to animal life. It was difficult, potentially (and in all probability) pointless work, but it gave the magician something to do.

Without warning, the woods sang. The magician's eyes snapped open, and he scoured the shadows for some sign of what was happening. Then he saw the Warden.

Forest had not changed at all. His large frame, lush red hair, and playful green eyes all conspired to convey an earthy jocularitas. The overall effect was ruined only by the careful perfection of its parts.

"Ho there, boy," boomed the big man.

When he recognized his visitor, the magician smiled.

"Hello, Forest," he said. "It's good to see a friendly face."

The Warden beamed. "That it is, boy. That it is."

Having grown used to silence, the young man was at a loss for conversation. "So, how did you find me," he ventured.

"Oh, ho, ho," laughed the Warden. "Word gets around. The birds for a hundred miles have been chattering about the strange, green man who eats neither berry nor flower nor insect. Most of them were



pretty skeptical, but I figured there was something to it."

The magician laughed. "I didn't realize that animals gossiped about humans. I guess that's what I get for trying to keep a low profile. So, what news of the outside world?"

"The war goes well," said the Warden, "but I doubt you care much about that. Perhaps you would be more interested in hearing about a certain princess and her brand new son?"

The magician caught his breath. He'd been avoiding thinking about that, but it didn't hurt as much as he thought it would.

"What's he like," he asked, smiling.

"Oh, he's beautiful. He'd do any father proud. The princess named him xsxsxsx." The last was not so much a word as it was a deeply unpleasant sound, like stone scraping against metal.

"What was that," said the magician.

Forest smiled. "I said, she named the child xsxsxsx."

This time, the sound was even worse. The magician visibly winced. The Warden appeared for the first time to notice his discomfort.

"Oh," he chuckled. "I forgot, you wouldn't be able to hear the child's name."

"Why wouldn't I," asked the magician.

"On account of him being called what you were called before."

"Before what?"

The Warden gave a very convincing impression of innocent shock. "Why, before the White Council declared you a black magician and

stripped you of your name, of course. You must really have taken to the hermit's lifestyle to not have notice after all this time."

The magician that was Valon stared, horrified. "What? How is that possible? I haven't broken any of the Council's laws."

"It's because you're a goblin," the Warden said. When he noticed the young man's look of outraged disbelief, he elaborated, "It's a damn travesty, if you ask me. I agreed with the Council's original decision. The Wardens' mandate isn't about technicalities, it's about keeping the human genetic stock pure."

"But Ardent wasn't having it. He called you out in front of the Council, and when you didn't show, they must have figured a wronged exile was better than an angry Warden."

The magician plopped down onto his meditation stone. He couldn't process what he was hearing.

"I am V-" he began, but he couldn't finish. Even thinking about the word was nauseating. When it actually came to his lips, he was forced to suppress a sudden gag.

He focused his will and tried again. "I am V- -argh -ack!"

The second time was much worse. His teeth ached, and there was blood in his spittle.

"I-"

"Whoa," interrupted the Warden. "You'll hurt yourself if you keep this up. It just isn't worth it."

The magician looked plaintively at the big man. He was grateful to have a friend in his time of troubles.

"You're right," he said. "I just never thought losing my name would affect me so much. It always seemed like such a small thing. I wonder what I'll call myself now."

"Oh, that won't matter," said the Warden jovially.

"Why not," asked the man.

"Because you'll be dead."

Goosebumps rose on the magician's arm. Suddenly, the shadows around him seemed sinister and threatening.

"What," he said.

Forest rolled his eyes, as if he could not believe the idiocy he was hearing. "I . . . am . . . here . . . to . . . kill . . . you," he said slowly, annunciating carefully.

"But you said it was a travesty!"

"Aye, it is," agreed the Warden. "But I figured the hunters'd come for you sooner or later, and you'd rather it was a friend that did you."

"But you could let me escape!"

"I suppose I could," the Warden mused, "but what kind of life is that for you, always running, always looking over your shoulder? Just let go, and it'll be quick and painless.

"Besides, I hear death ain't that bad. It's like your consciousness expands and grows until it encompasses the whole of the universe, and when it grows beyond the measure of time and distance and brushes the edge of eternity, it will sing to the Creator, and the divine will answer in a never-ending chorus of voices, echoing

against perfection, forever."

"Where'd you hear that," the magician asked skeptically.

"Warden talk, mostly," Forest admitted. "That's sort of what it's like for us when we lose our bodies, but we always stop short and get pulled back. We figured humans'd keep going."

"I think I'll wait," said the magician, carefully standing up.

"Sorry, boy, but I can't let you go. Tracking down a black magician's a lot of work, and if I don't kill you now, some Warden's going to waste his time on it later, and who knows, maybe that wasted time will cost lives."

The magician knew he had no choice. He would have to discard the peace he worked so hard to attain. He would have to fight for his life. He focused all of his thoughts and power into a single punch.

It didn't even land. The Warden radiated magic like a hot wind. The harder he pushed into it, the harder it pushed back. He was staggered.

He would run, but not before the Warden got in a blow of his own. The big man's fist thudded into him hard and sent him flying. As he slid along the forest floor, he felt a fierce shredding all along his body, as if the very stones and brambles had turned to present him with their sharpest edges.

Then he caught movement in the corner of his eye and saw that that was exactly what they were doing. The ungrateful bastards.

Gasping for air, he scrambled to his feet and turned to flee. The Warden was faster.

At the last possible moment, the magician leapt into flight. The magic came easier than it ever had before.

Forest ripped a tree stump from the earth and hurled it towards him. It only clipped him, but that was enough to send him sprawling to the ground. He landed within feet of a ravine.

"Mixed blessings," he said, rubbing his aching side. He had less than a minute to plan his next move. He wasn't trapped. He could easily clear the gap with a single leap, but by the same token, the ravine would offer no defense against the Warden. He had an idea, but it was desperate.

The Warden found him standing in the open, resolute and proud.

"Bravo xsxsxsx, I knew you had courage. It'll do your son good to hear his pa died on his feet, like a man."

"I have no intention of dying, Forest."

"That's a good boy," the Warden laughed. Then he charged.

Just as he reached striking distance, the magician fell on his back, and pushed up, hard.

Now, Wardens were unchallengeable in their strength, but they didn't weigh much more than normal men. And the magician could throw a normal man pretty far.

In the distance, the Warden's landing echoed through the forest. He'd hit the ravine. Stopping just long enough to shake the smirk from his face, the magician took off into flight. To a Warden, a two-hundred foot fall was a mere inconvenience. He'd have only a few minutes to escape the line of sight.

## Chapter 29

The magician touched down gently in a field in southern Paragad. When gravity resumed its normal hold, he collapsed into a messy heap.

His side hurt. His ears rang. He was fairly sure his arm was broken. The high of mortal danger was wearing off.

He dragged himself into the shade of a nearby shack. He didn't cry. He was too mad.

His old life was lost forever. He had to accept that. His enemies wanted his total annihilation, and his friends had taken their side. He could never go back.

Now, he cried. He didn't realize it before, but he had convinced himself that his exile was temporary. He would hide for a few years and fix himself. Then he would go back, and Ardent would . . . give up on killing him.

He was so stupid. Ardent still wanted to kill him. He was still a goblin. His wife was still fucking another man. And his son still didn't know his father.

All the forest had done was allow him to pretend he could escape. He needed a new plan, one that would take him home.

He couldn't go back. The human world had rejected him, even to the point of stripping him of his identity.

What did he have left? He was a goblin. That felt like something.

He mulled it over. Giving up had its appeal. Despair was an old friend, and he found comfort in the manic perversion that would come

from embracing the abyss. But that way lay death, and worse, dishonor. He didn't think he could bear it.

He would find a way to go back. There was no other choice. The Council condemned him because he was a goblin. The Council hated goblins because of the threat they posed. The solution was as obvious as it was absurd.

He would have to end the war. He would go to the Matriarchs and convince them to call off their attacks. Then he would go to Heuralesta and deliver a treaty to the Council. Then he would go home.

It was a stupid plan, and it would never work, but it was marginally better than nothing.

To bring peace to the goblin clans, the magician would have to gain their trust. He would have to embrace his nature and become a real goblin.

He had no idea what that meant. It didn't seem like the sort of thing a man could learn. He'd always thought of them as rampaging beasts, the scourge of the human lands, but he didn't feel like rampaging anywhere or scourging anything. Maybe the designs of his maker were too specific for that.

He shuddered.

He had no idea what it meant to be a goblin, and it seemed like there was only one way to learn. He would have to travel to the goblin lands and live among them.

The magician shakily rose to his feet and pumped his fist in the air. A mouth-breathing farmer's child stared dumbly at him, and he remembered where he was.

He hobbled off to find some privacy. He had work to do. If he was going to do this, he was determined to do it under his own name.

In a pine grove near the border, the magician heaved. He felt like he had swallowed broken glass, and that his name was all that was holding it down. If he ever managed to say it, the word would scour his throat and tear up his insides.

He wondered how the Council was able to magic him so thoroughly. Then he remembered. Four years ago, on the palace roof, he agreed to it. He'd have an unkind word or two for Ordin if they ever met again.

After a week of trying, he came to the conclusion that he would never be Valon again. The best he could manage was Val-, and that was assembled one painstaking letter at a time. Anything past that and he fainted from the pain.

In a way, it was fitting. Half a name for half a man. When he got to the point where he could say it without retching, he continued on his way.

Gauvrim pass had changed greatly since he had been there last. For one thing, the bodies had been cleared away. For another, humans were living there now. They'd renamed it Victory Pass, and it was practically bustling.



Relatively speaking, that is. It was still high-altitude pastoral land, so it would never host a thriving metropolis, but throughout the high valley, new settlements were being built, and many hands were hard at work.

Val- took rest in the new town of Meadowcrest. Though it still smelled faintly of sawdust, there was a familiar energy about the place. The men were hearty and scarred, and they looked like they *really* enjoyed the quiet of the high valley. Val- couldn't shake the feeling that he'd seen them before.

It wasn't until he saw the statue that he understood the connection. According to its dedication plaque, it was cast in bronze in Morovia, and given to the town to commemorate their role in repelling the goblin offensive. It was titled *Senestrion's Folly*, but Val- knew it was of him.

It was not at all flattering. It depicted a stick-like, bug-eyed wisp of a man cowering beneath some unseen power. He held in his hands a sword with the Aurelian royal sigil, but he had it by the wrong end, offering its hilt in gesture of surrender.

Val- motioned towards one of the villagers. "What is *that*," he said, angrier than he intended, or even realized.

The villager, a thick-necked man so thoroughly Paragadran his hair was practically white, smiled goofily. "That's our town statue," he said.

Val- took a deep breath and gave his best approximation of a friendly smile. It was more like a grimace. "Yes, but why would you

have a statue of that particular subject matter?"

"Oh, it's sort of like our town mascot, you know. Most of us served with him in the battle of Gauvrim Pass, back before he showed his true colors."

"I don't think I'm familiar with that story," said Val shirtily.

"Well, Sensestrion here was the Goblin Queen's secret apprentice. He pretended to be one of us, but the High King figured it out, and tricked him into turning against his master. The two had a big fight, but when he won, he turned coward and ran off, just like the King predicted. Then we mopped up the dregs of his goblin army.

"That's what got us this land. The statue was kind of an in-joke between Captain Weston and the mayor of Orem Gorge - that was the town in Morovia we were stationed in right before the end. The Captain made some off-hand joke about how it was this black magician that won us the war, and so when he was chosen to lead a group of settlers, the Morovians sent us this.

"We're saving up to send them a big, stone donkey, because of this one time--"

"Wait," said Val- "I think I've heard of . . . the magician who served with General Ardent at Gauvrim Pass. Wasn't he some big hero who killed hundreds of goblins?"

"I guess he had to make it look good," said the villager.

"Besides, I saw him a couple of times around the camp, and there was always something off about him. He was real standoffish, no sense of humor, and he was always looking at you like he wanted to take you

apart to see what made you work. I'm not surprised he turned bad."

Val- rubbed his beard. "Thank you," he said. He was not at all sincere.

"No problem," said the villager. "You mind if I ask you your business in these parts?"

The last thing Val- wanted to do was talk to this idiot one second longer than necessary, but he'd started something, and so he had to finish it.

"I'm looking for some relatives," he said. "They fought in the war, and last I heard, they lived around here." Val- knew he should have lied, but it felt good to tell the truth.

"Oh, what are their names," asked the villager.

Realizing that maybe the truth wasn't such a good idea after all, Val- prevaricated, "It doesn't matter. They're not here. Everyone here's Paragadran."

"And you are?"

Val- tried to remember. It had been awhile since he read the Tome of Infamy. "My mother was Anolosh and my father was Hanverian," he said. It was a weird thing to admit, but as far as he understood Matronexa's magic, that was probably the closest thing to an accurate answer.

"Hmm," mused the villager. "The town of Aschel to the north has a lot of Hanverians in it. Maybe you could try there."

Surprised it could be so easy, Val- nodded. "Thanks," he said. Suddenly, an idea struck him.

"I won't have to worry about goblin attacks, will I?"

"Nah," said the villager. "They're mostly beat down pretty good. Rumor has it that the ruins of Deprok Sunchek are haunted, but I'm guessing that it's just scavengers poking around. Stay away from the slopes and you should be fine."

Val- thanked the villager once again, this time doing everything he could to conceal a smile.

The ruins of Deprok Sunchek had long been picked clean. Most of the looting was by the human forces. In the long hours after the tension of the Gauvrin assault had finally broken, the men were drunk with power. And with captured goblin moonshine. Val- remembered there being little of value, but the men just wanted souvenirs, proof that they had braced with the impossible and come away clean.

There was nothing there now. Even the stones of the fortress had been carried away to the booming new human settlements. Val- moved on.

The magician sat on a stone near Gauvrin Deprok. There was no point in being there. Three years ago, the human forces collapsed the main entrance, and then systematically blocked up the ventilation shafts. The goblins would have abandoned the place shortly after that.

There was no point in being there, but Val- was running out of options. He could not look in the south, where the clans were more active. That would have taken him too close to the center of the

Council's power. He had come north in the hope that the Shield Clan reconstruction was well underway.

The thought made him laugh. He was well on his way to becoming a goblin. He'd never have thought that as a human.

Yet despite the brief moment of levity, the fruitless search was really starting to wear on him. He stood up and strolled towards a pile of large stones - an improvised plug in the goblins' ventilation system.

He casually punted a stone into the grass. It made a satisfying arc as crashed down near the limits of his sight. He picked up another one to see if he could make it go farther. After a half hour, the shaft was unplugged.

That's when he noticed the smell. It was faint, being years old and wafting up through a hole in the ground, but it was unmistakable. It carried with it suggestions of smoke and sweat and shit and rotting flesh. It was the accumulated odor of thousands of bodies living underground, in close proximity, with poor ventilation.

Val- contemplated his future with dread. He would have to enter that stench. He sighed. At least now, he knew how to find the goblins.

## Chapter 30

The entrance to the goblin city was not unguarded. For about half a day's march around it, patrols of six goblins made their rounds, searching for intruders. A fortress guarded the entrance, but it was small, almost huddled, as if it was nervous about the very prospect of existing at all.

Val- could have easily snuck past the patrols, but he knew from experience that it was a bad idea to surprise armed men. He assumed the same principle applied to goblins. So he allowed himself to be captured.

The goblins held their spears nervously, and without expertise. Three years ago, he'd have taken them all with only a token effort. He wanted to join their society, however, and decided that would not make for an ideal first impression.

Instead, he used the Voice. He became placid and beautiful, a friend to all living things.

"Please," he said, dripping calm. "*I only want to talk.*"

Enraged, the goblins attacked. That took Val- off guard. He had used the Voice to such great effect on Matriarch Addak, but these goblins were having the opposite reaction.

Belatedly, he understood how it worked. The matriarchs controlled the males. The magician controlled the matriarchs. That was why they avoided the front lines. Val- was forced to flee.

He tried again the next day. These goblins did not hesitate to attack. They must have heard about him.

Val- danced between their spear-thrusts. As usual, the goblins fought with zeal, if not skill. He didn't worry. A group that size had absolutely no chance of harming him.

Eventually fatigue took its toll.

Val- repeated his pitch, this time without the Voice. "I only wish to talk," he said.

This confused them. One tried a clumsy spear-thrust, but with a sideways block, Val- sent the weapon spinning into the brush.

The goblins giggled.

"Go," one of them barked. Apparently, he was their leader. He bore no insignia of rank.

Dejected, the would-be go-getter stalked away in search of his lost spear.

"We don't talk to no hoo-mens," the leader said.

Val- sighed. This would not be a productive conversation.

"That's all right, then," he said patronizingly. "Because I'm actually a goblin. My name is Val-."

"Wow. Val-cough sure is a funny name for a goblin," the leader said. His followers again giggled.

To his surprise, Val- realized they weren't stupid, just young. Very young. Their distorted features made it difficult to tell, but he guessed they were about 12 in human years.

"You don't look like no goblin I ever seen," the leader said. "The name's Meedux Threewinter First, if you think you can remember it."

Val- was uncertain, but the only way to go was forward. "I'm pleased to meet you, Meedux. I-" he started, but he was interrupted by the laughter of the goblins.

The leader turned with an unexpected fury, "Shut up, you dogs, or I'll rape you so hard your ears'll bleed!"

To Val-, it was something of a shocking threat, but the others were more amused than threatened.

When the leader next spoke, it was with wounded pride. "Now I know you ain't a goblin, 'cause Meedux is a girl's name. A boy's name is birth order. I'm the oldest, so I'm in charge. Threewinter 'First,' you see? These yaps are Foursummers, and that one you sent fetching is a Fourwinter.

"Meedux is our mama, and if you call me that again, you and I are going to have a problem, see?"

Val- nodded. He didn't trust himself to say anything helpful.

Threewinter nodded back. Val- interpreted it as a sign of respect.

"Course, we already have a problem," said the goblin. "You say you're a goblin. I say you're a hoo-mahn. Can't both be right. Normally, I'd just kill you, but that ain't exactly worked out so far, so I guess we're stuck."

"I look like a human," Val- said. "But I was made by Matronexa."

The name provoked a reaction from one of the goblins, who spat on the ground and muttered, "The bitch!" Val- couldn't help but agree.



"Ah, keep your politics to yourself," groused Threewinter.

"No," said Val-. "He's right. She was a bitch."

"Ha," laughed Threewinter. "That sounds like something a goblin'd say." He turned to face his squad, pausing briefly to eyeball the freshly returned Fourwinter, and bellowed, "What's our motto?"

"Love your mama, hate your maker," they chanted in unison.

"If you'd like to take me prisoner," suggested Val- after a polite interval had passed.

Threewinter immediately rejected the idea. "Don't take no prisoners," he said.

Val- tried to sound reasonable without using the Voice. It was harder than he thought. "You can't kill me, and you can't let me go. . ."

"That's true," agreed Threewinter.

"So take me to see the Matriarchs," Val- finished.

The youngest goblin, Fourwinter First, spoke up, his voice piping, "Whoa, you can't take a witch to see the mothers."

"Gag yourself, Foruwun, the man ain't no witch."

"Could be," the younger goblin pouted.

Threewinter laughed with a hacking cackle. "Hey mister, you'd better show us your cock, else my bro's gonna think you're a witch."

"Men can be witches," shouted Fourwinter.

"That's total shit, you little stain-licking roach-fucker. Men can't be witches."

"It works different for hoo-mens," the younger goblin said.

Threewinter clearly hadn't thought of that. Chastened, he turned to Val-. "That true," he asked.

Val- nodded. "Actually, I *am* a magician," he confessed.

"Well shit," cursed Threewinter. "Now I don't know what to do."

"How about this," said Val-. "You leave me here, and then report back to base that you found a human magician who claims to be a goblin, and that he wants to speak to a Matriarch. Then it'll be your superiors' decision what to do."

The goblins mulled it over. They appeared to like the idea.

"Okay," shouted Threewinter. "You men move out. We gotta tell the mothers there's a hoo-mahn witch goblin that wants to yabber at 'em."

"Yes mama," chimed one of the Foursummers.

As they marched away, Val- heard "I swear to the Earth mother you'd better get ready to bend over . . ." fading into the distance.

The next day, the goblins returned in force. There were about a hundred, and while many were more seasoned than his erstwhile captors, most were not.

Back when he was a soldier, they would have comprised a unit he'd need 10 troops to destroy. Alone, he'd be forced to take to the brush, use hit and run . . .

He shook his head and focused on the present. The goblins were led by a single Matriarch, who was also painfully young. She carried

herself with the pomposity of the freshly promoted.

"As the duly appointed representative of the Shield Clan and the City of Gauvrim Shadunk, I, Reekok Shield Ebrek, am authorized to inform you that human magicians are neither needed nor welcome in our territory, and to request that you depart immediately."

Val- could sense her concentration. She was holding back a powerful trembling. She was afraid of him. They were all afraid of him.

"I'm not here as a magician," he said. "I'm here because I recently found out I was a goblin, and I want to get to know my people."

Reekok bit her lip uncertainly. "You bear none of the markings of the recognized goblin breeds," she said. "Who is your maker, and what is your purpose?"

Val- knew he would be asked some variation of this question, and had tried to prepare for it, but the subject still revolted him. "Matronexa created me to be a duplicate of her dead lover, so she would have some place to resurrect his soul."

"Oh shit," hissed Reekok, before quickly remembering herself.

"If what you say is true," she said with stiff formality. "Then you are entitled to sanctuary within the goblin lands, but this is a matter that can only be decided by the Shield Clan High Matriarchs.

"I will escort you into the city of Gauvrim Shadunk, but know this: until your petition is heard, your life is at my pleasure. My authority in that matter is both unquestionable and absolute, and I

will not hesitate to use it if you give me so much as the slightest cause.

"Do you still wish to enter our lands?"

It was a weak bluff, but Val- did not underestimate it. She must have had some talent, if the Matriarchs sent her after him, and her fear could make her dangerous.

"I do," he said, after an appropriate pause.

So far, his short time with the goblins had been an education. The city of Gauvrim Shadunk was not. It was more or less exactly what he expected.

It was dark. It was filthy. It was crowded. Soldiers, or at least what passed for soldiers among goblins, were a frequent sight. The sound of fistfights and screaming arguments punctuated the normal urban cacophony, and it stunk. Bad.

He saw most of the familiar breeds. Ratbody taskmasters would drive teams of rockbodies in heavy labor. A single ogre would accompany every fourth or fifth patrol, in a futile effort to keep public order through superior force. He didn't spot any reds, but he suspected that mixing them in with the general population would be like dropping a lit match into a dry haystack.

The only thing that surprised him was how young the city was. It seemed like the adults were outnumbered by the children. They spilled out into the streets in a way that would never happen in a human city. At one point, he saw an ogre try valiantly to break up a

running battle between two gangs of feral boys, only to fall to a double-sided flurry of makeshift shivs.

But Val- could almost understand child-beggars and child-thugs. What shocked him were the child-mothers. Though he had not yet gotten the hang of estimating the ages of the small-bodied goblins, he could have sworn that some of the women he saw leading around throngs of toddlers were actually girls. It was hard to tell, though. Many of them had old eyes.

Yet despite its filth and misery, there was something recognizable about Gauvrim Shadunk. A breastfeeding girl of 13 or 20 laughed at her playing children. Goblins stopped work to gawk at him being marched through the city. Some of them waved. More of them cursed and hissed.

He noticed that many of those goblins were older, and bore brands on their faces or palms. Then he remembered. Gauvrim Shadunk used to be Dagger Clan territory.

## Chapter 31

Val- stood alone in the Court of the High Matriarchs. He was waiting for them to convene. He'd spent the last six hours under guard, with nothing but the echoes of the chamber for company.

In some ways, this place resembled the chambers of the Council of White Magicians. It was round. The Matriarchs sat on a raised platform. Those who would address them stood, exposed, in the middle.

In other ways, they were very different. For one thing, the court was larger. Behind the supplicant, taking up the greatest part of the room, was amphitheater seating. Apparently, anyone who wanted to could simply stroll in off the street and watch the proceedings.

But the real difference was not apparent until the Matriarchs themselves arrived. Though it was clear to Val- that they commanded respect, they nonetheless did not cultivate the mystique and detachment he had long observed in the White Council.

They had entourages. They brought supporters to fill the stands. They were approachable, and not in the careful, controlled way the High King was approachable. Goblins would crowd thickly around them. Some would even try and touch their clothes or hair. As often as not, such interlopers got a boot to the face for the trouble, but so beloved were the Matriarchs, that such bouts of violence never seemed to inspire acrimony, or even much disrupt the business at hand, which seemed to be greeting and thanking as many people as possible.

Soon enough, though, the Matriarchs took their places, and the crowd quickly followed their example.

Val- would be judged by four Matriarchs. They were all ratbodies, and they ranged from early to late middle age. He found the youngest one attractive, but she gave him such a dirty look that he quickly changed his mind.

The occupant of the largest chair stood up, cupped her hands, and shouted, her volume enhanced by the Sorcerous Voice. **"All right you scum, SHUT UP! We're set to begin."**

Apparently, this was part of the ritual, because after a brief bit of laughter and applause, the crowd quieted. A few helpful "Shut ups" echoed through the chamber, but were quickly silenced.

The lead judge spoke again. "As Matriarch of the host city, I will preside over this hearing. I am Drada Shield Shadunk, and I will be casting votes for the family Shadunk."

She then sat, and the judge to her left stood. "I am Meshin Shield Kirdoc and I'm casting votes for the families Kirdoc and Akanol."

The lead judge nodded, and she sat. Next, on the far left, was the youngest judge. "I am Eedja Shield Eedjada. I'm casting votes for the families Eedjada and Erej, and for Shield Deprok."

At this announcement, the crowd exploded. About a third of them were on their feet, shouting at the floor. They themselves were then shouted down by those that remained seated.

"Sit. The fuck. Down," intoned Matriarch Drada, and it was like a spell. The lead judge turned to address her colleague. "There is no family Shield Deprok," she said.

Matriarch Eedja grinned. "Eloa Eedjada reached Tenwinter last year and changed her name two weeks ago. That's twenty seasons with at least twenty surviving children. No one challenged her claim to Deprok, and she built a house there. That means she has a family, and a vote. Which I'm holding in proxy."

"Is that true," Drada asked her fellow judges.

"This is the first I'm hearing about it," said Matriarch Meshin. They both turned to the fourth, and oldest member of the panel.

The matriarch appeared to ponder the implied question. "Eloa is old enough," she said. "And the family Eedjada has been doing some sort of excavating in Deprok, but the population is small."

Drada glowered at the youngest matriarch. Finally, she said, "You can cast a vote for Deprok, but it's provisional, pending verification of a legally proper founding, prior to today."

The decision was met with cheers and boos in roughly equal measure.

Finally, the judge on Drada's right stood up. "Truly a masterstroke, Eedja. I congratulate you. It's a shame you wasted it on this.

"My name is Riad Shield Ored and I'm holding proxies for Nechek, Anrak, and Kardek. I'm also voting for Ored, of course."

There was a very small applause for this announcement. The other judges looked resigned.

"Very well," said Drada. "The remaining families either could not be contacted, or have registered abstentions, and the total votes



accounted for has met the minimum requirement of 15. Therefore, we can begin.

"The petitioner is here to request sanctuary as a goblin. Are the facts of the matter in dispute?"

Matriarch Riad spoke, "I was a close personal friend of the Magician Senestrion. The petitioner could be his twin. Furthermore, the family Ored is currently in possession of Senestrion's research notes. His method for resurrecting the dead appears viable. I would say that the petitioner is most definitely a goblin of a hitherto unknown breed."

The crowd's shock at this information was not half as turbulent as Val's. The dark knowledge that would have allowed Matronexa to usurp his body still existed, and it was in the hands of a goblin Matriarch. Now that he knew he still had something to lose, this whole experiment was starting to feel a lot less interesting.

Matriarch Drada looked bemused. "So, the facts are not in dispute," she said. No one contradicted her.

"Then we'll move on. Would granting this sanctuary unduly harm the Shield Clan?"

"Absolutely," shouted Eedja, without any hesitation whatsoever. When there was no immediate objection from her fellows, she rolled on. "Why are we pretending we don't know who this is? This is Val-  
xxxxx Queenslayer!

"He slaughtered our armies at Seatab! He buried Raktall! He starved Deprok, Iklek, and Urdchek! We shouldn't be protecting him,

we should be hanging him! He's as great an enemy as the Shield clan ever had."

The crowd was riled by the Matriarch's words, and the psychic energy of their hatred was palpable. It had never occurred to Val-that the goblins might not want him either.

With the lull in Eedja's tirade, Riad took the floor. "Yes, Val-xxsx is a killer. He's a goblin. Most of us were made to be killers, to serve the ambitions of the humans' black magicians.

"That's why it's the law of the Earth Mother: In me, all is forgiven. Those who come to me will begin life anew.

"The black magicians made our ancestors to do terrible things. That's why the law says nothing a goblin does before he joins the people matters.

"I dealt with Matronexa personally. She was indeed as cruel and as black a magician as any of the makers in our history. She wanted Val-xxsx to be what he became. His crimes are her responsibility."

"Shit," said Eedja. "Utter shit. I was there after the siege of Gauvrim. I saw the families turn to cannibalism when the stores ran out.

"I was on the front lines, cutting down the Dagger Clan refugees when fear and hunger drove them to invade us. I personally had to hang some of my best friends--"

"Family Eedjada's historical relationship with the Dagger Clan has long bordered on the inappropriate," interrupted Meshin.

"Meshin, you snake! You're going to take his side over mine? The

Dagger Clan were fellow goblins. Why not ask him about his friends, the High King, and the butcher, Ardent?"

"I'm not taking sides," Menshin said. "I'm simply noting a bias."

"Damn straight I'm biased," screamed Eedja, to the unrestrained roar of the audience. "I'm biased for goblins, and against those that would hurt them. I'm biased against the notion that we should ever waver in our revenge on the human lands, and I'm biased for the proposal of separating the so-called Queenslayer from his head and sending it to the White Council as a warning about what happens to those who would fight against us!"

The spectators, almost to the last, were suddenly standing and screaming. They raged and threatened and stomped their feet.

Val- was getting angry himself. He turned to face the audience. He was loud, but he managed to retain enough sense to restrain the Voice.

"Yes, I fought against you," he said stonily, "and I could tell you how sorry I am, that I was used by the Council and the Wardens, but you know what, Fuck you!"

"They told me a lot of lies, but they didn't need to lie to me about you. I saw for myself what your armies did to Paragad. I saw at Blueflower how you treat humans that fall into your power.

"As far as I was concerned, you were monsters. I hated you and I was proud to kill you.

"But then I found out I was one of you, and the hatred felt

pointless. I came here because I wanted to forget the hate, to let it go, but you're not fucking making it easy for me."

It was the wrong thing to say, obviously. The stands emptied as the goblins surged forward, howling for blood. Val- tensed. His warrior instincts kicked in, and he prepared to fight his way out.

Then he stopped. Despite his anger, he didn't really want to kill the goblins. He was tired of the bloodshed. If they wanted to rip him apart, so be it.

Only it was not to be. Matriarch Drada leapt up and banged a truncheon against the side of her chair. Any thoughts Val- might have had about the ceremonial nature of the weapon were quickly put to rest as the Matriarch waded into the crowd, swinging away without prejudice.

Shortly after, her fellow judges followed her. Even Eedja joined them, though she gave him a poisonous look as she passed.

The Matriarchs clubbed the most aggressive of the rioters, but the violence was not reciprocal. As the leaders and spiritual mothers of the Shield Clan, their persons were sacrosanct. Even the most furious goblin would rear back rather than strike them.

The middle of the crowd was crushed between the press of bodies as the front lines retreated and the back ranks advanced. Eventually, the mob got the message and returned to their seats, but they left more than a few bodies behind.

Val- was impressed that four women could so readily handle hundreds, but he was ashamed that more were dead on his account.

"I'm sorry," he said, when the Matriarchs had returned to their seats.

"Listen up," shouted Drada. "I don't care if it's the audience or the petitioner that does it - if the peace of these deliberations is disturbed one more time, I swear by the Earth Mother that I will have the guard in here, and they will purge this entire court."

The crowd seemed to take the threat seriously. They were much more subdued henceforth. When she was satisfied, Drada continued, "Eedja's words shamed the law of the Earth Mother, but she's not alone in her feelings about the petitioner. Wherever he goes, he's sure to disrupt public order, and I don't want him in my city."

Menshin appeared thoughtful. "My colleagues make some good points," she said. "Forgiveness and trust will not come easily for this one, yet we cannot simply abandon him to the mercies of the Wardens. It's not an easy decision."

Riad spoke last. Val- could sense her conflict, but outwardly, she carried herself with an unflappable dignity. "Ladies, I understand your concern. Believe me, the northern families appreciate the struggles faced by those closest to the human lands, but the law of the Earth Mother is what defines us as a people, and in this case it is clear.

"The humans may abandon their principles at a moment's inconvenience, but we are better than that. Val-xsxsx is a despicable person, but he's a goblin. He has a right to try and grow beyond the crimes he was forced to commit."

As defenses went, Val- found it more than a little insulting, but he was grateful to have an advocate.

Matriarch Drada stood. "Normally, this is the point where I would ask the petitioner to say something on his own behalf, but I think, given recent events, that he might wish to waive that right. Am I correct?"

Val- thought about the hundreds of angry goblins he had so recently insulted. He nodded.

"Good," said Drada. "Then I think I've heard enough to call for a vote. It has been proposed that we offer sanctuary to the petitioner. In order of increasing precedence, we will declare for or against."

"Against," snapped Eedja.

"Abstained," said Menshin.

"For," said Riad.

Drada looked to the others, and then at Valon. It was a long time before she spoke. "You may not be aware of goblin law," she said, "but as host Matriarch, my vote will decide any ties. Currently, your sanctuary stands at three votes against and four votes for. If I vote for you, it will be under the condition that you be separated from the general population and confined to the Shadunk Grand Monastery. Will you attempt to resist such imprisonment?"

He was somewhat disappointed that he would not get to experience the whole of goblin culture, but he recognized the generosity of the offer. "No," he said.

"Then I will reluctantly vote 'For.' Your petition is granted with a vote of five to three."

The protest from the audience was muted, but noticeable. It was not a popular decision, but no one wanted to be the one to cause trouble. Val- was escorted to the Monastery by Riad's own honor guard.

The unit was commanded by a young goblin woman who dismissed them as soon as they reached the monastery gates. "We both know they're just for show," she said.

The two walked in awkward silence through the halls of the Monastery. Val- was surprised at how sturdily the place was constructed. He suspected he was not the only prisoner.

"I don't want to cause trouble," he said, eventually.

The goblin looked at him curiously. "Then what was that ruckus at the court," she asked.

"I just got caught up in the moment," he said.

"You sounded like you really hate goblins," she said.

Val- looked at her. It was still a new experience, goblins who weren't trying to kill him. She was pretty, almost exactly like a miniature woman.

There was something different about her, though. He could see it in her stance and posture. She was incredibly open, and comfortable being so. She moved through the world confidently, as if she expected it to cooperate with her every ambition. He found himself trusting her.

"It's different now that I'm here," he said. "When I'm talking to you, you seem a lot like the people back home, but when I was living with the humans, you barely seemed real."

"That's quite a fucking thing to say to someone's face," said the goblin.

"Oh, I'm sorry," apologized Val-.

"No, it's all right," laughed the goblin. "You were just being honest. The humans don't think of us as real."

"It's not like that," Val- said. "Mostly they're just scared of you."

Now, the goblin really laughed. "Humans are scared of us? We're on the brink of extinction, thanks to your White Council. At any moment, your armies could collapse one of our cities, and your castoff black magicians are constantly trying to enslave us, but you are the ones who are afraid?"

"I'm not a human," Val- said. "It was made abundantly clear to me that I'm no longer welcome in the human lands."

The goblin stopped laughing. "People treated you like a human. That makes you human."

"Fine," said Val- "I was a human. And the humans, including me, never thought of the goblins as being scared. We assumed you hated us so much you would not rest until we were all killed, and based on what I've seen so far, we weren't entirely wrong."

"Hey," said the goblin. "We're not the ones who associate with the Wardens."



"The Wardens are very few," Val- said. "They don't represent humanity as a whole."

"But you entrust them with positions of power," the goblin said.

"Like you do with black magicians," Val- replied.

"Why are you even here," the goblin said angrily.

"I thought I already explained this. I don't want to fight any more."

"I'm supposed to believe that coming from the Queenslayer?"

Val- sighed. "I just go by Val now."

He said it with such resignation that the goblin was visibly taken aback. She smiled apologetically. "Well, Val, my name is Lukia Shield Ored, but you can call me Lukia."

## Chapter 32

As he grew used to the idiosyncrasies of goblin architecture, Val- gradually realized that the Shadunk Grand Monastery was a beautiful place. What humans did with painting and sculpture, the goblins did with shadow and echoes. Their decorative flourishes made the building itself lumpy and asymmetrical, but when the torches were lit and the chants were sung, the area around it became magical.

The moment of realization came for Val- on his third day. He was walking down a long hall decorated with odd bulges in the ceiling and walls. Confused at the sight of such random ugliness, he failed to notice a particularly low-hanging stone. As he lay sprawled on the floor as a result of his inattention, he saw, on the far wall, the shadow of a delicate orchid.

It was such a pointless thing. Anyone walking down the hall in a normal manner would obscure it entirely, but the more he thought about it, the more Val- respected it. It gave him a strange sort of comfort to know that he was surrounded by beauty, even if he couldn't see it.

And Val- needed all the comfort he could get. He was more isolated in the Monastery than he ever was as a human magician. At least as a human, he'd only had to deal with people's pity and discomfort. The goblin priestesses actively and aggressively ignored him, as if they hoped he would be carried away by the force of their scorn.

His only friend was Lukia. Technically, she was his guard, but

she acted more like his informal tour-guide. They couldn't leave the monastery, but much of the city was visible from its upper floors, and she would often point out landmarks while they sat and talked.

One day, not long after he arrived, they were on their morning walk when Val- noticed a new passageway.

"What's down there," he asked.

"Oh, you can't go down there," Lukia said.

"Why not," said Val-.

"Because you're a man," she replied.

He'd expected to hear "because it's secret" or "because we don't trust you," but the way Lukia said it, it didn't sound like her reasons had anything to do with security. He was intrigued.

"Why can't men go down there," he asked.

Lukia smiled. "They try from time to time, but they don't make it out again. That's the Abbey of the Sisters of the Cleft Ruby, goblins bred for sex."

"Men are sexed to death," Val- asked, with almost appropriate horror.

"You really are a man," Lukia said smugly. "No, the Sisters will kill any man they see."

"Why," he asked.

"Probably so they don't sex him to death," she said.

"Well, surely they wouldn't . . ."

"You don't understand," Lukia interrupted. "The Sisters are a special breed of goblin. They're born nymphomaniacs. Put them around

a man, and they can't think of anything but fucking. It's their nature. They can't help it.

"But that's not the worst part. The magician who created them didn't want children, so the Sisters are normally infertile. Except some time around their twenty-fifth birthday, they become spontaneously pregnant with their own replacements.

"After that, they age rapidly. By the time the babies are weaned, they're withered old hags. Most don't survive more than a year after that.

"So the Sisters never have sex. It's the only sort of control they can exercise. The largest part of their lives was stolen from them so they could be some magician's ideal fuck toys, and the only way they can get back at him is by defying their purpose."

"What do they do in there," Val asked.

"Not what you think, pervert. They maintain their holy celibacy and channel their misbegotten libidos into prayers to the Earth Mother, asking for revenge against the humans that abandoned them to this fate."

"That seems a bit unfair," Val- said. "I didn't even know about them until now."

Lukia's tone was one of righteous anger, restrained for the sake of her friend. "I'm talking about their ancestors, Val. The White Council knew about their ancestors. That's why they kicked their maker out, but they didn't try to help them.

"Gaztril the Snake Eater had a harem of 144 Sisters. Only 35

survived to find sanctuary, and they had to fight and fuck their way through a thousand miles of hostile territory to get here. The Wardens killed them whenever they could, and the Earth Mother only knows how many were lost to sicko humans who took advantage of their limitations."

"It sounds like you admire them," Val- said.

"I suppose I do," Lukia replied. "I wish more goblins understood what they do."

"What's that," Val- asked.

"That the makers built us for a reason, and whenever they act as the makers intended, they're playing right into their hands.

"Take my own breed, the Sacred Swarm. We were meant to be an army. The men were supposed to be expendable grunts and the women were supposed to be brood mares. So, how do we act?

"Our boys are ignorant brawlers who would rather tear each other up than do an honest day's work, and our bitches couldn't keep their legs together to save their lives.

"So we fall into this cycle. We breed fast and outgrow our lands. We have so many mouths to feed, and attached to those mouths are hands that are useless for most honest work, but willing to hold a spear. So we send them into the meat-grinder of war, and nothing ever comes of it, but at least we have fewer mouths to feed."

Val- was troubled. Lukia spoke with anger, but he could sense underneath it a powerful fear, and he wasn't sure that fear was unjustified.

"Maybe it doesn't have to lead to war," he said. "Maybe the Matriarchs and the Council could work together and find some way to control your numbers."

Lukia snorted. "Val, I'm starting to think your reputation as a ruthlessly efficient warrior might be somewhat exaggerated. How you can serve under Ardent and think the Council would willingly 'control our numbers' with anything less than extermination is beyond me."

Ignoring the twinge of shame brought on by this reminder of his past, Val- searched for the right words. "I'm probably the only living person who's lived with both humans and goblins, so I know more than anybody. They're not that different. If the goblin clans can get along with each other, and the human kingdoms can get along with each other, there's no reason they can't all get along together."

"Your naiveté is cute, Val. If you were a goblin, I'd probably pity-fuck you, but you don't know what you're talking about. The Goblin Clans fight each other all the time. The only thing that keeps us together is the human threat. The human kingdoms are probably just as bad. They probably only cooperate because the High King tells them to."

"But the war is killing you," said Valon. "You can't possibly win. The combined strength of the human kingdoms is too great, and that's even before you count all those troops you lost needlessly in the Morovian campaign. If you don't make peace . . ."

"I know, Val. A lot of us know. Most would rather die than ask

the White Council for help."

When she saw the look of shock on Val-'s face, Lukia continued, "Do you know why our executions are hangings?"

Val- shook his head. She explained, "Before the Sacred Swarm, there was no goblin culture. A thousand years ago, we were created by the magician Lexesis Thrice-Cursed as a weapon of war.

"Lexesis was defeated, but a portion of his army, our ancestors, escaped. They built an underground city, called Sanctuary Cave, and they lived there in peace.

"But that wasn't enough for the Council. With the aid of the Wardens, they caused a cave-in. The Swarm was trapped, and eventually, most of them suffocated, but a small number were able to burrow to safety.

"When they escaped, they swore to never again allow a similar event to threaten their whole race, so they split into the clans, each of which could preserve on its own the Law of the Earth Mother.

"When we hang a victim, she feels for herself the terror of the people of Sanctuary Cave. Except those people were innocent. They did nothing to bring that fate upon themselves.

"That's why so many of us will never accept surrender. The Council decided, for no reason other than their own hatred, to eliminate us. So we will return their hate. We give them back as good as they give us until their debt of blood is paid, and they beg us for the mercy we never received from them."

Val- couldn't say anything. He knew exactly how she felt. It

hadn't made him happy, killing Matronexa, but he would never have believed that before he did it. How much worse would it be if he'd had not just one lifetime of grievance, but dozens?

He would still have to figure out a way to bridge the gap, because to do so was his only way home, but for the sake of his new friendship, he resolved to avoid the subject of politics.

That night, he slept fitfully. The more he got to know the goblins, the more impossible his goal seemed to become. The problem kept him awake for longer than it should have.

He had a stupid dream about Sharel. He was back in Heuralesta, and she was yelling at him for borrowing her shoes. He cried as he tried to explain that her shoes wouldn't fit him, but she had no interest in listening.

He woke in a cold sweat. Just in time to see the knife plunging towards him.

He slapped it away. It clanged loudly against the wall. The assassin squealed in shock and scrambled after it.

Val- got to his feet. His eyes rapidly adjusted to the darkness.

His would-be killer was a female goblin. She was scrawny and wore the rough garments of the city girls, but she must have been a powerful magician to dare attack him.

It quickly became clear that Val's first instinct was wrong. She was no matriarch in disguise. She wasn't even a normal soldier.

Her attacks were slow and highly telegraphed. When she stabbed,



it was without power.

Val- gingerly plucked the knife from the assassin's hands. Then he snapped the blade off the hilt and threw both pieces to the ground.

The goblin actually picked up the blade and tried to use it as a weapon! Val- sighed and let her stab him.

It didn't even break the skin. Instead, the blade slid backwards, cutting a deep gash in her hand. Val- caught the blade as it fell from her grasp.

The assassin started to cry. Somehow, Val- felt guilty.

"Don't feel bad," he said. "I bet lots of people have wanted to kill me, but you were the only one brave enough to try it."

"Shut up, hoo-mahn," she cried. Val- watched her flail against him. She tried her best, but she was too weak.

She was getting weaker. As the blood loss took its toll, she swayed unsteadily, and eventually collapsed. Val- stooped to bind her wound. She flinched away from his touch, but she couldn't prevent his attentions.

He looked at her with pity. "What made you think you could take me," he asked.

The goblin returned a look of the purest, clearest hatred Val- had ever seen. She seemed to know she was beaten, though, and so chose to answer.

"Someone's gotta do it. You must've witched the mothers, to get them to let you live after what you done."

For the first time, Val- noticed the brand on her unwounded palm. "You're Dagger Clan, aren't you?"

"What's it matter to you," the goblin spat.

"I understand why you hate me," Val- said, "but I did what I had to do."

"You didn't have to kill my brothers."

Val- smiled compassionately. "I probably did. If I met your brothers on the battlefield, they likely didn't leave me a choice."

"They weren't no soldiers," the goblin said. "You didn't kill them direct. They died during the hunger."

"I'm sorry," said Val-. "We were following a strategy. We wanted to cut off the army's food supply."

"Men with swords don't starve," the goblin said. "My brothers was bakers. They had the food. The soldiers didn't."

"You didn't starve," Val- said.

"There came a time when women was rarer than bread."

Val- cringed. The frail young woman shivered defiantly. He knew he could never apologize to her. He didn't even try.

"I can't let you kill me," he said.

"Course you can't," the goblin agreed. "But I gotta. . . do . . ."

The assassin fell asleep in Val-'s arms. With self-conscious tenderness, he placed her on his bed, and went to find Matriarch Glechek, the night guard.

The stone-faced old woman glowered at him as he knocked on the

frame of her open door. She was not his friend.

"I just wanted to tell you I had a nocturnal visitor," he said.

"My job's to keep people in, not out," replied the Matriarch.

"I was wondering if you could find someone to take her home."

"What, d'you fuck her," leered the Matriarch.

"No," said Val- "She's just someone who wanted to pay me a visit, and she's overstayed her welcome. I'd like her treated gently, but I need her out of my bed."

"Sounds like she fucked you," the Matriarch said. "I can arrest her, but if I arrest her, I'll have to interrogate her."

Val- didn't like the sound of that. "Never mind," he said. "I'm sure she'll leave on her own."

The Matriarch's mood instantly turned. Or rather, she abruptly realized a newer, better way to express the mood she had all along. With knowing perversity, she said, "You're making it sound like you don't want me to arrest her. Makes me think that this girl and the Queenslayer are in cahoots. Maybe this is a matter of goblin security."

"Forget I said anything," said Val-.

"Too late," said the Matriarch. "You lodged a complaint, and it's my sworn duty to take that complaint seriously."

They hung the assassin in the morning. Val- did not attend. It was a goblin hanging.

## Chapter 33

Life in the Shadunk Grand Monastery was slow and uneventful. As the months passed, he came to know Lukia pretty well. She was, like him, a soldier, and though she would never be as strong as he was, she was also a fairly credible magician.

To pass the boredom, he offered to teach her a thing or two. That made her laugh.

"No offense, Val, but you're a man. I doubt there is anything you can teach me about magic."

Val- rolled his eyes. "I'm a pretty strong magician, you know."

"Well sure," Lukia said, "but that's more brute force than skill."

"Okay," said Val-. "Maybe you could show me something then."

Lukia grinned. "That sound's like a challenge, smart guy. Let's see you do this."

Lukia then took out her knife and balanced it, point first, on the tip of her finger. Val- clapped.

"That's pretty good," he said, "but it's a relatively simple adjustment concentration. If I may borrow your knife, I'll demonstrate the next step."

He took her knife and concentrated. He felt its balance, and explored with his mind its structure and weight. He balanced it, point first, on the stone floor.

"I'm going to have to apologize, aren't I?"

"Not really," said Val- "The look on your face was apology

enough."

"I guess I forgot that you're only technically a goblin. You're more like a human man."

"What do you mean by that," asked Val-.

"You know what they say about human men."

"Obviously, I don't," said Val-.

"Oh, right," Lukia said. "They say that human men are more feminine than masculine."

"That sounds like an insult," Val- said.

"Only if you want to have sex with me," Lukia replied.

Val- thought about it. He wasn't sure the parts would fit.

"I'll pass," he said.

"Then it's a compliment," she said. "It means you have rationality and real emotions. Not like goblin men, who only have prejudices and appetites."

Val- considered his time among the goblins. It seemed an apt enough description of the males, and Lukia would be in a position to know.

"I can't imagine what it would be like to live like that," he said.

"It's not so bad," Lukia said. "They have their uses, and they like it when we do their thinking for them."

There was a dangerous, delicious gleam in her eye when she said it. Val- shifted uncomfortably. Maybe he was more like a goblin than he thought.

It was late morning (probably) in summer (according to his calculations) when Val- received his first and only visitor. The Matriarch Riad Ored studiously inspected his room. She appeared extremely interested in the the dust atop his simple wooden chair.

"My granddaughter speaks very highly of you," she said.

Val- felt a rising wave of warmth at the news, but was too suspicious of the old woman to show it. He grunted.

"She says you're a model prisoner." That deflated him a bit.

"And a good friend." That was better.

Neither of them said anything. Even more than was usual for a ratbody, Riad was hunched and compact. Val- allowed himself a quick peek into her thoughts, but her mind was far away.

"Why are you here," he asked.

Riad turned to him. "The war goes poorly. The humans have buried Algeld Gretcham." Her tone was flat, but it carried a subtle challenge.

Val- knew what she wanted. She was testing him. She wanted to know if he was *really* a goblin, if he felt the rage and despair he had so often observed in their kind.

He didn't.

They were goblins. Goblins died all the time. It would be sad if Lukia died, or if something bad happened to that little shit, Threewinter First, but . . .

Who was he kidding? He didn't care that much about humans

either.

He looked into Riad's eyes and said, without remorse, "I'm a hardened killer, Matriarch. Death doesn't faze me anymore."

"I'm not sure I believe you, Val-xsxsx. Senestrion told me the same thing, sixty years ago, and he was the best friend our people ever had."

"I'm not Senestrion," growled Val-.

The Matriarch absorbed his anger, letting it empty into an artful lacuna. "Who are you trying to fool," she said reasonably. "Why did you even come here?"

"I thought I could persuade you to surrender, to give up this war and save everyone a lot of trouble."

Riad's dignified features barely flickered, but Val- thought he could detect a twitch of a smile. "You thought you could fix us," she said.

It sounded arrogant when she put it like that. "Maybe," he admitted.

"Senestrion was the same way," said the Matriarch. "He thought he could reverse our afflictions. He found out the hard way that he couldn't."

"What do you mean," asked Val-.

"The results of his initial efforts were . . . not pretty."

"So, you just let him experiment on you," said Val-.

"Of course not," replied Riad. "He used captive humans."

"That's horrible," said Val-.

"Maybe so, but we live in a pretty horrible world."

"So, what happened," Val- asked. Strangely, he was comforted by the knowledge of his prior self's atrocities, and of the goblins' seeming acceptance of them. He couldn't possibly do worse.

"He eventually stopped trying to fix us, and started trying to help us," she said admiringly. Then her face darkened, and she mumbled, "Until he met Matronexa, that is."

A chill of unreasonable guilt shook Val-. He hadn't thought about her in at least a month. "Matronexa," he said.

"She bewitched him. He always had this grandiose streak, and she was the perfect tyrant. He wasn't the only one who fell to her charms, but he was the first."

Val- said nothing. He found himself sympathizing with the black magician. It was unpleasantly comfortable.

"But this was not a social call," the Matriarch said. "The southern Clans have requested your presence, and it's been up to me to decide whether or not to transfer you."

"And what have you decided," asked Val-.

"I've decided that they're fools if they think they can control you, but I think they're going to have to learn that for themselves. They haven't suffered at your hands the way we have."

Val- had been under the impression that she was his advocate and supporter. Her ambivalence confused him.

"If you feel that way, why did you argue on my behalf? You said the Earth Mother's law meant I shouldn't be punished."



"Maybe I felt sorry for you," said the Matriarch. "Maybe I was hoping to save you for something worse. I don't know. All I know is that you were never worth sacrificing the law over."

Val- smiled stiffly. He wondered if he would ever escape his enemies.

Travel through the goblin lands was slow and tedious. Val- was limited by the speed of his escort, and they spent weeks in long, underground tunnels, lit only by the light of the torches they carried with them.

Yet it was not entirely unenlightening. Some parts of the journey passed over land, and in these stretches, Val- saw goblin farms, goblin loggers, and goblin fisheries. It was interesting to see that even in these above-ground settlements, the goblins resembled their urban cousins. With all the space of the upper world at their disposal, they still preferred to build their homes close together and bury them in the earth.

It was a huge waste of effort and resources, and considering the fates of Raktall, Deprok, and Grettham, a major strategic liability, but the urge to burrow seemed instinctual. Val- wondered what purpose it served.

He decided to try and think it through. Assuming he was an evil black magician, how would he use goblins to achieve his goals?

The ratbodies were an army, but even with their increased birth rates and shortened life cycles, they would have needed time to

prepare. An underground settlement would be an ideal place to grow their numbers without being discovered.

It seemed a stretch, though. The way the ratbodies concentrated their numbers and surrounded themselves with the tools of their own destruction was too great a vulnerability. It made it far too easy to kill great numbers at once.

That's when the thought occurred to him. It was an evil thought, but it made sense. Maybe the magician did not want rule over a world of goblins. Maybe he had the element of surprise, and the arrogance to think he could defeat humanity in one, big push. Maybe the war wouldn't last long enough for the liability to come into play. Maybe when it was over, he needed a way to dispose of his tools quickly.

Something changed inside Val-. He decided to pursue peace for the goblins' sake, as well as his own.

## Chapter 34

After far too long, Val- arrived in the city of Algeld Hamrak, stronghold of the Gauntlet Clan and center of goblin high culture. On the most obvious level, it was cleaner and richer than Gauvrim Shadunk. The ceiling was higher and for light, they used oil instead of torches.

More subtly, it was also comparatively cosmopolitan. Val- saw goblin breeds that never showed themselves on the surface, and even among the ever-familiar ratbodies, there were racial and cultural variations.

Val- would have loved to explore the city, but he was still, technically, a prisoner. His captors took him directly to the Heart of the Race, the fortress which housed the Goblin High Command.

Although perhaps *fortress* was only really an accurate description of the upper part, the visible cap that sat in the massive cavern of Algeld Hamrak. The real Heart of the Race was a massive warren of hardened bunkers, connected by a spiraling tunnel that ran almost a half-mile deep.

The bunkers were largely empty, but all together, they could hold thousands. It was the goblins' last place of retreat if all else was lost.

Val-'s destination was at the very bottom, the Mother's Sanctum, possibly the holiest place in all the goblin lands.

He found the passage eerie. He and his escort marched by empty room after empty room. The space between them was punctuated by choke

points, portcullises, and archers' blinds. There were drainage channels for the blood they expected to spill.

There was nothing improvised or provisional about this place. Its architects had seen to every detail, and spent great care in getting them exactly right.

If it was ever used, it would not be inhabited for long, yet they spent great care in getting the details exactly right. The goblins were a people convinced of their own imminent destruction, and they were determined to have it happen on their terms.

Val- could use that.

While the Matriarchs assembled, Val- was confined to one of the lower bunkers. He paced along the lines on the floor. They formed a 12 x 12 grid.

He got a feeling this place was meant for refugees. Each square in the grid was large enough for about a half-dozen bedrolls. From what he'd seen, that was on the small side for a goblin family, but presumably, at that point, most of them would have died.

The walls were decorated. He decided to take a closer look. At first, he didn't understand what he was seeing. It was a series of pictures. The first one showed a goblin holding a child, but there was something strange about it. The child sat on the goblin's left arm, and its head was held by the goblin's right hand.

The second picture introduced another goblin. This one carried a short sword. The third picture . . .

Val- shuddered.

He spent many long, cold hours in that place. He tried to sleep, but the bunker had a discomfiting aura. Though no one had ever died there, it was like it was haunted, perhaps by the shades of deaths yet to come.

When it was all over, it was almost a relief to go and defend his life against the judgment of the Matriarchs.

The Mother's Sanctum was an odd place. It was a giant quartz crystal, but it was also a fortification. Its surfaces were connected by a lattice of supports that would help it withstand an assault from any direction, and zig-zagging stairs lined the walls, allowing access to the hundreds of alcoves that would house the various Matriarchs that would one day assemble there.

The entrance was wide open, but hanging over it was a massive stone slab, held up by heavy chains. When it fell, it would not easily rise again.

The whole thing felt like a tomb, and Val- supposed that's what it was - a dignified resting place for the last of the goblins.

Six Matriarchs waited for him at the bottom. Val- didn't like that. It was one plus two plus three, or one times two times three - a powerful mystic number. Still, it could have been worse. There could have been 36 of them.

As he descended the stairs, he got close enough to make out their features.

*Shit*, he thought. One of them was Addak Dendrak. He avoided making eye contact.

The lead matriarch was the first he'd seen who was not a ratbody. She was his size, middle-aged, and had a face that inspired nightmares. It was scarred and burned. She was missing teeth and her nose had been broken several times.

With a kind of sickening instinct, he knew she was a female red. He suspected most didn't survive through their fertile years.

"The issue of your sanctuary was not easy for us to decide," she said. Spittle flecked uncontrollably through the gaps in her teeth whenever she said an *s*.

Val- nodded. He didn't like where this was going, but he wanted to see it to the end.

"Addak has agreed to sponsor you," she continued, "but we will require you to assist us in our war against the humans."

There it was. He knew they would want something like this. He could only hope they might see reason.

"I have an alternate proposal," he said.

The Matriarchs did not look amused, but their leader nodded.

"I can help the goblins in other ways. I'm unique. I'm the only person who's both human and a goblin. I can be a bridge between your worlds. I can go to the High King and ask for peace."

Addak grimaced. When she spoke, it was with a barely-concealed rage. "You're talking about negotiating our surrender. You generously offer to crawl to the Council and beg for mercy on our behalf. And

what offer to you think the Wardens will accept, short of our complete destruction?"

"And what's *your* plan to stop them," said Val-. "I know the High King managed to trap the greatest part of your army in Morovia. You don't have the numbers. Matriarch Ored told me you just lost another city.

"It was what, Algeld Grettham? If I understand goblin naming, that puts the human forces pretty close to *Algeld Hamrak*. Or am I wrong?"

"I'm volunteering to go to human territory. They've labeled me a black magician. The Wardens will probably kill me on sight. Yet I'm willing to take that risk if it'll lead to peace."

Addak growled, "As long as I live, we will make no concessions to those that would destroy us."

"It's not your decision, Addak," the red gently reminded her. She continued, "He's right about the state of our forces. We need some breathing room, and an armistice could buy us the time to regroup. I think we should let him try."

The smaller Matriarch glowered at the room generally, but it was apparent that the will of the majority was against her. "Just so you know, Lesheik, if you do this, it will be over my protest."

"Noted," said Lesheik.

The human forces were camped above the ruins of Algeld Grettham. Val- had traveled there underground, and it was an experience he was

eager never to repeat. Refugees clogged the access tunnels, and the cold murk of their grief overwhelmed his normal telepathic filters. By the time he reached the surface access, his face was stained with tears.

He took a long break on a hill overlooking the camp. Once he'd regained his composure, he spent a couple of hours gathering his focus. He'd need to be at his best for this mission.

There was no way of knowing how many Wardens accompanied the King's retinue, but Val- knew the man. He didn't take unnecessary risks. If the magician were seen too soon, he could kiss his life goodbye.

Luckily, Val- was good. Shadows surged to engulf him. He dodged through the guards' blind spots. The wind pretended not to notice him. When he got to the royal tent, he felt like howling.

He didn't, though. Instead, he slipped inside.

"Hello, Senestrion," the High King said, not bothering to turn and face him. Val- ground his teeth in annoyance.

"I go by Val-," the young man said.

The High King laughed. "You do? That's wonderful. I knew I was right about you."

Val- was disarmed. He'd so far only seen the High King's back, but he could feel himself falling into the orbit of his power. He couldn't believe the man had betrayed him.

But he did. Val- steeled himself and concentrated on the business at hand. "I have a message," he said.



"Aren't you going to ask me about your son," the King asked.

It was a low blow, made worse by the fact that it struck a place he didn't even know was vulnerable.

"I- I-," he stuttered. "I'd like to see him."

"You know that can't happen," the High King said.

"But, if-" Val- mumbled. "The Council might change its mind."

The High King turned. His face was stern. There was no hint of warmth, but plenty of steel. "The Council does what I say, and your return would prove problematic for me. Besides, Sharel has moved on."

Val- reeled. He grabbed for equilibrium by reminding himself that this was entirely expected. It almost worked.

"I know she was always more interested in magic than in me, but we have a bond-"

"She's married to the King of Morovia now," said the High King.

"I thought your family didn't marry ordinary royals," Val- said. It was a stupid thing to say, but he'd long since lost all control over this conversation.

"Yes," said the King. "We marry magicians to keep our magic strong. Except thanks to you, my heir carries the blood of Maril and Gard, and Sharel is now free to secure more valuable alliances. So, you see why your return wouldn't work for me."

*Wouldn't work for him* - what the fuck was that supposed to mean? The man was talking about his life. It didn't have to work for anyone but himself.

"You know what else wouldn't work, my killing you," said Val-.

It was not his best judgment.

"You could do that," said the King, "but you won't."

Had Heural the Farsighted predicted even his change of heart? It was true Val- wasn't killing anymore, but maybe he could make an exception, this once . . . for the greater good.

"You seem awfully confident that I've reformed myself," said Val-

"Actually," said the King, and suddenly, the air in the tent became hot and stifling, as if the pressure had risen dramatically.

Val- turned to see the Warden Ardent. The general's face was one of tectonic rage. Val- chalked this one up as a lesson learned.

"We're letting him go," said the High King. "He has a message to take back to the Matriarchs. He's going to tell them 'never'."

## Chapter 35

The red Matriarch, Lesheik Gauntlet, scowled.

"I won't fight," Val- repeated.

"Why not," she asked.

Val- beat down the rising knot in his stomach. He really didn't want to answer that question. "Do I really need a reason not to fight," he complained.

The Matriarchs were impassive. Clearly, he did.

"All right," said Val-. "Here's reason one, my son, Val-**argh-fucking-shit-balls-ON!**"

After catching his breath, he continued, "Reason two, my wife . . . well, my friends. Reason three, I want to find the part of myself that isn't a weapon."

"You were a weapon for the humans," said Lesheik.

"Yes," sighed Val-, "and I regret it. I never thought about the harm I was doing, about what was lost because of me, but I know now, and though it's too late to take it back, I just want to stop."

"That's our problem," the goblin said. "You killed so many of our kind, of your own kind, on behalf of the humans. Yet now that the time has come to pay back the debt you owe, suddenly your principles interfere."

"You don't understand," said Val-. "It was discovering that I was one of you that gave me those principles."

"So, you refuse to fight for us like you fought for them?"

Val- said nothing.

"So you refuse to fight for us like you fought for them," the matriarch repeated.

"Yes," admitted Val-.

"Why," asked Lesheik.

Val- couldn't answer. Was their cause less just? Were their methods less humane? Were their people less deserving? As far as he could tell, they weren't, but he didn't want to fight.

"I can't," he said. "I lived with them my entire life, and yes, some of them, especially the powerful ones, are exactly what you fear, but most aren't. They're just ordinary folks who mostly don't think about goblins at all, except when you're invading."

"So, your heart is still human," the matriarch said.

"Maybe," said Val-, "but the rest of me is both. I think in time my heart will grow to match.

"I mean, you know I lost everything when I refused to fight you, right? I was a hero to them. I might have even survived being a goblin."

Some of the Matriarchs seemed to soften, but then Addak spoke.

"I'm sure your journey has been very inspirational, but we are not dealing in abstractions or platitudes. The humans are on their way here to kill us, and if you decide to just 'sit it out,' you will be complicit in our destruction."

With that, the moment died. Val- could feel their minds close. He was cornered.

He had no good argument. She was completely right. When the

humans came and collapsed Algeld Hamrak, an incalculable amount of goblin blood would be on his hands. He probably couldn't stop it, but he could give his all to help them resist.

He was strong. If he turned his blade against the human armies .

. . .

"I won't fight," he said.

To her credit, the elder red looked ashamed. "I'm sorry to hear that," she said. "Now we have no choice but to go with our back-up plan. We will complete the resurrection of Senestrion."

A cold shock of betrayal threatened to drown Val- in its icy embrace. On the other hand, it made perfect sense. He'd have done the same thing in their place. It still hurt, though.

"You have no right," he said.

The lead Matriarch shook her head sadly. "We may not have the right, but we have the power. Even one extra magician might enable the survival of thousands."

So Val- kicked her in the chest.

The fight began. Almost instantly, Val- was outmatched. The strongest fighters, Addak and Lesheik, were enough individually to test his limit. In a group, even the weaker ones were a threat.

Val- had no hope. There was no escape from the Heart of the Race, even if he survived the Matriarchs' assault. He was running on pure instinct.

The crazy architecture of the Mother's Sanctum worked to his advantage. As he leapt through the lattices, his enemies were only

able to take passing swipes at him. It was a battlefield designed to facilitate the desperate last stand of an inferior force, and it was working perfectly.

Below him, the lead Matriarch was entering the rage that characterized her breed. That effectively took her out of the fight, as she could not think clearly enough to chase him through the Sanctum's structure. Of the rest, most were not fast enough to keep up with him.

That left Addak. She cornered him near the Sanctum's highest point.

"When I saw you with Matronexa, I felt sorry for you," she said. Val- would have loved to tell her what she could do with her pity, but she was armed and he was not. He felt it was best to be diplomatic.

"Thank you," he replied.

"I don't feel that way any more," she said, taking a swipe at him.

Val- tried his most charming smile. "Doesn't your honor as a soldier prevent you from attacking an unarmed foe?"

She thrust hard at his stomach. He managed, just barely, to slip out of the way.

"Yeah," she said, "but my experience as a general tells me it's a good idea."

"Oh, good," Val- said.

"Why good," she asked, chopping at him.

**"BECAUSE NOW I WON'T FEEL BAD WHEN I REACH INSIDE YOUR CHEST AND RIP OUT YOUR STILL BEATING HEART!"** He said it with the full force of the Voice. As expected, her resistance had not increased. She stumbled backwards and slipped off the edge of the latticework.

Her sword clattered on the ground below. She'd grabbed the edge just in time. She was at his mercy. He could finish her off, evade the red, and pick off the others one by one. Maybe seal the Sanctum and escape through whatever bolt-hole the goblins left themselves.

He was good. Perhaps even good enough.

He looked down at Addak. She didn't dare pull herself up while he was standing over her. He could see the hatred in her eyes.

She wanted to kill him, but to his surprise, he didn't hate her for it. He understood where she was coming from. She was afraid, and he offered no reassurance. He knew well that sort of anger.

"I don't want to kill you," he said. "I know you still think of me as the evil human who served with Ardent, but I've given up fighting. I won't hurt the humans, and I won't hurt you."

He stooped down and offered her his hand.

She took it and allowed him to pull her to safety. Then she stabbed him in the gut.

As he sank to his knees, she leaned in and whispered in his ear, "At least you'll die as yourself. It's more than you deserve."

It was a deep wound, made by a magician at the height of her powers. Val- couldn't stop the bleeding. He died.

## Epilogue

The war continued for many years. On both sides, many people died. On both sides, the strongest warriors were considered heroes.