

Heir to a Lost Sun

Caverns of Stelemia, #1

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To my wife, Kristen and my son, Kaleb. I love you both very much. Also to my cats, who have asked to remain nameless to maintain their mission secrecy, as they plot to take over the world one dirty kitty litter at a time!

Prologue

Semira.

Semira watched her father emerge from the gaping black mouth of the limestone passage and wondered what he'd think if he knew his beloved daughter meant to kill him. Liana, Semira's younger sister, followed him, her face haggard and dirty.

Upon seeing Semira standing there in the dark, he passed his torch to Liana, then took something out of a metal case and held it up. It looked like a playing card in his hand—thin and metallic, with no discernible use. As her father stopped in front of her, Semira asked, "You've been gone a month... was it worth it?"

He put the item back into its protective case. "Our visiondreams never told us what it does, though I'm confident once we learn what it is our journey will not have been for naught."

Semira wrapped her fingers around the glistening, wet stalagmite beside her and squeezed. Why did he have to mention the Dreams? He knew she hated talking about them. She was a scion like him, yet the dreams had never come to her.

They have found it. The item must be destroyed, the voice in her head raged.

The voice had first come to her after a terrible fever three years past. The best healers in Sunholm—Semira's home village in the dangerous subterranean regions of the Nether—had not been able to cure it and had believed she would die. Somehow, she'd lived. And as she'd been recovering, the voice had begun to whisper. At first she'd mistaken it for her own thoughts, but it hadn't been long before she'd realized it was something separate from her, a mysterious presence lurking in the dark recesses of her mind.

"What's with the frown?" her father asked.

Semira let go of the stalagmite and wiped her hand on her pants. She'd not meant to let him see her bitterness. "I'm glad you've returned, Father."

He gave her a long look, then stepped forward and embraced her. "I know you're upset at me for not taking you. It's dangerous heading so deep into the Nether, and I didn't want to endanger both my girls."

That wasn't why she was angry and they both knew it. Semira didn't have visiondreams, which meant she was an outsider in her own home. That was why he hadn't taken her.

Something caressed her soul. *You are special, young one. You do not need the dreams. You will save us all.*

Her father pulled away and kissed her on the forehead. "I must leave you now and meet with the librarians so they can study the artifact. We'll talk later." He patted her on the head and took back his torch, then moved off toward Sunholm.

Liana hugged her next and didn't let go until Semira hugged back. "Are you alright?" Liana asked as she pulled away.

Semira ground her teeth together and nodded.

Look at Liana feigning sisterly love, Semira thought. As if she'd not come along and ruined Semira's life. Semira had once been Father's favorite... until Liana'd had her first visiondream. Oh, Father loved Semira still, but he was also disappointed in her, and his disappointment had eventually led her to hate him. Even worse, she couldn't help but hate herself; she was different from the other scions, and they never let her forget it.

"I had another vision last night," Liana said. "It was of a woman with white hair and gray eyes. She stood on a jagged precipice above a lake of fire wearing glorious, shining white armor, and had a metallic bird perched on her shoulder. Broken human bodies lay all around her and hideous machine beasts were tearing them apart. It was horrible." Liana stepped back a few paces. "The strangest thing of all was... she looked like you."

Semira frowned. "But I have red hair and blue eyes. How could I look like her?"

"Her face, the way she moved... it was so like you."

"What do you think it means?"

Liana shook her head. Like most visiondreams, its meaning was ambiguous.

An armored hand slapped Semira on the shoulder, causing her to cower against the cave's wall. Had someone learned of her plan?

"Wrynric, you scared her," Liana said.

The old, bearded warrior laughed and pulled Semira to him, embracing her. She went rigid for a moment, before the familiar, safe feeling of his embrace soothed her. "I missed you," she murmured into his chest, so soft only he could hear.

Wrynric was like a second father to her, and had been the one she'd once turned to for comfort—until the voice in her head had taken on that role. These days, they rarely spoke; he was always either away on patrols or scouring the Nether with her father for strange artifacts. Like many who lived in Sunholm, Wrynric wasn't a scion, but lived with them as part of the Covenant of the Lost Sun. Of all those she planned to kill, he'd be the hardest.

They must all die, or they will destroy us all. The scar on her lower back burned with the voice's rage. It had been there since she'd gotten sick and the voice had first come to her. Somehow, the voice was linked to the old wound, almost like—

"I brought you something special," Wrynric said, rummaging through a pocket. "I found it in the Dead City where we found the artifact."

The young Librarian, Erinie, came and stood next to him, nodding in greeting. Semira forced herself to be civil and nodded back. Neither of them liked the other, but Semira figured the least they could do was pretend they didn't want to strangle one another.

Wrynric put an egg-shaped object with faded markings on it in Semira's hand. "Screw it open."

Semira rotated the top half of the object until it popped off, revealing an identically shaped object inside. It was a little smaller than the one around it, but had the same markings.

"The next one opens too, and the next. They get smaller and smaller," Liana said.

Semira turned it over. "What is it?"

Erinie grinned. "I think it's a child's toy."

Semira had to stop herself from throwing it into Erinie's face. Closing the item, she put it in her pocket. It would be something to remember the old warrior by when he was dead.

"Come on, we need to get to the library," Wrynric said.

Semira backed against the cave's wall so they could get by. "I have something I must do first. I'll see you all at sixteenth hour."

They said goodbye and headed toward Sunholm. Liana lingered to hug Semira again, then raced after them. Semira watched until they disappeared through the torch-lit metal gates. When she was certain they were not coming back, she spun on her heel and stormed away.

She strode through two limestone chambers filled with sharp stalagmites and passed half a dozen side tunnels before finding the one she sought. The tunnel was devoid of torchlight and slick with moisture, but she was more sure footed than the first time she'd come there, following the directions of the voice in her head. Since then, she'd walked the tunnel dozens of times; today, she didn't miss a single step.

When Semira reached her destination, she waited. Minutes later, the scuff of a boot alerted her that the man in the darkness had arrived.

His voice spoke softly in her ear, "Have they found it?"

"Yes."

"Where are they taking it?"

"To the library."

A harsh intake of breath came from somewhere behind her, but Semira stood motionless and unafraid.

Tell them you will help them. They must retrieve the item and kill the scions. When they succeed, you will have saved us all.

"I'll help you."

"How will you help us, scion?"

"Don't call me that," Semira snapped. "I'm no scion."

A brief pause. Then, "How will you help us?"

"In three days' time, I'll kill the guards at the gate. When they're dead, you can begin your attack."

"Three days?"

"I need time..." She swallowed a lump in her throat. "To prepare."

"You would betray your own?"

Semira saw red. "My own? They're not my own. I'm not like any of them. I'm nothing to them."

"They love you, and you love them. You have lived with them your whole life."

They do not love you. They pity you and make fun of you behind your back. Your own mother disowned you.

What the voice said was true. All of it.

“I may have loved them once, but no longer.” Semira’s voice almost broke. “I’ll kill the guards, and you’ll attack. Retrieve the item, whatever it is, but leave my family to me.”

The man was silent for so long she thought he’d left her there alone, but then he spoke. “If you do this, there will be no going back. Do you understand?”

“I do. When they’re dead, I want to join you.”

Semira heard laughter. Female laughter. She spun round. “Who’s here with you?”

A torch burst to life, and Semira had to cover her eyes until they adjusted to the light. Around her stood two dozen black-clad figures, all wearing strange masks over their faces. They all looked female except for the man in front of her, who stood six feet tall and had two short swords sheathed at his waist. The man’s eyes were dark, fathomless pits as they stared out at her through the eye-slits of his mask.

Semira licked her dry lips. “Who are you?”

“You may know us from the old tales. We are those who hunted the machine worshipers and extinguished their Sacred Lights. They think us dead, but we only slumbered.”

Semira studied him, then the women. “I know what you are. You’re the Knives of the Divine Dwaycar.”

“Good girl. You may have a place among us, if we succeed.”

You will succeed. You will stop the prophecy from coming to pass. You will save us all.

THE BLOODY DAGGER TREMBLED in her hand. It had been so easy to sneak up on the two guards at the gate and slit their throats. They’d trusted her as one of their own, and now their blood dripped from her fingers. It shouldn’t have been so easy. They were the first people she’d ever killed, and she’d known them her whole life. It should’ve been the hardest thing she’d ever done... yet it hadn’t been.

She stared at the growing pools of blood. What had she done?

The Knives of Dwaycar emerged from the darkness at the edge of town, swords and javelins in hand. Semira waved to them from the guardhouse beside the open gate.

The male Knife hurried over, then scanned the courtyard at the center of town. “Good work; the scions still sleep. Now stand back and let us do what must be done.”

She grabbed his arm, forcing him to face her. “Remember to leave my family to me. They’re in the repository, helping the Librarians study the artifact.”

He nodded once and she let him go. His hand made a sweeping gesture and as one, the female Knives charged through the gate. They began kicking in the doors of the nearest houses, ready to butcher those inside and set fire to their homes.

As smoke and screams filled the air, Semira began to pace in and out of the gate. She longed to join in the bloodletting. These people, her scion kin, had tormented her all her life. They’d teased her, spat on her and called her names.

Semira stormed back into the guardhouse and kicked one of the dead guards in the side, turning him over so his vacant eyes stared up at her. “You deserve this, all of you,” she shrieked, falling to her knees as great sobs racked her body. “You deserve this, you deserve this. You do.”

Do not weep for them, my love. This is necessary. When the scions are dead and the device is destroyed, we will leave here and be as one forever.

I'd like that.

Semira dropped the dagger and studied her trembling hand. Already the blood on it had dried. Soon the slaughter would be over, and she would be able to wash her hands and forget what she'd done.

Never forget. This is the day you saved us all.

Semira screwed up her face. “I want to forget—their names, their faces... their screams.”

The presence inside Semira's mind stroked her soul, and a feeling of peace settled over her. *You are a hero, the voice soothed. There are tens of thousands of people out there who will never know that you saved them by stopping the prophecy from coming to pass. But you and I will remember, as will your brethren who fight with us this day.*

She got back to her feet. *I am a hero. I have saved us all. My kin got what they deserved.*

Remember that. Always.

A black-clad woman emerged from the burning village, her eyes reflecting the flames. With a gloved hand, she pointed toward the repository. “The survivors have fled there. Come, Sister, and finish what you started.”

Semira took the sword the woman offered and followed her toward the repository. The smell of burning flesh hung heavy in the air. It was time. Time to end the lives of all those she had once held dear. Father, Liana, her hateful mother and... her heart ached... beloved old Wrynric.

If fate granted it, Semira would get to kill that vile, self-important husk of a woman, Erinie too. How good it would feel to spit in the Librarian's face and drive a sword into her guts.

Semira walked among the dead and dying, the flames and blackened metal, almost oblivious to it all. Built into the side of the chamber wall, the repository loomed ahead, orange flames reflecting off its glass windows.

The heat evaporated the last of Semira's tears. She arrived at the repository door and paused to take a deep breath.

When her lungs had filled with smoky air, she kicked the door and it flew open. A guard charged her, his spear-point aimed at her stomach. Hardly noticing him, she side-stepped his attack and cut open his belly as he went by.

Countless hours of weapons training with Wrynric had served her well.

Semira walked among the shelves of books and computers, nearing the large, golden globe forged into the shape of the Lost Sun. As she went past, she turned up her lip. The first verse of the Sacred Oath of the Covenant of the Lost Sun was written over it...

We who are chosen to carry the lineage of the scions through the ages of the future untold must keep the bloodline pure, protect those who are of the blood and preserve the knowledge handed down to us from our ancestors.

Semira had now broken that oath.

Just like her father before her. Oath breaking must run in the family.

Several of the female Knives fanned out around her, killing anyone unfortunate enough to have not fled to the upper floor. Few guards were around, which meant the attack had taken them by surprise.

Liana gazed down at her from the railing on the second floor, and Semira dug her nails into the hilt of her sword. This was it. The torment would soon be over.

Their father came to stand beside Liana, his face as pale as the husks who lived their lives forever in darkness. "Semira. My dear, sweet daughter. I prayed to the Lost Sun that this day would never come."

Semira stopped and pointed at him with the tip of her sword. "I'm here for the artifact. Give it to me."

He shook his head. "It's not yours to take. Please don't do this."

"I need to. I've had visions of my own... of a sort. The artifact is dangerous and it must be destroyed, for the good of us all."

Her father's eyes filled with tears as he watched the Knives cut down the last of his people on the lower floor. When their screams died away, he sobbed, "I'm sorry that I've failed you and that you came to hate us so."

What did he know of Semira's hate? He had always been too busy carrying out the work of the covenant or lost in a visiondream with the other scions to pay attention to her.

The male Knife walked up beside her. "We have come to stop the Prophecy of Ibilirith from coming to pass. That item you hold will destroy us all. Hand it over or die."

Liana cried into their father's side and he draped an arm around her, holding her close. "We don't even know what it is, Dark Brother. My people and yours have been at peace for many years. You could have approached us and stated your concerns, yet you've come here and murdered us in our sleep."

Semira kicked a desk chair over. "Enough talk, Father. Give us the artifact."

Liana pushed away from their father. "You're too late, Sister. Some have managed to escape through the secret tunnels. They have it, not us."

"You lie," said the man beside Semira.

Father laughed. "No lie, spawn of Dwaycar. The item is gone and you'll never find it."

No, the voice inside wailed, the scar on her back searing hot. It cannot be. Kill them. Kill them. Kill them.

A red haze descended over Semira, and she ran up the stairs. A guard threw a dagger at her as she reached the top but she ducked under it and charged her father. He turned to watch her bear down on him and made no move to defend himself.

"Noooo..." Liana screamed, but their father held her back.

Semira drove her sword into his stomach, feeling it graze his spine and emerge out the other side. He grabbed her by the shoulder; squeezing so hard Semira's bones creaked.

"I knew this day would come," he said, in a strangely calm voice. "I saw it in a dream years ago. If I'd known it was today... Your sister—please don't hurt her—"

He coughed blood. "I hoped my vision was wrong and that you didn't hate us so. You're my daughter... How could—"

He fell to his knees, dragging Semira down to hers, his other hand still holding Liana back. "Do not walk long in the dark, Daughter. Return to the light of the Lost Sun, or you'll become a slave to darkness forever."

With those words, he let go, then slid sideways to the ground and breathed no more. Semira stared down at him. "I feel... I feel..."

What?

"You killed him. You killed him!" Liana cried, kneeling beside their father and cradling his head in her arms. She looked up. "Why, Sister? Why?"

Hurry and finish this. You must find those who have taken the device.

A guard fell to the floor beside Semira with a javelin lodged in his neck. Out of the corner of her eye, Semira saw the Knives of Dwaycar forming a half-circle around her. They watched and waited.

Waited for her to finish what she'd started.

Semira wrenched her sword from her father's stomach, feeling his blood splash onto her hand. "I'm sorry, little sister," she said, then rammed the sword into Liana's side.

Liana screamed in agony and scratched frantically at Semira's face, tearing ragged gashes across it. Semira's screams joined Liana's and by the time Semira's voice failed her, Liana was gone.

Someone shook her and continued to shake her until she looked up. It was the male Knife. "We need to leave. The item is not here. A sister has found the entrance to a secret tunnel at the back of the repository."

Semira looked around as blood dripped from her face. It was hard to focus through the pain. The pain in her soul. Where were Mother, Erinie and Wrynric? Why hadn't they been with Father?

The Knife shook her again. "Come on. We must move."

Get up, my love. The device must be found. I will help you find it.

Semira growled, deep in her throat. Tearing the bloody sword from Liana's body, she hurled it over the railing to the lower floor. This was what it took to be a hero. One who saved lives. Who had the courage to do what must be done.

She took a deep breath, then looked up at the Knife. "I think I know who has taken the artifact. Father wouldn't trust it to anyone but his most loyal friend. A man named Wrynric."

He helped Semira to her feet. "Then lead the way, Sister. We must find him and stop the prophecy from coming to pass."

Remember, what you do is for the good of us all.

Semira glanced at the bodies of her father and Liana. No. What I do, I do for myself.

She walked away and left Sunholm to burn.

Chapter 1

Kara.

Kara stood combing her hair on the second-floor balcony of the Golden Keg tavern, enjoying the last few minutes of quiet before her shift. The early evening was so peaceful; she could watch the ships come in, their hulls lit by phosphorescent bacterial colonies growing among the stalactites on the cavern roof. A horn blew from the quartermaster's tower, echoing like music off the wet stone walls of the cavern. A goods-laden cog broke ranks from the others and rowed toward the dock.

Beyond the harbor, the bacteria grew over parts of the vast dormant-stalagmite citadel—the capital city of the caverns, Stelemia. The glowing city towered over the enormous cavern, a primordial monolith carved into houses, stores, taverns and at the very pinnacle, the Halls of the Priest King. It reflected off the smooth, black surface of Crystal Lake and attracted silver fish from the lightless depths to the surface to bask in its reflected radiance.

Kara had lived her twenty years of life within sight of that spire. Her life, like that of her mother's, her mother's and *her* mother's beyond count, had been lived in the cold, dark depths of the Caverns of Stelemia—a vast system of caves lit by bacteria and electric sacred lights, built in an age only spoken of in children's tales and ancient, tattered tomes in dusty reliquaries.

In the caverns, life clung to the light, for beyond it, there was only death.

The sacred light across the street flickered once and then died, plunging the street into darkness.

Kara stopped combing her hair and watched the other lights further up the street. If another went out, they would be in trouble.

When the others remained lit, she leaned over the railing to call to the door boy. "Olly, set some torches at the entrance so patrons can find their way inside."

Olly walked out onto the street and looked up at her. "That's the second one to go out this past month and the Order hasn't even fixed the first one."

"They will; have faith," she replied.

He grumbled and went to get some torches.

Berda called to her from inside the tavern, "Kara dear, hurry up. Your shift is about to start."

Kara straightened her bangs. "I'll be right there."

Kara took one last look at the ships, savoring her last breath of fresh air, then went inside. Berda met her at the top of the stairs leading down to the bar. The crone ran her wrinkled hands down Kara's face, then squeezed her breasts and buttocks and nodded in satisfaction. "That new gown fits perfectly." She kissed Kara on the cheek. "You should make a fine penny tonight."

"Yes madam," Kara replied, and looked down at her dyed pink-and-orange gown. It was low-cut and revealing and had cost her two week's wages. Men found Kara beautiful with the dress on or without it.

"Smile girl, you're not some ninny that's yet to lose her maidenhead."

"Sorry madam."

By the time she was halfway down the stairs, Kara had assumed her flirty, boisterous persona and was prepared for a long night entertaining the tavern's

patrons. When she entered the noisy taproom she took three flagons of ale from the old barman. "Who ordered them?"

He pointed toward three men-at-arms with yellow mushroom insignias on their vests identifying them as soldiers in service to House Mawborne. They sat around a table, rolling dice.

"Watch yourself out there, girl," the barman said. "There's a funny feeling in the air tonight."

"You said that once before and nothing happened. If I recall, it was a good night all round."

He poured himself a drink. "Just be careful."

She chuckled. "I will."

Kara walked toward the men-at-arms. She'd entertained them before but they'd never done more than fondle her. Like many of their type, they spent too much of their meager incomes on ale and dicing and were often left with barely enough coin to sleep with the ugliest wretch from Blind Fish Wharf. It was Kara's job to keep them happy so they'd spend more on booze.

There was only a smattering of other customers present so early in the evening. The other courtesans, Nyla and Mihiri, were working the floor already, their gaudy and revealing clothing eliciting hungry stares and playful groping from a rowdy group of mercenaries. Mensig, the one-eyed bouncer, stood near the entrance and kept watch for trouble. He carried a padded club to beat troublemakers with before tossing them out.

A stranger in chainmail sat in a corner, his face hard to make out in the poor light. His eyes followed Kara as she walked toward the men-at-arms, so she blew him a kiss and he looked away.

"Aye, look boys; it's the buxom beauty of Westhollow come to play with our dice." The fatter of the men-at-arms laughed and took a tankard from her as she arrived at the table. He wore a chainmail shirt that jingled as he moved. Kara handed the remaining tankards to his two companions before he pulled her down onto his lap and gave her a sloppy kiss on the cheek.

Like many men who frequented the Golden Keg, the fat man's breath was foul. It smelled of rotten cheese and sour ale, though she'd grown accustomed to worse.

"Roll the dice for me, love. I want ya to win back me coin," he bellowed. "These bloody robbers ave taken it from me."

Kara grinned, scooped up the dice and shook them, making sure her breasts bounced up and down. When she rolled them, the men were too busy watching her bust to notice. "You scored a seventeen!" She laughed and took a mouthful of ale from his tankard.

He scooped up the pile of copper coins. "I knew you were lucky."

After he pocketed them, he ran a hand up her leg and she giggled playfully.

"Roll mine now m'lady, and if you win I promise I'll buy you a jewel," the short man across from her said.

"Oh, a jewel is it?" She blew him a kiss. "And where are ya going to put it?"

Grinning, he reached over and ran a hand over her breasts. "I'll drop it between them two lovelies and see where it lands."

The other two men roared with laughter as they slammed their tankards on the table. Then the fat one said, "Where are you gonna get coin for a bloody jewel, Sonard? Surely not playing dice with penniless scum like us."

Sonard scowled and motioned for Kara to roll the dice. She scooped them up, shook them, and scooted them across the table. The dice rolled a fourteen. Sonard slammed his fist on the table. "To the dark with ya, woman. There goes me last four coppers."

She reached over and patted him on the cheek. "Better luck next time." He waved her away and went back to drinking. The fat man groped between her legs but she batted his hand away. "You have to pay to touch down there."

He growled like a dog and bit her playfully on the neck, then lifted her off his lap. "Off with ya; you've soured poor Sonard and now we'll have to listen to him whine the rest of the night."

Other customers had entered the tavern so she left to fetch them drinks and entertain them with girlish laughter and womanly flesh. The early hours of the night wore on, and Kara took a quick break to clean herself up.

Berda met her outside the washroom. "Go see to the man in the corner. Nyla said he's got a purse full of coins but he wasn't interested in spending them on her. He said he wanted you."

Kara went to attend him. As she approached, he leaned forward into the light. He was an older man with a beard shot through with gray. A jagged scar ran down his left cheek, and another three that looked like claw marks ran down his neck. He wore loose-fitting chainmail covered by a leather doublet displaying a yellow-circle insignia she'd never seen before. A fine-looking dagger hung at his waist and leaning against the wall beside him was a longsword sheathed in a silver embroidered scabbard.

She gave him her well-practiced radiant smile, showing off her fine white teeth. "Do you need another drink, my lord?"

He studied her a long moment, then lifted his tankard. "Yes, more ale would be good."

Kara took it and filled it at the bar, then returned and placed it before him. He pulled out the chair next to him and motioned her to sit.

She quickly glanced over at Mensig to make sure he knew she was there. The doorman nodded to her, so she collapsed playfully into the chair, maintaining her pleasant smile. The strange warrior put the tankard to his mouth and drank, his eyes on hers.

"Are you a lord?" she asked to break the ice.

He lowered the tankard and chuckled. "What gave you that idea?"

She pointed at his fine scabbard. "That, my lord. It looks beautiful. Not the sort of thing common soldiers carry with them."

He shrugged and took another sip of ale. His eyes were on her but, unlike those of most men, she saw no lust in them. "How have you been treated here?" he asked.

"Treated?"

"Yes. How have they treated you?"

Kara forced herself to keep smiling. What an odd question. Most men didn't care how she was treated; they wanted her on their laps so they could feel her woman-parts and boast about their exploits and have her laugh at their jokes.

"I'm treated well, my lord. Thank you for asking." Kara glanced at her sister courtesans who were entertaining fat merchants at another table. "This tavern is all I know."

He took a silver coin from his purse and lifted it so it caught the glow of the sacred light hanging above the bar. The silver bore the same ring of light bulbs around a crown that was embossed on all coins minted in the Caverns of Stelemia.

Kara tried to take it, but he moved it out of her reach. Still smiling, she put a hand on his leg. If she pleased him, perhaps he would give it to her. She'd never held a silver before. It was a month's wages. "You're handsome, my lord. I can be yours if you wish it."

He swiped her hand from his leg. "Do you know the old tale of the Metal Man behind the door?"

She blinked. "My lord?"

"Do you know it?"

Kara brushed back her bangs and studied him. He looked normal enough, and gave off no threatening vibe. What was he playing at?

"Do you know it or not?" he insisted.

"Yes. My madam used to read it to me when I was a child."

"Then tell me."

"It's a sad story about a man who was courting Lady Ibilirith when she still walked the caverns as a mortal. But then the War in Heaven came, the One God was driven out and Lady Ibilirith and the other divines went to heaven to bring him back. The man—whom she'd left behind—was heartbroken and in despair. He turned himself into metal so he would live forever, then locked himself inside his castle, behind a metal door, hoping she would one day come back for him." Kara paused for dramatic effect. "It is said his voice can still be heard crying out for her if you chance upon his door."

The story was told so children would know how powerful love could be and how it could change the nature of a man forever.

"What if I told you I found the door and heard the Metal Man's voice?"

"I don't know, my lord."

He grabbed her right hand and placed the silver coin in it. "Fetch me another drink, and it's yours."

She gasped, "Really?"

The man nodded and motioned her away. She pocketed the coin, not believing her luck, and raced to get him more ale. When she returned a minute later, he motioned her to sit again. He drank quickly, then set the tankard down, wiped foam from his mouth and let out a satisfied belch.

"It's been too long since I've had a drink." He inclined his head toward the door leading to the back rooms. "Let's go somewhere more private. I must speak with you alone."

Kara beamed at him. Finally, he was speaking a language she understood. She didn't enjoy sleeping with men—most at any rate—but she enjoyed their money and the compliments they gave her. Being a courtesan was a job and it had good

days and bad. His strange questions and aloofness made things awkward, but it was satisfying to know she'd gotten a silver out of it.

Hand in hand, she led him upstairs. Berda sat on a stool in the hallway knitting a new blanket, and she gave Kara an almost imperceptible nod as she went by.

When they arrived at Kara's room, she closed the door behind the man and lit a candle. He leaned his sword against the wall and took a seat at the small table with the candle on it. "Your name's Kara, isn't it?"

"Why yes, my lord. How did you know?"

A faint smile crossed his face. "My name is Wrynric. I'm... an explorer of sorts. I have traveled places few dare tread in search of ancient artifacts."

Kara put her hands behind her back to undo her gown. "You sound fascinating, my lord. I like brave men."

He grimaced. "Leave your clothes on."

She caught hold of the gown before it slid off. "Sorry, I thought..."

"I have things I must tell you. I'm not here to pleasure myself on you."

Kara did up her gown, then reached for him. "That's fine. Some men are happy to pay to talk to a woman."

He gave her a disapproving look and gently pushed her back. "I'm not one of those men."

"I'm a courtesan, my lord. You gave me a silver. That's more than any man has given me." She gave him another one of her smiles. "I'll repay you for your generosity however you like, as long as you don't hurt me."

She'd slept with men far uglier, older and unkind than Wrynric and they'd not given her any silvers. She would do anything he asked in the hopes he'd give her another.

"What you are is not important to me. I'm here because I need to show you something that belongs to you."

She lost the smile as he pulled something from his pocket and held up a strange white item attached to a thick silver chain. The item looked like a playing card, but thicker and with writing on it. At its center was a square indent that appeared to be made of copper and on one end, a red bulb twice the size of a man's thumbnail that seemed to be as dead as the sacred light up the street.

"What is it, my lord?"

"It's an ancient artifact discovered in a ruin far from here."

"I've never seen it before, so how can it belong to me?"

What was he on about? Was it some sort of test? This had never happened before. Other men would have thrown her on the bed and done her then and there, or told her how beautiful she was and how much they loved her. Wrynric was strange, and it was hard to know what to make of him.

"It does belong to you, even if you don't know it yet." He stared into the candle's flame. "This was never meant to happen. You're a half-blood and his one mistake."

Kara frowned. "What are you talking about, my lord?"

He turned back to her, his eyes wet with tears. "Stop calling me lord. My name is Wrynric. I came from Sunholm, a hidden town deep in the Nether."

She backed away a step. "You come from the Great Dark beyond the sacred lights?"

“Yes, but don’t hold it against me, girl. Not everyone who dwells out there is a heretic or criminal.”

“I saw someone who lived beyond the sacred lights once. He was pale and shrunken and vile looking.”

“Indeed, there are people who live in the Nether that look as you describe—we call them husks. It seems the sacred lights of Ibilirith do more than light your path; they are also vital to one’s health. My people regularly came to Stelemia to trade, so we escaped the worst of the ravages of living too long in the dark.”

She continued to keep her distance, interested in what he had to say but not wanting to get too close to someone who lived beyond the sacred lights. Everything she’d heard about people who lived in the Great Dark had portrayed them as sub-human curs.

Yet Wrynric did not seem so bad. Strange, but not evil.

He leaned forward in his chair. “Now stay silent girl, for there’s much I need to tell you and it will be hard for you to understand.”

Not knowing what else to do, she sat on the bed and let him tell his story. After all, if she listened to it, he might give her more coin.

“The story is about your father and the Metal Man behind the door. I told you I heard him and I was not making jest.” Wrynric closed his eyes and spoke in a low, husky voice. “Your father’s name was Arden. He was a great man and was the one who sent me here.”

“My mother never told me who my father was. And I never wanted to know, for he broke her heart when he told her he wouldn’t take us with him. Are you sure this man Arden is my father?”

Wrynric looked uncomfortable. “I’m sure. I met your mother, Kristia, several times over the years. She was a great woman.”

Kara narrowed her eyes. “I don’t recall seeing you before. How come my madam doesn’t know you?”

“It’s been several years since I’ve been here and I never introduced myself to her. The last time I visited was when Arden came to say... goodbye to your mother. I was sorry to hear Kristia passed away soon after we left.”

Kara nodded, feeling old anger billowing up. She pictured her mother lying on her deathbed, bathed in sweat while Kara—her only child—prayed over her. “I didn’t know he came to see her. Many believe Mother’s broken heart was what killed her.”

Wrynric winced. “I’m sorry Arden had to do what he did. But know, he had no choice.”

“No choice?” Kara raised her voice. “Mother loved him and he abandoned her.”

“And Arden loved her too, with all his heart, but as I said—” Wrynric stopped and swallowed, his face a mask of pain. “It doesn’t matter now. We can talk of this later. I’m sorry I brought it up.”

“It’s alright,” Kara said after taking a moment to suppress the bitterness that threatened to spill over. “Just tell me this is going somewhere.”

He let out a relieved breath. “It is. Now listen. You also had a sister called Liana, but I don’t have the time to discuss her now.” He licked his lips. “The first thing you should know is that Arden and Liana were special and shared something called visiondreams. In these dreams, they caught glimpses of the future.”

“Were they fortune-tellers, like at the Great Market?”

He smiled faintly. “No, they weren’t fortune-tellers. In one of their dreams they saw the artifact on the silver chain. After months of the same vision, they decided to go in search of it.

“I accompanied them on a journey deep into the Nether, following the path revealed to them in their visiondreams. After many days of travel through dangerous, unexplored caves we arrived at an underground city, long abandoned and deathly silent.”

Men had told Kara crazy things before—normally when they were drunk—but this tale of Wrynric’s was quickly becoming the most unhinged thing she’d ever heard.

“We walked the concrete passages of the Dead City for a few days and chanced upon a half-open, scorched metal door. We climbed under it and found ourselves in an ancient storage room. Buried under a collapsed part of the wall was the crushed remnant of what appeared to be metallic human bones, the only remains we had seen in the parts of the city we’d explored. Little was left except a leg bone, part of a skull and a skeletal hand.”

“But you said you heard the Metal Man. How could he be dead?”

“I don’t know how to explain the bones. Other than the voice we heard, we saw no sign of anyone or anything in the Dead City. At any rate, gripped in the skeletal hand was the artifact I hold before you. Its location was near enough to where your father and sister had seen it in their visiondreams.”

How could an ancient relic found in some distant part of the world have any connection to Kara? She wound the end of her hair around her fingers. “So, what’s this got to do with me?”

He ignored her and continued, “We were about to head home to study the artifact when we heard something. We followed the sound and arrived at a heavily corroded metal door. A voice was coming from the other side but we couldn’t understand what it was saying.”

She let go of her hair. “Was it the Metal Man?”

“Yes, though we didn’t know it at the time. There seemed to be no way to open the door, so we hammered on it with a stone and the voice stopped talking. I called out and asked who he was and what he was doing there, but he didn’t answer me. After an hour, we were about to give up when we heard him speak again; though sadly, we still couldn’t decipher a word of what he said. Eventually, we gave up trying to communicate with him and returned home to Sunholm.”

Wrynric held up the artifact. “When we got home, we studied this thing in the belief that one of us would be able to activate it like Arden and Liana had seen in their visions. But no matter what we did, none of us got it to work.” He put the artifact down on the table. “We were frustrated and close to giving up when Arden had another dream.” He lowered his voice. “This time, it was of you.”

“Me?”

Wrynric nodded solemnly. “This won’t be easy for you to understand. Your father was a scion. *You* are a scion.”

“What’s a scion?”

“All you need to know right now is the scions were the people I lived with in Sunholm who carried inside them an ancient legacy. You’re a half-blood, for Arden was a scion but your mother was not.”

“Alright, but how do I—”

“Hush, let me explain where you come in. In this new dream, Arden saw you with the artifact around your neck. It was no longer as it is now, for the bulb on it was lit.”

Wrynic paused, as if to gather himself for the final plunge into madness. It was madness. Almost none of what he said made sense.

“Your father said dark times are coming. He said you will be forced to undertake a dangerous journey into the Nether and that you will travel to the Dead City where we discovered the artifact. There, you will walk to the door we heard the voice coming from and open it.”

How could he say such insane things with a straight face? She’d never left the capital before, and there was no way she’d ever go into the Great Dark. She leaned forward. “I’m hanging off your every word. Did my father see what was inside?”

“The Metal Man.”

“*The* Metal Man?”

“Yes, that’s what I said. You spoke to him in a language Arden couldn’t understand.”

“Really?” Kara dug her nails into her leg, trying to stop herself from laughing.

Wrynic frowned but continued. “He saw you enlist the Metal Man’s help and later stand at the head of a great host and lead them against an ancient enemy in the Final Battle to end humanity’s exile here in Stelemia.”

“Our exile? Exile from what?”

He sighed. “We didn’t always live underground. I’m a member of a group called the Covenant of the Lost Sun, and we believe humans came from a world watched over by our namesake—the Sun.”

That statement finally made Kara let loose her laughter. When she could speak, she said, “That was a great story my lord, one of the best I’ve ever heard. Thank you for the silver coin; I hope I’ve pleased you. I’m going to speak to my madam now, so you better leave.”

She tried to stand but he grabbed her and put a hand over her mouth. “I realize I must appear a crazy old fool, but your father saw the future. His visiondreams were real.” Wrynic made her face him. “The ancient enemy is coming and time is running out. I’m here to escort you to our Safehold in the Nether. The home of the scions, Sunholm, is gone, but at Safehold we’ll find a Librarian named Erinie who will help us get to the Dead City so you can speak to the Metal Man.”

Kara mumbled indignantly into his hand but he ignored her protest. “When we’re safely on the road, I’ll tell you everything. When I let you go, gather clothes, food and find a weapon, for we must leave as soon as possible.”

A scream came from somewhere in the tavern. Wrynic swung to face the door, pulling his hand away from her mouth. “Who was that?”

Kara used the opportunity to make a run for it, but he shoved her back on the bed. “You foolish girl,” he hissed. “There are people out there that would kill you for what you are. They attacked Sunholm and butchered your kindred and they may have followed me here.”

“Let me go, please.”

Someone let out a long, drawn-out wail that was cut off by the sound of breaking furniture. Wrynric grabbed the artifact from the table. “Put it around your neck and climb out the window. Head to the Shrine of Lydan in the city of Deep Cave and I or one of my brethren will find you there. Tell no one who you are and make sure you keep the artifact hidden.”

Kara’s heart pounded. “Let me go. I don’t want your stupid artifact—”

“Silence, girl. I know who is out there and he means to kill you. I’ll hold him off as long as I can. Now take the artifact and head to Deep Cave.”

She dug her nails into his arm, a pointless gesture as it was covered in mail armor. “I’m not going to Deep Cave.”

Before Kara could react, Wrynric put the artifact around her neck. As it fell between her breasts, the red bulb flickered to life. Then the world spun and she fell on the bed, unable to move.

Wrynric came to stand over her, his sword drawn. “Arden was right. You’ve woken the artifact.”

The strange paralysis began to ease. “What... What have you done to me?”

“I’m sorry, half-blood. I had to do it.”

She held the artifact up and studied it. The copper square looked like the insides of the machines the Order tended, but the rest, covered in writing, looked alien to her. A wave of nausea made her drop it and wretch on the bed. When the nausea passed, she tried to take the artifact from around her neck but Wrynric stopped her.

She fought him. “Take it off. I want it off—it’s making me sick.”

“Your father said you must leave it around your neck for his vision to come to pass. You are the one who’ll return us from exile.”

“No, let me take it—” She froze as boots thumped down the hallway toward the door.

There was a scuffle outside and Berda cried out in pain. Wrynric positioned himself between Kara and the door. “Open the window, half-blood, climb out and run as fast as you can. Keep low for a few days, then catch one of the trader caravans to Deep Cave.”

Kara’s blood went cold as the footsteps stopped outside her door. Wrynric shoved her toward the window. “Get going, girl. Now.”

The door burst in and a man garbed head-to-toe in black leather armor stepped into the room. He wore a black mask depicting an ugly human face, his cold, dark eyes visible through its narrow eye-slits. He held a short sword in each hand, both dripping blood. The man looked at Wrynric, but then his gaze fell on Kara and the glowing artifact hanging between her breasts.

Kara’s heart skipped a beat as the man’s malevolent gaze lingered on her. When his eyes switched back to Wrynric, he raised his swords. “You gave her the item, you fool,” he said in a soft, almost mournful voice. “You should have died with the rest of your people back at Sunholm.”

“Leave her be, Dark Brother. Your fight is with me.”

“No, my fight is with her. I cut down her brethren in Sunholm for that device. She cannot be allowed to fulfill the prophecy.” He gestured at Kara with a sword.

“If I had known of her existence sooner, she would have died long ago. Her death will be for the good of us all.”

Suddenly he lunged for Wrynic, and the old man barely managed to parry the blow. Kara screamed as the two men fought one another. If their fight carried them away from the door, she could run past them and flee the room.

As she waited for the chance to escape, her eyes fell on Berda, who lay on the floor in a pool of blood outside the door. Further along the hallway was another body draped in a brightly colored dress. Nyla.

Oh no, no...

“Get out the window, girl,” Wrynic yelled as he parried a thrust. “I’ll hold him off to give you time to escape. Go to where I said I would meet you and wait.”

She stared at him, her breath coming fast. Mensig. Where was he? “Help me, Mensig. I need help.”

Wrynic dodged a savage downward blow of the black-clad man’s swords. “He’s dead, girl. Get out of here. I can’t hold him off much longer.”

Blood ran down Wrynic's face and he looked like he was already tiring from the fight. His longsword was too big to use in such cramped quarters and Kara didn’t have to be an expert fighter to know the old man was doomed. Sparks flew as the swords rang together.

She had to escape before he was killed.

Kara pulled the window open and took one last look at Wrynic, then climbed outside and dropped to the stone street one story down. It was lit by sacred lights, but shadows were everywhere and anything could be hiding in them. The clang of weapons rang in her ears as she ran away from the Golden Keg.

Her home.

A patrol of spear-wielding town watch raced toward the tavern, but only a handful made it inside before the rest were intercepted by three black-clad figures charging them from the decorated stalagmite garden beside the inn. The watch fought bravely but were driven back.

Kara ran down a narrow street away from the fighting. She needed a moment to gather herself and work out what to do. Taking shelter in the shadows beside a house, she listened. Voices were coming from the buildings around her as people woke to the sound of fighting. A dog barked and a bell tolled farther down the street, calling more of the watch to arms.

Torches appeared from a side street and a dozen more town watch hurried toward the tavern. Kara leaned around the edge of the house and watched them charge into the fray.

Smoke billowed from the Golden Keg’s windows and flames engulfed the curtain in her room. A black-clad figure dropped to the street from one of the upper windows of the tavern and swiftly fled into the shadows. More black-clad figures armed with short swords raced through the front door and disappeared down another street.

Kara listened for a long time. The sound of battle moved away, only to be replaced by that of running feet. People arrived by the dozens to fight the flames. They set to work hauling water from a nearby fountain that collected moisture that dripped from the cavern roof.

She pondered what to do. If she went back to the tavern to find out if anyone survived, she risked being caught by one of the black-clad murderers who might still be around. She sobbed, her stomach twisting in knots. She couldn't leave them. She'd known them her whole life!

Something exploded in the taproom, sending flames in all directions. Part of the second floor collapsed and all the people fighting the fires could do was let it burn.

Kara covered her eyes. Her friends—no, family—were all in that tavern and now they were dead. Everyone she loved was gone. Murdered by strangers and left to be consumed by flames.

What was she going to do? She'd never been on her own before and knew little beyond life in the tavern. And if one of the Priest King's Inquisitors saw the artifact... they'd torture her then banish her to the Great Dark!

It took several deep breaths to bring her mind back into focus. She'd let her fears run amok. If she was to survive, she needed to keep them under control. She must also learn to make do on her own.

The artifact still glowed from between her breasts, making her visible in the shadows. She snatched it viciously from around her neck. *Get rid of it and go into hiding. I still have the silver coin. That will be enough to get by while I decide what to do.*

Kara crept around the back of the house and hid the artifact in a small mushroom garden. The light bulb went out as soon as it lost contact with her. She turned to leave but a wave of nausea and dizziness made her fall to her knees.

What was happening? It started after she'd let go of the artifact.

The dizziness became so bad she risked passing out. Before it got any worse, she staggered back to the garden and fell down, crushing the mushrooms. She felt around for the artifact and her left hand fell on it just as she was about to throw-up.

Kara put the chain back around her neck and as soon as the item touched her skin, the dizziness and nausea passed as quickly as it had come. She lay in the garden until she got her breath back, then sat up and peered down at the glowing artifact.

What was it? Why did the black-clad man want it? More important, how could she get rid of it?

If there was a way to get rid of it...

Time to work that out later. For now, she needed new clothes and somewhere safe to hide. The red light was visible through her courtesan gown and would draw attention.

More people came to haul buckets toward the tavern as the flames threatened to engulf neighboring buildings. Little was left of her home except flame, charred stone and memories.

Years of cleaning, hauling kegs and later working the taproom floor had toughened her. She would mourn her friends and her home, but she wouldn't let grief consume her like it had her mother. Berda and the rest would want her to stay strong.

Bidding her friends a silent farewell, Kara turned and walked away.

Chapter 2

Aemon.

The coin rolled across the desk and onto the floor before Aemon could scoop it up. He let out an irritated sigh and reached down to pick it up. He had been counting coins for the Royal Bank of Stelemia for hours and his eyes burned with fatigue.

“Two thousand three hundred and fifty-four,” he said under his breath, writing the number down on a slip of parchment. He looked at the pile he had counted and the pile yet to be counted. *So many left. So many.* Junior clerks always got the most boring, soul-crushing tasks and coin counting was among the worst of them.

He was tempted to go drown himself in Crystal Lake.

Aemon turned and found the banker at the desk next to his asleep. “Morgon, wake up. You know what will happen if Rubin catches you napping again.”

Morgon raised his face from its pillow of parchment and coins, still looking half asleep—but he always looked half asleep. Their hours were long and tedious and mostly spent in this small office counting silvers and coppers and filling out paperwork. Though Morgon was twenty-one like Aemon, he was already going bald.

“What time is it?” Morgon asked.

Aemon glanced at the mechanical clock on the wall above the fireplace and was surprised to see how late it was. “It is twenty-third hour.”

Morgon groaned and went back to counting.

Around first hour, Aemon stopped what he was doing. “Hey, do you hear that? It sounds like bells.”

Morgon looked up, his eyes only half open. “Go see what it is. You are ahead of me, so you can spare a moment.”

Aemon went to the window and looked out over the city of Stelemia. At first his eyes were drawn to the monolithic spire at the center of the city. His family was up there somewhere, in the noble quarters near the Halls of the Priest King. Did they still think of him—their fourth and youngest son they had sent to languish at the bank?

The bells continued to ring. He found it hard to force his gaze away from his old home. Since arriving at the bank he had spent many an hour staring at his former home, longing to run through its countless halls, arches and colorful mushroom gardens.

Why is it so hard to leave the past behind? The bank is my life now, whether I like it or not.

Quenching his nostalgia, he sought out the source of the alarm. “I think something is happening near Westhollow. I see a large flickering light.”

“Fire?”

Aemon leaned further out the window. “Looks that—” He paused and listened. “Hey, I think I hear fighting.”

Morgon yawned. "It is probably a barroom brawl or something. Poor folk are always fighting one another." He inclined his head toward Aemon's desk. "Get back to work or we will never finish."

Closing the metal shutters, Aemon went back to his desk and resumed counting. It was near third hour by the time they were done. They got up from the pile of coins, made their way groggily to their beds, collapsed onto them and were asleep in seconds.

"GET UP YOU TWO," A voice screeched. "You lazy sods miscounted! This is the third time you have failed your test."

Aemon woke instantly and climbed out of bed already apologizing. When his eyes adjusted to the glow of a torch, he found Senior Banker Rubin glowering at him. "Test? I thought... I am sorry, sir. How much were we off?"

"Two silver, ten coppers."

"But sir... there were over six thousand—" The old man looked so enraged, Aemon's words caught in his throat.

Rubin swung the torch around in front of their faces. "I could find fisher boys with better counting skills than you two." He glared at Aemon and then Morgon, as if to make sure they knew just how angry he was. "Go bathe and have breakfast. I expect you both in my office in two hours."

Aemon glanced at Morgon and tried not to show fear. Senior bankers could smell it.

Every time he and Morgon had been to Rubin's office, they had been assigned the most onerous of tasks—sweeping the floor of the bank's vaults or dusting the gold and silver bars. Jobs better suited to peasants rather than young men of nobility.

What plans did the old man have for them this time?

With one final scowl of displeasure, Rubin left. Aemon and Morgon bathed in the crisp waters of the public baths beside the bank, then started on their breakfast of mushroom and blind-fish soup. As they ate, they discussed what task the senior banker would set them.

"Maybe he is not going to give us a task at all," Morgon said. "He might kick us out of the bank because we keep making mistakes."

Aemon hoped not. His parents would disown him if he lost his job, and he would be forced to fend for himself. He feigned a reassuring smile. "I doubt he would let us go. I think he is going to test us again by giving us the same coins we counted last night—plus or minus a few to make sure we count them correctly." Rubin had done that several times already, and it would come as no surprise to Aemon if he were to do it again.

In the end they found out they were both wrong.

Aemon could not believe what he was hearing. "You want us to go to Deep Cave to loan coin to House Teradith? But... what do we gain by loaning them gold they cannot repay?"

"Do I need to spell it out?" Rubin snapped. "If I do, then there is *no* place for you in this business."

Morgon squirmed in his seat beside Aemon. He might be afraid, but Aemon was not going to let the old man intimidate him. "No. I think I understand perfectly."

“Then explain to me what we are doing.” Rubin jammed his metal quill into the pot of ink, then returned to writing on parchment. So far, he had not so much as glanced up at them since they had arrived.

Aemon worked saliva into his dry mouth. “The bank is attempting to keep the age-old conflict between the Houses of Dworebyn and Teradith brewing. If one side seems to be winning—like House Dworebyn is now—the bank calls in their debts to weaken it until the other house can regroup. You also secretly loan the weaker side coin so they can hire mercenaries to make up for their losses.” Aemon tried not to show his distaste, though it left a foul taste in his mouth. “When a stalemate is reached again, you postpone the debt repayments of both sides but remain ready to loan or call in coin as needed so that the conflict never ends.”

Rubin blew on the parchment to dry the ink. When he was done, he put the paper in a box and started writing on another. “For what purpose do we do this?”

Aemon balled a fist under the table. They did this because the bankers were evil, conniving old men who cared nothing for human life.

And they were trying to mold Aemon into becoming as cynical and heartless as they were.

In a carefully measured voice, Aemon said, “More debt means more power for the Banking Council and the bank’s secret investors. The best way to create debt is through perpetuating conflict, so you can strip the adversaries of all their assets—piece by piece—until you eventually own them all. When that happens, they are completely under your control.”

Rubin looked up and actually smiled. For the first time ever. “A most astute assessment, young man. Your mother was right; you are a shrewd one.” His eyes switched to Morgon and the edge of his mouth curled. “What have you got to say for yourself?”

Morgon caught his breath, his face draining of color. Then he mumbled, “What about the trader caravans disappearing in the Limestone Caves?”

Damn. Aemon had forgotten those rumors.

Rubin’s smile disappeared. “Do not let that matter trouble your thoughts. The Banking Council has calculated the odds of you going missing and the odds are acceptable.”

Morgon shifted in his seat. “What are the odds?”

The old man’s eyes became as hard as obsidian. “The odds are acceptable.”

The two young men turned to one another. The same fear Aemon felt was mirrored in Morgon’s eyes. Neither of them had left the capital before and both had heard rumors about trader caravans disappearing on the road to Deep Cave. The journey used to be considered safe and was a routine trade-route for the merchants who traveled all throughout the Caverns of Stelemia. Now, two in ten caravans never made it.

Ominously, some of the caravans had been escorted by companies of guards, yet still had gone missing. It was the same story each time. No bodies, wagons or evidence of struggle were ever found.

The cave networks of Stelemia were vast. Some of the passages were carved out by human hand; others were natural, and no one had explored them all.

Anything could be out there in the darkness between the settlements and cities...

A few years back, while sitting at the office window staring at his old home, Aemon had seen a pale gray monster in Crystal Lake. The thing was the size of a trade cog and it had taken two war galleys armed with ballista to drive it back out into the black depths of the lake.

Aemon had also read of eyeless men who wore no clothes and hunted by sound in one of the bank's intelligence reports. The report claimed they had been sighted near the edge of the Great Dark and that they had carried bone weapons. Two scouts had followed them into the Great Dark beyond Stelemia but quickly lost them in the maze of passages.

The journey through the Limestone Caves would be dangerous, and he and Morgon were not fighters. Who knew what they might encounter out there?

In a fit of assertiveness, Aemon said, "When we get back from this trip I demand Morgon and I both be promoted to full-ranking clerks. We are sick of doing the chores no one else wants to do."

While he waited for the old man's answer, Aemon fought the urge to bite his nails—something he did when nervous. He could not let Rubin see his fear.

Rubin studied him but said nothing. Clearly the old banker expected more.

Aemon cleared his throat. "You want us to perpetuate the conflict in Deep Cave by bolstering the losing side. That sort of underhanded dealing needs to remain secret." He gripped the edge of Rubin's metal desk to steady himself. "If you trust us enough for such a clandestine task, you can trust us to serve the bank as full-ranking clerks in the future."

"That is acceptable," Rubin said, a little too quickly. "You leave in two days' time."

Aemon leaned back in his chair. That had been easier than he had expected.

When they were outside Rubin's office, Morgon whispered, "How did you find the guts to stand up to him? There is no way I could have done that." He grimaced. "Did you see his face when you said it? I thought we were done for."

"Well, one of us had to stand up to him or we would be stuck counting coins forever. I for one have greater aspirations. If we are expected to put our necks on the line for the bank and engage in illegal dealings, then they can start to treat us with more respect."

Something occurred to him. Did he really want to be promoted in the bank? What other vile things would they expect him to do when he wielded more authority in its ranks? Maybe one day, in the distant future, he would be elected to the Banking Council and could set about making it an honorable institution that actually helped people, rather than hurt them.

That night, Morgon and Aemon were not instructed to count coins but were given their first night off since Ibilirith's Den Sveta celebrations two months earlier. Unlike most young men who were given a night off, they did not go out drinking and carousing, going to bed early instead.

The next day passed in a blur. Aemon spent most of it reading a book by Artorius Forgmon the Explorer, who wrote of the strange things he had seen on his travels into the Great Dark.

A few tales stood out in his story. One was of red liquid fire he called lava. Forgmon claimed it was so hot it could melt stone. Another chapter was about a large worm-like creature that could eat through solid rock, and the next about a

citadel filled with severed heads that spoke in a language the author did not understand.

A personal favorite of Aemon's was Forgmon's tale of a giant metal machine he claimed stood as tall as the great trees growing in the Priest King's Botanic Gardens. The same book told of vast, ancient treasure hordes, filled with gold and platinum and hidden behind talking doors.

As interesting as some of the stories were, many seemed too farfetched to be believed.

But then, what would Aemon know? He counted coins for a living and spent his days in the safety of the Financial Promenade of the capital.

Books were Aemon's door to adventure, for his real life was a never-ending cycle of tedium. He dreamed of heroes like Rexus of Acid Lake and imagined what it must be like to wade into battle and come out a conquering hero.

When the dreaming faded upon waking, Aemon went back to counting coins or filling in ledgers and died a little inside, knowing he was not brave or strong enough to be a hero.

THE NEXT DAY, AEMON and Morgon were woken early by a clerk who told them to go to the vault. Once there, they found Rubin overseeing two strongmen who carried a wooden chest full of coins. The strongmen placed the chest on a small cart guarded by three men-at-arms.

Dressed in chain armor, one of the three men approached Aemon and bellowed, "My name's Veladan. Me and the other two louts over there are here to escort you banker boys to Deep Cave." He spat at their feet. "Keep out of our way. You two weaklings wouldn't be the first nobles I've had to rough up a little."

With his humble introduction out of the way, Veladan returned to the ox-drawn cart.

The ox was a fat, pale old creature that looked as if it were on its last legs. Aemon bit a nail. Looks could be deceiving... right?

The bank had more than enough gold to afford a healthier ox and more guards. Many more guards.

Aemon chewed on a slither of broken nail. He knew the bank had not become rich wasting coin on appearance. Perhaps Rubin thought if the wagon and its escort had a façade of mediocrity, they would draw less attention. If the Priest King, the Inquisitors or the houses of Deep Cave ever found out the bank was fueling both sides of the conflict by loaning both houses coin—heads would roll.

Most likely his and Morgon's.

Rubin came to see them off. "Do not return without the writ from House Teradith confirming they have received their coin."

"What of the missing caravans?" Morgon asked. "Should we ask around and see if anyone knows why they are disappearing?"

Rubin waved dismissively. "We do not know the validity of these... rumors... and frankly, will not care until they intrude upon our interests." His eyes glazed over for a moment. "I suppose it would not hurt to find out what you can on the matter, but do not let it distract you from your primary task. Our coin must get to House Teradith."

Morgon did not look pleased. “But what happens if we are attacked on our way there?”

“You defend the gold with your lives,” Rubin replied coldly.

Morgon’s shoulders slumped. “Why not hire more guards or send a banker with more experience?”

“We are already risking enough on this endeavor without sinking more resources into it. Make do with what you have.”

Before Morgon could ask another pointless question, Rubin spun on his heel and walked away.

So that was that.

They were not being sent on this mission because the bankers thought they could be trusted but because they were expendable. The bank risked losing the three thousand gold and a couple of low-ranking clerks, but clearly considered the potential rewards worth the risk. Another few decades of conflict in Deep Cave, and the bank would own the entire city.

The two young men had been under Rubin’s tutelage for five years and the old man had never shown them a pittance of compassion or warmth. His only loves were precious metals, information and power. However, unlike some in the bank, Rubin was willing to risk everything if he had the chance to make a great profit in doing so.

Aemon suddenly felt as worthless to the bank as he did to his own family. Both would cast him aside without any remorse. Well, he would show them. When he completed his task, he would be a real banker. After that, he would find a way to outsmart them all and they would be forced to respect him as an equal.

Before they left, Aemon stared up at the bank. It was hewn out of a hundred-foot-tall stalagmite and lit by dozens of sacred lights. Above the bank loomed the colossal calcium-carbonate city of Stelemia, where the hearts of forty-five thousand people beat. Though he had lived in the Capital Spire most of his life, the sight of it never failed to awe him.

In the upper-class home he grew up in, he could stare out his bedroom window at the vast Cavern of Stelemia. The cavern contained six cities, a dozen towns and the bottomless Crystal Lake, where a hundred ships sailed on black waters. There were other caverns in Stelemia, but none were nearly as large or populated.

Veladan motioned for them to fall in line as the driver got the cart moving. They followed on foot along city streets carved from the floor of the cavern. It was early, so few people were about and the ones who were ignored them. The roads were lit by sacred lights swarming with insects attracted to their warm glow.

Two brown-robed sisters of the Order of Ibilirith were running electrical cable through a shallow trench carved out of the rock. They looked up at the cart as it passed with their usual solemn expressions.

For the Order, Stelemia’s machines and electrics were relics of a golden age—when their goddess Ibilirith had walked the world as a mortal. After Ibilirith’s ascendance to divinity, her followers had remained faith-bound to maintain her technologies. The Order believed she had laid the many miles of power cable that ran between the Serdtse Power Station to all the major cities in Stelemia. The cables brought power to the thousands of sacred lights throughout the caverns. To

the citizens who lived where the phosphorescent bacterial colonies did not grow, the sacred lights were all that stood between them and total darkness.

Aemon waved to the two sisters but they went back to their labors without acknowledging him.

The cart made its way to a warehouse behind the Great Market, where Veladan left to talk to a group of teamsters about joining forces with a trade caravan. All the caravans now traveled with a contingent of armed guards and teaming up with one would increase their chances of making it to Deep Cave alive.

It did not take long for Veladan to find a caravan willing to take them, and minutes later Aemon and Morgon found themselves on a wagon behind the cart with the bank's gold. They sat on sacks filled with dried mushrooms from the night-shrouded farms of Breccia Bonefields, where mushroom caps grew among countless bones.

They waited for other passengers and wagons to join the column; then the drivers whipped the oxen, and they were off. Eighteen armed guards protected the flanks of the fifteen-wagon-strong caravan while Veladan and his two companions walked beside the cart with the coin chest.

As they rode down a backstreet, a hooded figure leapt from the darkness of an alley and landed across from the two bankers.

They both jumped in fright as the figure looked at them—it was a young woman. She smiled, showing perfect white teeth. *Phew*, Aemon thought. She was not there to kill them.

While she looked around for a place to sit, he studied her. She had long red hair, pale skin and a shapely body. Little of her face was visible under her hood and black cloak, but what he could see was enough for him to conclude she was beautiful.

Morgon stared at her open mouthed. Elbowing his friend in the side, Aemon muttered, "Stop staring, fool."

Veladan came to investigate. "What are you doing up there, eh?" he growled. "Have you paid your fare?"

The woman winced. "Of course I paid, my lord. It looked nice and comfy up here and I thought these two kind men would protect me if something were to happen to us out there." She gave Aemon a surreptitious grin. "I can pick a brave man when I see one."

Veladan roared with laughter. "You should have come to me, then. His battles are fought with numbers and ink, while—" He half-drew his sword from its sheave. "Mine are fought with this."

"What's your name?" the woman asked. "Will you protect me if the bad men come to take me?"

The warrior's eyes filled with lust. "My name's Veladan, and you betcha. If these bad men show their faces, send them my way and I'll make short work of em."

She brushed Veladan's cheek with the back of her hand and he hurried back to the cart with a hungry grin on his face. The woman sat down and stared at the floor of the wagon. As they passed under a sacred light, Aemon was surprised to see tears running down her cheeks. She must have sensed his eyes on her, because she looked up at him.

Her tears shone in the streetlights, making his heart ache for her. “Are you alright? What is your name?”

The woman’s left hand touched something hanging around her neck. “My name is Kara and I’m in danger.”

Chapter 3

Kara.

The young man fell over himself to help her, just as Kara had expected he would. “You are in danger? Tell us what is wrong and we can try to help you.”

Both men hunched forward, waiting eagerly for her to say something. She could tell they’d already fallen for her.

Their fawning aside, they could still pose a threat. They mightn’t have had anything to do with what had happened at the tavern—but that didn’t mean they could be trusted.

She came up with a story but kept it vague, to dissuade them from asking too many questions. “A rich merchant wanted me as his mistress. He sent thugs to abduct me, so I fled.”

The balding man slid next to her. “My name is Morgon.” He nodded toward the man who’d asked her name. “And he is Aemon.”

Aemon gave her a shy smile. “Nice to meet you.”

Kara studied them. Both were dressed in fine brown woolen clothing and their boots looked like they’d been polished recently. Morgon’s dwindling head of hair showed signs of gray, though he looked no older than Kara. Aemon, with a handsome, clean-shaven face and short brown hair, also looked around twenty, though he was near a head shorter than her and smaller of frame. His blue eyes shone with intelligence and compassion.

As different as the two men looked, they shared one thing in common—they were naive and probably had little experience with women. It would be easy to manipulate them with a smile here and a gentle touch there.

Hopefully, it wouldn’t come to that.

“I can tell by the way you speak, you’re both nobles.”

They glanced at one another. “Is it that obvious?” Morgon asked.

Kara chuckled, then said, “I’ve known a noble or two in my life. You all speak so... formally.”

Aemon smiled back. “Yes, we are nobles, but we are both fourth-born sons, which makes us of little use to our families. We can still help you, though. Tell us what you need.”

“I want to keep a low profile. If anyone asks who I am, tell them I’m with you.”

“Veladan said he would protect you,” Morgon reminded her. “He and his two companions look like they could take on anything.”

Kara watched the three armed men walking alongside the cart in front of them. They did look formidable, and maybe she could use her courtesan wiles to try to get them to help her. But after what had happened a few nights ago, the world

seemed far more dangerous. Seeing the people she'd grown up with murdered... she wasn't sure if she could trust anyone anymore—even men besotted by her.

Unlike the two naive nobles, Veladan was a shrewd one and recruiting him would be dangerous. He would want more than flowery words and playful touches in exchange for his protection and she no longer had someone like Mensig—the doorman at the tavern—to hold the warrior back if he got carried away. Furthermore, nothing would stop him from taking what he wanted and ditching her at the first sign of trouble.

Then there was the artifact. It would be impossible to stop Veladan from seeing it and asking questions she couldn't answer. And if he thought the artifact was valuable, he might take it from her—which could kill her, judging by what had happened in the mushroom garden back at the capital.

With luck, the black-clad man and his companions would be looking for her back in the city and would never think to look among the trade caravans. If that were the case, she wouldn't need Veladan's help anyway.

Kara tried not to stiffen as Morgon put a hand on her arm. "When we get to Deep Cave we will find you somewhere safe to hide," he said. "Aemon and I work for the Royal Bank of Stelemia and come from wealthy families. We can give you coin and the protection of our family names."

He looked so eager to help, she had to smile. "You're too kind, my lord."

The balding banker sat up straight. "I like hearing you call me that. Say it again."

"Leave her be," Aemon said. "She has been through enough already."

Sighing, Morgon let go and moved away. Kara stared out at the Field of Spikes. She'd never seen so many stalagmites before. They looked like thousands of little spear points poking up from the ground, waiting to impale anyone who dared walk among them. Only the road was clear of them.

The spikes were lit by the faint glow of the bacterial colonies on the cavern roof and stretched for miles on the right side of the highway until they faded into darkness. To her left, the gentle ripples of Crystal Lake lapped against its ancient stone shore.

Every half mile, they passed a metal watchtower lit by three-foot-long mushroom-stem torches and a single sacred light, attached to a cable running through a narrow channel carved into the rock beside the road. The channel led all the way back to the capital and connected with the power hub near the center of the city.

Soldiers armed with an assortment of weapons were stationed in the towers. They protected the road from thieves and the occasional monster that found its way into the cavern from the Great Dark.

One of the watchmen stopped the lead wagon to converse with the driver. Morgon stood up and watched the two men. "I wonder what they stopped us for."

Kara tried to keep her head down and her face hidden under her hood. What if the guard was saying something about her? What if—She caught herself before she let fear override common sense. The man was part of the army, not one of the black-garbed killers.

The wagons set off again, and a message was passed from one man to the next. One of the caravan's guards came to walk beside Kara's wagon and said something

to the driver. The driver's face paled. When the guard moved away, the driver spoke over his shoulder to Kara and the two bankers. "I've just been told there are Inquisitors in the village up ahead. Seems they caught wind of a heretic around here and have come to investigate."

Inquisitors! Could they be looking for me?

Kara clasped the artifact through her cloak and tried to keep her breathing under control. The Inquisitors spent their lives searching for anyone who posed a threat to the divines, the Priest King or those who served them.

What if carrying the artifact somehow made her an enemy of the divines? Maybe Wrynric had stolen it from the Order. It looked like something of theirs. Her chest tightened. Even having spoken to Wrynric, a man who claimed he came from beyond the sacred lights, could land her in trouble.

What am I going to do?

Morgon was looking her way. She didn't need anyone seeing her overreact to the news. That might lead them to ask questions—which could end with her being handed over to the Inquisitors. She stared into the Field of Spikes so no one would see her face and tried to get a hold of the anxiety that threatened to overwhelm her.

"Oh, and one more thing," the driver said, his voice heavy with dread. "Another caravan went missing in the Limestone Caves."

The driver focused on the road again and the two bankers whispered frantically to one another. Why did they sound so afraid? Was it because of the missing caravan or the Inquisitors? If the latter, then they had little to fear—if what she'd heard at the tavern was true.

Inquisitors rarely purged nobles. It was commoners like her who feared them. There were few common folk who didn't know someone who'd lost friends or family to Inquisitorial torture, execution or exile over a silly comment overheard by the wrong ears.

Kara glanced down at herself. She was dressed like a commoner and was the only woman in the caravan. That alone singled her out for notice. Had she made the wrong decision in going to Deep Cave? She bit her lip so hard it drew blood. *Stop it*, she told herself. *There is no point second guessing my decision.*

She was almost out of coin, had no food or water, and only had a knife and her charms to defend herself with. Wrynric had told her to head to Deep Cave, and he was the only one who knew she had the artifact—other than the black-garbed man trying to kill her.

What other option did she have?

Easing up on her lip, Kara fought the urge to burst into tears. She'd cried enough already. Now, she had to be strong.

"What do you think, Kara?" Aemon suddenly asked her.

Kara jumped. She'd been so absorbed in her thoughts, she hadn't noticed the two bankers looking at her. She cleared her throat, letting go of the artifact. "About what?"

Morgon ran his fingers through his thinning hair. "The Inquisitors, of course."

"Oh... I don't know... Why do you think they're here?" She hoped their answer would help calm her fears and get their attention away from her.

“Who knows?” Morgon replied, his voice jittery. “When I was younger, I saw them drown a man in the lake for deliberately breaking a sacred light. They were chanting in ecstasy as they did it.” He shrugged. “Still, drowning is better than being exiled into the Great Dark or thrown alive into the furnace of the Halls of the Priest King.”

“That is not all they do,” Aemon said. “They also throw people into a bottomless pit called the Well of Remorse in the Bastian of Purity. And Lydan help you if you bring harm upon an Inquisitor, a member of a holy order or one of the Priest Kings soldiers...”

Morgon glanced up the road, as if he expected an Inquisitor to leap on him at any moment. “We have nothing to fear, though. None of us has ever traveled beyond the sacred lights nor said ill of a Divine.”

He sounded like he was saying that more to calm his own fears than that he truly believed it. His eyes were on the cart Veladan guarded. What was on it that made him so nervous?

Aemon opened a canvas sack. “I am going to eat something to distract myself. Kara, do you want some food?”

Her mouth watered. “Yes, please. I haven’t eaten since yesterday.”

He handed her a loaf of mushroom bread and a wineskin filled with water. She thanked him, then scarfed down the bread and drank half the water. When she lowered the wineskin from her lips, she found both men laughing. “What?”

“I have never seen someone eat so fast,” Aemon said.

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “I told you I was hungry.”

Further down the road, an old shepherd waved at the caravan from among the spikes as the wagons rolled by. Behind him, hundreds of sheep and swine munched on food scraps from feed troughs chiseled into the cavern floor.

Morgon wrinkled his nose. “Those animals stink. How can he stand being around them?”

“You get used to bad smells,” Kara replied.

“Expect the stench to grow worse,” Aemon said. “There is a village called Klardna up ahead, where half the meat and wool sold in the markets in the capital are sourced from.”

“How do you know that?” Kara asked.

Aemon mumbled something under his breath. Morgon patted him on the back and laughed. “It is like everything he knows—he read it in some stuffy book or banking report. Ask him any question and he will bore you to pebbles with inane facts and figures he once read somewhere.”

The banker was not wrong about the smell becoming worse. By the time they arrived at the edge of Klardna, all three had covered their noses. Sheep, swine, chickens and rats darted about the wagons as they drove along the main thoroughfare. A group of children tried to climb onto one of the wagons but the driver scolded them and they scurried away. The adults in the town spoke in hushed voices, many looking down the street toward the center of town.

The direction the trade caravan was heading.

Were the townsfolk afraid of something? Was it the Inquisitors, or had the people trying to kill her gotten to Klardna first? For a brief moment, Kara

considered jumping off the wagon and running away but decided it would draw suspicion.

When they neared the center of the village, Morgon inclined his head toward a group of people garbed in white who were surrounded by a dozen armed men. “There, look. Inquisitors.”

The Inquisitors stood on a dock beside the road, waiting for their brethren to come ashore from a ship. The sails of the vessel bore the Inquisitors’ golden lightbulb resting atop a bed of healing herbs imposed over a silver shield. The symbol represented all the divines, except Dwaycar the Betrayer.

Three of the figures were male, but a fourth—with a circuit of golden embroidery woven around a pointed hat—was a woman. She was tall and proud, with a face as cold as the waters lapping the stone shore of the lake.

Aemon gasped. “That is Inquisitor General Malaris. She is the Priest King’s left hand and Prime Servant of the Four Divines. It is said she can identify a heretic just by looking at one.”

“Stay quiet,” Morgon whispered as the group of white-clad figures turned to watch the wagons pass by.

Kara lowered her hood and gripped the artifact as Malaris’s eyes fell on her. She tried to look away, but the Inquisitor’s gaze pinned her in place. The Inquisitor General said something to one of her underlings and he studied Kara too. Malaris pointed at the wagons and several of her guards raced over to stop the caravan.

They know about the artifact. They know!

The Inquisitor General strode over to Kara’s wagon. Morgon and Aemon backed away, almost falling over the side. But Malaris wasn’t interested in them.

Her eyes were on Kara.

Kara didn’t move. She didn’t breathe. Everything but Malaris was forgotten.

The Inquisitor stopped in front of Kara and motioned for her to pull back her hood. Kara slowly reached up and removed it.

Her bangs fell into her eyes, so she brushed them back and stared at the Inquisitor General’s embroidered shoes. “Look at me, peasant girl,” a cold voice said.

Kara sniffed, then lifted her face so the other woman could study it. Malaris pulled something from her robes and glanced at it, then back at Kara. The item beeped like the computer at the temple near the Golden Keg. “What is your name, girl?” Malaris asked.

“My name... Kara. My name is Kara.”

Malaris nodded once, then showed Kara what was on the screen of the device in her hand—the image of a woman with red hair and blue eyes. “This woman shares many facial characteristics with you. Do you know her?”

Kara worked saliva into her dry mouth as she peered at the screen. The woman wore black armor, like the man who had attacked the Golden Keg, and in her hand was what might have been a mask. But her most striking features were the scars running down her face. Kara wasn’t a healer, but they looked like they had been made no more than a month or two ago. “I have never seen her before, my lady. Who is she?”

“She is a heretic and criminal from beyond the sacred lights. One who has turned her back on the holy technologies of Ibilirith. She was seen a few days ago

with two of her brethren by the resident Inquisitor, who took this picture.” Malaris studied Kara closely.

Kara tried her best not to look guilty or to move her hands anywhere near her hidden knife or the artifact.

Then the Inquisitor General seemed to relax. “It must be coincidence that you look similar to this woman. My computer has scanned you, and it tells me you have never ventured out of the pure radiance of the sacred lights.”

“No, my lady. I honor Lady Ibilirith.”

Malaris pursed her pale lips. “I do have one question, though. Why is a young peasant woman like you traveling alone on such a dangerous trade route?” She sounded like she was scolding a child. “Have you not heard of the missing caravans?”

Kara didn’t know what to say. She couldn’t come up with an answer. *The Inquisitors are going to take me away!*

A voice spoke from behind her. “She is with me.”

Malaris’s eyes switched to the speaker. “And who are you?”

After a brief pause, he said, “I am Aemon, of House Pulmard. I am going to Deep Cave on family business and this woman is my servant.”

The Inquisitor General nodded indifferently. “Then go about your business, noble lord. I will keep you no longer.”

Kara let out her breath. Thank the divines the banker had spoken up or her silence might’ve condemned her.

“May the sacred lights shine over us all,” Aemon intoned.

Malaris and her companions moved away, and the guards blocking the caravan from moving onward motioned the wagons along. Kara was too afraid to take her eyes off the Inquisitor General—who still watched Kara, as the wagons continued their journey.

When the caravan had traveled some distance, Morgon let out a nervous laugh. “That was creepy. I thought we were doomed, for sure.”

Kara was finally able to look away and found Aemon wiping sweat from his forehead. He forced a smile. “Did you see Malaris’s eyes? I have never seen anything more terrifying.”

What Aemon said was true. Few things frightened Kara more than the way that woman had looked at her.

“Thank you, Aemon, for telling Malaris I was with you. I didn’t know what to tell her when she asked me what I was doing.”

His cheeks reddened, and Morgon spoke up for him. “He gets like that sometimes. He will stand up and say something when others are afraid to.”

“Brave,” she said as she watched the town recede into the distance.

It occurred to Kara that Malaris might have been able to help her. The Inquisitor General might have known what the artifact was and how to get rid of it. But the risk...

Kara’s insides twisted themselves into knots at the very idea of going back.

Her guts made the decision for her. Speaking to an Inquisitor was out of the question. If she showed them what she carried, they might condemn her as a heretic. *Better to go to Deep Cave, wait for Wrynric and demand answers from him.*

She noticed the driver and some of the other men in the caravan watching her. When her eyes fell on them, they quickly looked away. Kara touched the artifact and cursed Malaris for bringing attention to her when she had been doing her best to avoid it. Now everyone would watch her to make sure she didn't show signs of being a heretic.

Once out of the village, they drove along the highway until twenty-third hour, pushing everyone to the edge of their endurance. Kara didn't blame the traders for wanting to travel as far as they could before stopping. The further away they were from Malaris, the safer they would feel. The caravan made camp beside the last watchtower, which overlooked the edge of the cavern and the entrance to the Limestone Caves.

The next leg of their journey.

Kara hopped off the wagon and noticed some of the men staring at her again. Turning away, she said a silent prayer they would leave her alone. Mensig had protected her from harm, but now he was dead—along with everyone else she'd ever loved. She had to find a way to protect herself and get to Deep Cave; otherwise, their deaths would be for nothing.

But she was tired and afraid. How could she go on when everyone seemed to be out to get her? The only allies she had were the two bankers, and what good would they be if the black-clad murderer found her?

After dinner, Aemon motioned her over as he and Morgon sat against the side of the wagon. "You can sleep next to us if you like."

Morgon looked up at her with a toothy grin. Clearly, he wanted her to sleep beside him. She forced herself to smile so they wouldn't see her reluctance.

What should she do? She'd already decided Veladan was not an option, and enlisting the help of one of the other men in camp would be difficult now that Malaris had singled her out.

The best bet would be to stay with the two bankers and sleep lightly. Both were too innocent to try anything on her. That almost made her chuckle. Who knew, she might be stronger than them anyway. They both looked pretty weak—not like the sort she normally dealt with. At any rate, she had her knife and was prepared to use it.

When she sat between the two bankers, they started to fidget. She rolled her eyes. "Look, I'm not going to bite you, all right?" Their faces went bright red and Aemon mumbled something about being nervous around women. "Don't be afraid of me. I'm a person, just like you."

Saying that seemed to make things worse, because both bankers went as rigid as stone. She burst out laughing. *Oh, these poor fools. The only women they've probably known are their own mothers!*

With men as innocent as these, she could likely make them do anything she wanted, had she the mind for it. Lucky for them, she had no interest in using them like that.

Eventually the two bankers joined in her laughter, but all three closed their mouths as Veladan approached. "What are you three laughing at, eh?"

"Nothing, sir," Aemon replied.

Veladan glared at Kara. "So, girl, do you plan on spending the night with these two quill-pushing guppies, or do you fancy being with a real man?"

She ran her tongue over her teeth, carefully considering how to respond. If she insulted Veladan, he may not come to her aid when needed. "I'm comfortable where I am, my lord. I mean sir. I wouldn't want to keep you up all night. You have to protect us from the dark, so you need to stay at your best."

He snorted, then spat at her feet. "I'm always at me best. Now look, you need protection. These two weaklings aren't going to be able to stop one of the scum around here coming to pleasure himself on you throughout the night. None of them will mess with me, though." He reached down. "So come with me, and I'll make sure no one lays a hand on you."

Aemon leapt to his feet. "I will protect her. If anyone tries to hurt her—they will have to get through me first."

Kara grimaced and waited for Veladan to explode. Morgon gulped loudly.

Veladan picked at a wart on his nose and shrugged. "Suit yourselves, but don't come crying to me if trouble finds you during the night. I's paid to guard the gold—not you three." He spun around and walked away, leaving them to stare after him.

Might the warrior be the one paying her a visit throughout the night? Kara touched the hilt of the knife hidden in her cloak.

If he did, she had to be ready.

Kara and the two bankers didn't speak for some time after Veladan left, nor could they sleep. Kara's thoughts turned to the road ahead. She didn't know much of what lay between the capital and Deep Cave.

"Do either of you know anything about the next step of our journey?"

"I do not know much," Morgon said. "I know it is dangerous, though. Somewhere in there—" He gestured toward the crevice marking the entrance to the Limestone Caves. "Is where the caravans are going missing. They enter and never come out."

Aemon knew a little more. "I've never been here in person but I know that the entrance to the Limestone Caves begins as a wide crevice and later narrows so only one wagon at a time can squeeze through. The caves are a labyrinth filled with bottomless shafts, unexplored chambers and countless tunnels, many of which lead into the Great Dark."

He picked at a bit of dirt on his cloak, seemingly delighted with himself that he knew so much.

Kara asked, "So I imagine it's easy to get lost in there?"

"Not if you stick to the road. Historians claim that forgotten stonemasons in ages past leveled much of the limestone of the main thoroughfare so travelers would know if they were on the right path."

"How many ways through the caves are there?"

Aemon shrugged. "Only one is known, though few dare venture far from the highway because it is easy to become lost. Some people tried to map the caves a few years back. They left the highway to explore the side passages—but were never seen again."

"Thanks for making me even more afraid of going in there," Morgon groaned. "How long will it take us to get through?"

"Around four days," Aemon replied. "The distance through the caves is not great, but our pace will be slow because of the wagons and the limitations of

torchlight.” He pointed to one of the other wagons. “Under that canvas are dozens of torches. If they follow trader protocol, each man will be given two of them—one to light, the other as a spare.”

This was going to be worse than Kara had anticipated. It never occurred to her there’d be no sacred lights on the road. “Are there settlements or guard posts in there?”

Aemon shook his head. “There is nothing until the guard post at the bridge over the Vadose Canyon, near the exit to Deep Cave.”

Kara changed the subject. “I know this might not be the best thing to bring up before bed, but do you know anything about the missing caravans?”

Aemon started chewing on his thumb nail, which muffled his voice. “They probably just got lost. I think we will be fine. We will be fine.”

That wasn’t reassuring. Kara decided to lighten the conversation.

“How do you know so much, anyway? You said you’ve never been out here before.”

Morgon’s face split into a grin. “Like I told you before, he read it in a book.”

“I wish I could read,” Kara said softly. “I knew an old woman that could once. She used to sit me on her lap and read me stories while my mother was busy working.”

“What happened to her?” Aemon asked.

The memory of Berda lying in a pool of blood made Kara’s stomach clench. “She died.”

“I am sorry.”

Kara sniffed and turned away, wishing to be alone with her thoughts.

“When we get to Deep Cave, I am going to get drunk,” Morgon said.

Aemon snorted. “But you never drink.”

“After this, I think I will.”

Unable to sleep, Kara got up and walked to the edge of Crystal Lake, making sure she stayed in sight of the bankers in case something happened. She fingered the artifact under her cloak absently, gazing out over the dark water and listening to the soft ripples on the shore.

On the other side of the lake, the lights of the Five Jewels shone in the distance. Four of the Jewels were the major cities in the Stelemian Cavern. Berda had once told Kara their names. The largest Jewel was her home city, the capital, Stelemia. Then there were the other cities, Crystal Cove and Gravelbank Bridge, as well as the fortress of Dere-Zor with the imposing Gate of Lydan towering behind it. The red spires of the Bastian of Purity marked the fifth Jewel, the citadel of the Inquisitors built on an island about four miles from where Kara stood.

The capital, twenty miles away, glowed like a candle in the dark. The distant light of the city blurred as tears filled her eyes. Would she ever again walk its carved streets, hear the hum of its sacred lights, feel the hustle and bustle of its markets or smell the beauty of the flowers in the Priest King’s gardens?

Would it even feel like home, now that her friends were dead?

“I miss you all. So much. Why did this have to happen?”

Her only answer was the lap of ripples on the cold shore. Kara closed her eyes, squeezing out the last of her tears. When her mind was calm, she noticed how quiet it was away from the city.

She was alone. All alone. For the first time in her life, no one was there for her.

An hour later, Kara returned to the two sleeping bankers. Aemon held a book to his chest while Morgon sucked his thumb in his sleep. Curling up beside them, she stayed awake until most of the men in camp were asleep and no longer posed her any threat.

Then she let herself slip off.

IMOGEN... IMOGEN, OPEN your eyes and see what your children have wrought.

Kara's eyes fluttered open and she saw, as if for the first time. The light was blinding and unlike any she'd seen living in the caverns. Her eyes gradually adjusted and she found herself standing on a stone altar surrounded by a circle of perfectly carved granite megaliths.

A twenty-foot-high statue of a woman towered over Kara from just beyond the circle of megaliths, hands raised in the air like those of a beggar. Her carved features projected ancient nobility, sharp and proud. The stone woman wore regal white armor with a sword sheathed at her waist, and on a chain around her neck hung something that looked much like the artifact around Kara's.

What looked like large flakes of white dust covered the ground around the altar, and the air was colder than any Kara had ever breathed.

Look up, Imogen, and tell me what you see.

Who was Imogen? The voice speaking to Kara was that of a woman, but she didn't recognize it. Was it the statue?

Look up, Imogen.

Not knowing what else to do, Kara raised her eyes. Above her was a vast gray-blue expanse. A thousand twinkling specks of light slowly faded until she could no longer see them.

What was above her? Some type of stone or decorated ceiling?

What do you see, Imogen? Tell me what you see.

"I don't know what I see. Has the cavern roof been painted that color?"

No, Imogen. The voice sounded displeased. It is called a sky and it has been hidden by your children for years beyond count.

"What are the white flakes falling from it?"

Snow, Imogen. The snow that froze the world.

"Where am I? I've never seen anything like this place before."

Why are you pretending to not know, Imogen? This place represents the surface that is high above the darkness you now call home.

"I'm not pretending anything. I have no idea where I am." Kara shivered and brushed snow from her hair. "Why is it so cold here?"

As you well know, the surface was not always this way. Your children did this, Imogen. The children you unleashed upon the world.

"My children?"

They are your ancient, soulless offspring who do not feel cold, hunger or pain. You made them that way. You must remember. The voice sounded accusatory, like it harbored great anger toward her.

"I don't know what you're talking about. My name is—"

Imogen, Mother of Steel Children and twin sister of Dressen.

Kara spun around to see if she could find the woman speaking but the surface was a cold, desolate, empty place and there was no sign of any living thing.

The horizon brightened and an orange disk started to rise above it. Kara's mouth fell open and she almost backed off the altar. "What's that?"

The voice didn't answer.

She glanced around but saw nothing except the granite pillars, the statue, the snow, the orange disk and the thing called sky.

The cold lingered as the disk rose higher, and the world grew so bright Kara had to shield her eyes—but it was not enough.

The last thing she heard before her eyes burst into flames was laughter.

KARA JOLTED AWAKE AND clutched her face, unable to breathe. "H... Help, it burns. My eyes."

"What is happening?" Morgon gasped. "Is it Veladan?"

"My eyes—I'm blind."

Someone pried open her hands. Aemon stared at her. "Kara, can you see me?"

"Yes... Yes, I can."

He blinked. "What happened? Were you dreaming?"

"It—It felt so real. My eyes were on fire."

"Hey, Veladan's coming," Morgon whispered.

Kara closed her eyes and focused on breathing—in, out, in, out... Once her nerves settled, she opened her eyes again as the warrior stopped in front of them.

"What's happening over here, eh?"

"She was dreaming," Aemon replied. "She must have had a nightmare."

Veladan sneered. "Keep your screaming to yourself next time, girl. We're all on edge already."

Everyone in the camp was looking at her. Kara's hand wouldn't stop shaking so she put it into her cloak and gripped the artifact. "I'm sorry, sir. It won't happen again."

With a final glare at Aemon, Veladan left. It took Kara a long time to drift off to sleep again. When she did, her dreams were of ancient, soulless enemies, snow and an orange disk that gazed down at her and wept tears of blood.

When Aemon woke her hours later, it felt like she'd barely slept.

Chapter 4

Aemon.

Aemon shivered under his thick woolen jacket. The Limestone Caves were colder than the Stelemian Cavern, the air thicker with moisture. The walls closed in around them and sound became muffled. The wagons traveled single file, with some of the guards walking ahead of the column to do short scouting trips down side passages to search them for danger.

The darkness became oppressive, the light from a dozen mushroom-stem torches scattered along the column barely enough to penetrate the gloom. The

oxen were nervous and often had to be whipped to get them to move. Each man walked in tense silence, watching the shadows and side passages as if they expected something to leap out of one at any moment. The scouts met the column at every junction and chamber, having already scoured them for danger—but each time they reported seeing nothing.

Kara had pulled her hood over her head and jumped at every unexpected sound. Morgon seemed to have lost all interest in her, the darkness around them occupying his attention.

Aemon distracted himself from fear by reading a book using light from the torch fastened on a pole beside the driver. At other times, he studied the passing cave features and galleries, some so stunning they took his breath away. There were stalactites and stalagmites, flowstones, shawls, bell holes and the ever-present sound of dripping water. The only other sounds were the wagon wheels rolling over stone, hushed voices or the odd snort of an ox.

Twice the road sloped sharply upwards. Guards climbed the water-slick slope to turn the wheel at the top. The drivers attached the wagons to a metal chain, and the men manning the wheel winched them up. It was back-breaking work and the men had to be regularly replaced by others. On the second such slope, Aemon took a turn on the wheel beside Veladan and one of his mercenary companions. The two warriors did most of the work, their muscles bulging.

When the wagon was up, Veladan slapped Aemon on the back. “I bet that’s the hardest thing you’ve ever done, banker boy. Lot tougher than counting coins and scribbling on parchment, eh?”

“Not really,” Aemon replied, growing sick of Veladan and his attempts to belittle others. “You would be surprised at how heavy gold bars can be. One bar is worth more coin than you will earn in your entire life, and yet holding them is as mundane to me as you holding your sword.”

Veladan puffed out his chest like a rooster and took a menacing step forward. Aemon held his ground, knowing the warrior could not kill him, because if he did, Rubin would ensure he and his two comrades died horrible deaths.

“You better flee back to your mommy, boy,” Veladan snarled. He loomed over Aemon and shoved him backward with his armored chest.

Aemon wanted to cry out for the other man to leave him alone, but a quote from the great pit-fighter—and a personal hero of Aemon’s—Rexus of Acid Lake, came to him from the back of his mind. *Never show your enemy you’re afraid. It will embolden them—and they will come at you all the harder.*

Climbing to his feet, Aemon positioned himself so Veladan could not knock him down again.

The warrior shoved him harder, but through force of will, Aemon kept his balance. The warrior’s armor jingled as he suddenly roared with laughter. He slapped his hand on Aemon’s shoulder. “You’ve got more backbone than I thought, little lord. I’d have thought you’d wet your pants and run screaming all the way back to the capital.”

He pushed Aemon away. “You’re lucky I’m in a good mood or I’d have smashed your face in.”

Veladan’s companion growled deep in his throat, “Get out of here, boy.”

Aemon left. Only when he was out of the warrior's line of sight did he stop to gather himself and anxiously bite his nails.

That had been a close one.

Their journey continued, and the caves became more wondrous. After seeing a particularly awe-inspiring formation of flowstone, Aemon decided the Limestone Caves were more beautiful than he'd ever imagined.

Kara admired the cave features too, sometimes reaching out to run her fingers over one as they went by. Once, when a passing guard walked by with a torch, her green eyes shimmered like emeralds.

She was perfect. Why would anyone want to hurt her?

If only he had the confidence to talk to her more, so he could get to know her better. When he and Morgon left her in Deep Cave—they might never see her again. He looked away and swore under his breath.

What would happen to Kara once they arrived? He and his friend would do what they could to help her, but once their tasks in the city were complete—they had to return to the capital.

How depressing.

Thinking of where they were headed, Aemon's heart sank. Deep Cave was no place for her. The noble houses were constantly battling one another for control of the city. Though they usually kept the fighting off the streets, sometimes it moved from the shadows into the light—and innocent people died.

Aemon ground his teeth. Here he was heading there to prolong the suffering and conflict. *To the dark with Rubin for sending me on this mission and to my parents for forcing me to join the bank!*

Kara had said hired thugs were after her. Aemon might not be able to stay in Deep Cave, but perhaps when he got back to the Capital he could do something to help her. Maybe he could use his position at the bank to intimidate or bribe the merchant who hired the thugs and make him leave her alone. It might risk his job—but she would be safe from the merchant, and the bank's power would be being used for a worthy cause.

Working there afforded him few opportunities to do good deeds, and now that he had one—he should take it. No matter what it might cost him.

At some stage, Kara slipped off to sleep but jolted awake when they went over a bump. She fell forward onto the floor of the wagon. Aemon moved to help her, but Morgon got there first.

His friend helped Kara back onto her seat and she gave him one of her bright, toothy smiles. "Thank you. I've never ridden a wagon before. Guess I need to learn to hang on."

Morgon looked well pleased with himself.

Aemon's stomach clenched. *How dare he gloat like that?*

What if his friend won her heart?

Being the fourth son of a noble family, Aemon had always been overlooked, either for his older brothers or later, by more assertive young men at the bank. I am sick of it.

Crossing his arms, he forced himself to stare at the passing wall. As time passed, the clenching sensation in his stomach lessened. He told himself to stop

acting like a child. Morgon was his only friend, and now he felt jealous of him. Like he had his older brothers.

Aemon snatched a book from his bag, opened a random page, and started to read. At least in books, he could forget the world around him.

The day passed without incident, and they made camp in a large chamber. Thousands of other caravans had spent the night there over the years, leaving behind trash and burned-out torches. The air was rank with the smell of the cesspit further into the chamber and of rotting food left behind by earlier travelers.

When everyone was settled and the night watch set, the cook lit a fire and made fowl-and-mushroom stew. Kara finished hers long before Aemon and Morgon had eaten theirs. Aemon offered to go and clean her bowl, for she seemed wary of the rest of the men around camp and tried to keep to herself. She handed it to him, and he left to clean it in a pool of water at the edge of the light.

Did she trust him? He would not hurt her. He wanted to protect her, like a knight protected his lady, and help her in any way he could.

Aemon found it odd Kara had woken such feelings in him. Perhaps he had read too many stories of heroes and heroines winning the hearts of their loves—and a part of him yearned to do the same. But he was no hero, nor did he have it in him to be one. He could dream of being a mighty champion all he liked, but the best he could hope for was to become a powerful banker who could buy the allegiance of heroic warriors and tell them what to do.

Such a person was never loved. They were feared and obeyed. That was not what Aemon wanted out of life. He wanted to be remembered in the history books not as a dastardly banker but as a virtuous champion who helped people—even if through intellect rather than brawn.

When Aemon returned to their wagon, he sat down and leaned against the wheel. Kara took a seat beside him, her hand touching something hanging between her breasts. He had seen her hand there many times and had become curious to know what was there. But how would he go about asking her about it? She would probably think him nosy or asking to see her bust.

Kara caught him watching her, and withdrew her hand. “What are ya looking at?”

He winced, and looked at a limestone pillar glistening in the torchlight. “Nothing. Sorry.”

“You were staring at me.”

His heart skipped a beat. “I was not.”

She chuckled, “Don’t be like that. You can look at me if you want. Though surely there’s more interesting things around here. You’ve got a bag of books you could be reading.”

He flattened his lips into a line. Nothing was more interesting than her—nor more beautiful. “I have read them all before.” He looked back at her. “You should get some sleep. We have a long journey ahead of us tomorrow.”

Kara lay down and closed her eyes. Morgon returned from a trip to the cesspit, grabbed his blanket and draped it over her.

“Thank you,” she said.

When Morgon grinned at her, Aemon bared his teeth. *That no-good swine, he raged. There he is again, sucking up to her.*

His friend left to get another blanket and got talking with the cook. Aemon's rage dissolved and he berated himself again. Morgon was his best friend, and he had never felt jealous of him before. Why start feeling that way now?

He stretched his tired muscles. Why ask? He knew the answer. It was like in his books. He had read plenty of stories where someone came between two friends and tore them apart. Love could do strange things to people.

Even him, it seemed.

Aemon inhaled deeply and let it out slowly, thinking of how his life used to be so simple. He'd counted coins, filled out ledges, read reports and dutifully did whatever one of the senior bankers told him to.

He needed to find a way to emotionally detach himself from Kara—like a good banker would. Otherwise, he jeopardized his friendship with Morgon, his mission to Deep Cave and his position at the bank. And if he lost those—he would have nothing.

It would be hard to let her go—but necessary.

Though it made his heart ache thinking it, she needed to go her own way once they got to Deep Cave so things between him and Morgon could return to normal.

There would be no intimidating the merchant, nor checking on her after they left the city. She would be on her own.

VELADAN KICKED HIM awake early the next morning. "Get up, you lazy bums." When Kara got to her feet, he growled, "What is it you want in Deep Cave, girl? All you seem to do is eat our bloody food and give me sour looks."

She shrugged nonchalantly. "I have family there."

He studied her through narrowed eyes. "Who was it you needed my protection from, eh?"

"I have a cousin in Stelemia who is jealous all the boys are interested in me, and not her. She sent some hired thugs after me—to, in her words, 'make me so ugly, no man would want me ever again.'"

Aemon almost laughed at the lie. It was so bad. Veladan seemed perplexed by her answer. How would he react?

To his surprise, the warrior chuckled. "I give you this, girl—you've a quick wit about you." He made a sweeping gesture at the darkness beyond the torches. "Watch yourself. Anything could be out there in the dark. Waiting. Watching. For the right moment to—"

"Lights ahead," someone shouted from the front of the column. Veladan drew his sword, then hurried back to the bank's cart. Aemon and the other two climbed onto their wagon to get a better look.

The driver stood on his seat and studied the approaching torches warily. "Looks like people a coming," he said.

They watched as two dozen people pushing handcarts approached the caravan from the direction of Deep Cave. Once the people were close, they held their hands up to show they were unarmed. Several guards walked over to talk to them.

The people wore dirty, crudely stitched-together clothing made of animal skins. Aemon scratched his head in confusion.

What were common folk doing in the Limestone Caves?

The road was dangerous, and none appeared to be armed. Could they be fleeing the fighting in Deep Cave? Had things gotten out of control again?

The guards let the peasants move on, and they began to file past Aemon's wagon, pushing their worldly possessions before them. Their backs bent with fatigue, the peasants watched the play of shadows on the wall as if they expected one to spring to life and attack them.

Aemon called out to a man limping along with a walking staff. "What happened to you?"

"War happened boy," he growled, and shuffled off before Aemon could ask him anything more.

Once the last of the refugees had disappeared down the highway, the caravan broke camp and moved on. A few miles later, the road narrowed, leaving only a gap the width of a hand between the walls and the sides of the wagon.

Water dripped from above, and it did not take long for everyone to become soaking wet. The caravan pushed on until the tunnel widened into a large chamber around twenty-second hour. There, they stopped to make camp.

The darkness of the chamber devoured torchlight like a hungry beast, the stalagmites its teeth, the water dripping from them its saliva.

Aemon cocked his head and listened. He thought he heard faint noises from somewhere out in the darkness, beyond the edge of the light. The noise from camp echoed off the walls, making it hard to know if the sounds came from the caravan or from somewhere deeper in the chamber.

Trust the guards. They have done this before, and would know if something is amiss.

By the divines, it was freezing, and his hands were wrinkled like an old man's. Moisture dripped from his clothes, and his boots were covered in mud. If only he could dry his clothes without stripping off and hang them near the fire like others had done. The idea of getting naked in front of other people embarrassed him to no end.

Aemon chuckled at the idea of Kara seeing him with no clothes on. She might not have seen a naked man before.

He felt sorry for the mail-clad sentries guarding camp. The only way they could keep warm was to stand next to the torches set around the perimeter.

Aemon went over to one of the cookfires to warm himself. After a few minutes, Morgon joined him. As they talked, Aemon looked around for Kara.

Finally, he caught sight of her in the shadows beside their wagon at the edge of the camp. *What is she doing?* She did not appear to have a blanket. *She must be freezing.*

He inclined his head in Kara's direction so Morgon would notice her. His friend sighed, "I asked her to come to the fire with me, but she refused. I think she is afraid about being the only woman in camp."

So Morgon had noticed her standoffishness as well. If men looked at Aemon the way they looked at her, he supposed he would be wary and keep his distance too.

Then again, was he any better than any of the other men in camp? He stared at her, and dreamed of holding her in his arms.

Shaking his head, he left Morgon and got a blanket from the supply wagon. If Kara did not want to go into camp and get one herself, he would get it for her. The

chamber was cold, and he had read stories of people freezing to death in their sleep. She needed to keep warm.

Striding over to her, Aemon held out the blanket. It took her a long moment to notice his presence. She looked up and gave him a distracted grin. "Thanks."

Aemon returned her grin with an awkward nod. When he tried to say something, his mind went blank.

I look like a fool. Say something!

How was it he could overcome his fear of scum like Veladan, but not his fear of talking to women? He could count on one hand the number of them he had spoken to in his life—and most of them were family.

Kara had been the first woman to look at him as more than a mere boy. To him, that made her special.

Aemon dug his half-chewed nails into the side of the wagon. What did he have to talk about anyway? She would not be interested in him. He was a coin counter and a pampered noble—not a strong warrior or handsome ladies' man.

She wrapped half the blanket around herself but kept the other half open. "Don't just stand there, Aemon. Come sit beside me. With two of us under the blanket, we'll warm up faster."

His heart lurched. *Kara really wants me under her blanket?*

"Sit, I won't bite."

He sat stiffly, then draped the other half of the blanket around himself. She was cold and wet and shivered violently. "You should have gotten a blanket," he chided. "You are freezing."

Kara rubbed her hands together to warm them. "I should've, I suppose."

She stared at one of the torches at the edge of the camp. After several minutes of silence, she said, "Tell me about yourself, Aemon. You seem different from the other nobles I've met."

"Different?"

"Nicer and less stuck-up."

"Oh." Her question took him off guard. What should he tell her? "Well, like Morgon said, I work for—"

"The Royal Bank of Stelemia. I know that already, but there must be more to you than that."

Aemon ran his fingers through his wet hair. Was there more to him than that? He did his work at the bank, read books about great things others had done while dreaming he would one day do great things too—though knowing he never would. Other than that, he woke every day despising his parents, despising Rubin and despising the bank.

His life felt meaningless.

"Sadly, there is not much more to me to talk about. I am the fourth son of a noble family in House Pulmard. I grew up with an old personal tutor who taught me much of what I know."

"I haven't heard of House Pulmard. Did you live in the Capital Spire? How close were you to the Halls of the Priest King?"

Aemon was not surprised she had not heard his family name. They were mid-ranking nobles at best. "We lived a dozen floors below his halls."

“Did you ever see the Priest King? I heard he wears a crown of solid gold that has rubies and sapphires attached to braids made of platinum that hang from it like hair. Oh, and is it true no one’s ever seen his face? What about—”

“Hey, slow down and let me answer some of your questions.” He grinned.

Her shoulders slumped. “Sorry, I heard gossip about him all the time. I just wanted to know what he’s really like. Poor people like me are never allowed to see him.”

“I only saw him once, but at a distance, so I did not get a good look at him. The more powerful families were able to get closer than mine. I did hear him speak, though.”

“What did he sound like?”

“He spoke through some sort of machine that carries his voice throughout his halls.”

She started to wring water out of her hair. “I hope I get to meet him one day. I always wanted to.”

There was little chance either of them would meet the Priest King. Few outside of the upper echelons of power in the caverns ever did. “I hope you do too.”

Kara was quiet for a time, contenting herself with drying her hair. Then she asked, “So what’s it like growing up in a rich family?”

“It is not as interesting as you might think. My brothers were much older than me and my two sisters were married off before I could walk. I spent most of my time in the family library or with my teacher, Tallis, who taught me numbers, politics and countless other things.”

“How’d you end up working for the bank? You don’t strike me as a greedy copper-pincher, like most rich people.”

Aemon laughed. “Is that the way you commoners—” He caught himself. “I mean, umm—”

“Poor muck-feeders? Beggars? Urchins from Blind Fish Wharf?”

Great, now I have done it. “I am sorry. I did not mean to offend.”

She tapped his arm under the blanket. “Don’t be so touchy, I’m only playing with you.”

“Oh...”

“I’m a commoner. So what? I grew up poor, but not as poor as some.”

“So, I take it commoners do not like us nobles. Or do you call everyone names?”

“We have names for everyone, some so foul I won’t repeat them here. Many commoners dislike the noble families and think they’re all pompous dandies.”

He laughed so hard, he choked. When he could speak, he said, “Trust me, there are many pompous dandies in the Capital Spire. Some of the men wear more perfume than their wives.” The mirth left him. “There are a lot of bad noble families up there. They murder one another all the time.”

Kara shrugged. “Poor people kill each other too. There are bad people everywhere.”

Hmm, maybe she is as cynical as I am. “Kara, you seem...”

“Seem what?”

He fidgeted and fought the urge to bite his nails. “So interesting.”

Kara did not mock him, like he had expected. Instead, she smiled and closed her eyes and seemed to slip off to sleep.

He let her be, and stared out into the darkness beyond camp until his eyes were heavy with fatigue. Some time later, he jolted from a light doze and sat bolt upright.

Something had woken him.

Scanning the camp, Aemon found most of the caravan asleep under their blankets. Five men stood on watch, but none showed signs of alarm. He glanced at Kara, then Morgon. Both still slept, his friend snoring softly.

Just a dream. Nothing to worry about.

No sooner had he closed his eyes, he opened them again. He had heard a noise. Something scraping over rock, somewhere deeper in the chamber.

Aemon got out from under the blanket and took a few steps toward the edge of camp. There he held his breath, and listened. Something was definitely out there, and the noise was getting louder. "Wake up. Wake up. Something is coming!"

It only took seconds for men to leap to their feet, grab their weapons and light more torches. Aemon could no longer hear the noise over the sound of the guards booted feet. They formed a loose shield-wall and readied themselves for battle.

When nothing came leaping out of the darkness, Veladan looked at Aemon and raised his eyebrows.

"I heard noises out there," Aemon said.

They waited, but still, nothing happened.

Three guards brandishing torches and swords cautiously made their way deeper into the chamber and soon disappeared behind a large flowstone that dripped with water. Aemon chewed his nails, waiting for them to cry out in terror as some primordial horror fell upon them. Instead, they returned a few minutes later and reported seeing nothing.

Everyone started to relax, putting it down to a false alarm. Men put their weapons away, then drew them again when something flew from behind a limestone pillar and struck the cook in the head.

The cook backed away so rapidly he stumbled and fell. Another man kicked the projectile and frowned. "It's just a rock."

Before anyone could react, a savage, high-pitched wail filled the chamber, the sound echoing off the walls, until it felt like it came from everywhere at once. Black figures burst from the darkness and launched themselves at the front rank of guards—who were ill-prepared for the attack.

Aemon's mouth opened in a silent scream, as the guards were cut down by figures dressed head-to-toe in black armor. All he could think about was that his caravan was going to join the growing list of others that never made it out of the Limestone Caves.

One of the black-garbed attackers threw a rock and it struck Aemon in the head. Intense pain shot through his skull and he stumbled backward, feeling woozy. Striking the side of the cart, he collapsed to the ground. Warm liquid filled his right eye. He reached up to touch it. Blood.

His blood.

Morgon cried out his name and started moving toward him. His friend stumbled on the uneven floor and fell several feet from him.

Aemon's thoughts turned to Kara. He needed to get up and help her escape. It might be the merchant's thugs attacking them.

Before he could move, a peaceful darkness overcame him, and he slipped away.

Chapter 5

Kara.

Kara opened her eyes and found herself atop a cliff overlooking a frozen lake with snow-covered structures along the shore. Her breath misted in the air and her limbs felt like they were turning to ice. Behind her, a dense mist swirled on a chill breeze.

A light in the sky caught her eye. The distant orange disk she'd seen the last time she'd been on the surface hung high overhead.

What was it? Was it alive? Why did it maintain its lonely vigil over this frozen, blighted world?

Something Wrynric had spoken of came back to her. She squinted her eyes and studied it. Could it be his Lost Sun?

Her eyes watered from the glare, so she peered down at the lake, hugging herself for warmth. Nothing moved down there. The whole world seemed dead.

What had brought her here?

A strong gust of wind made her stumble backward and fall to the snow-covered ground. Her landing was soft, the snow cushioning her fall.

Shivering, she got back to her feet and brushed herself off. For the first time she noticed what she wore. No wonder she was freezing—she was dressed in her courtesan gown.

Imogen. You have returned.

Kara spun around to find out who had spoken—but no one was there. “Who are you?”

A gentle after-breeze ruffled Kara's hair. It blew away the mist, revealing a frozen forest of skeletal fingers. No, not fingers.

Dead, branchless trees.

Hundreds of them stood on the side of a hill, with tendrils of gossamer mist swirling around them like serpents. The trees pointed skyward like spears, as if reaching for the orange disk to free them from their icy torment.

The disk is the sun, Imogen. You know this.

So, it was Wrynric's Lost Sun. How had she found it? And who was speaking? The voice sounded like the one she'd heard the last time she'd been on the surface.

Look among the dead trees, Imogen. Tell me what you see.

Kara studied the dead forest. Near the center stood something that didn't belong there. “I see a stone altar with megaliths around it, like the one I stood upon the first time I was brought here.”

Your children—the ancient soulless enemy of humankind—made that altar.

“I have no children.”

Yes you do, Imogen, Mother of Steel Children. You and those who worked with you made many children. The enemy you birthed makes these holy places to honor you.

“Stop calling me Imogen. My name’s Kara.”

An invisible force spun her to face the frozen lake. See what the war against your children brought upon us. Look to the edge of the lake, and tell me what you see.

The hand shoved Kara forward.

“Stop, please, I’ll fall over the edge.”

Tell me what you see.

A foot from the ledge, the force withdrew. Kara backed away a few steps and took a deep calming breath. When her nerves settled, she peered down at the lake. “I see frozen water and around it, what looks like half-buried buildings.”

Those buildings were part of a great city. For years beyond count, they have been buried under snow and ice. But now the world is thawing, and the ghosts that haunt it stir once more.

Kara felt cold breath on her cheek, making her hair stand on end.

The voice whispered in her ear, But this world is being corrupted and with it, my memory. Shadows rise to hunt, the ancient, soulless enemy awakens and a hero leaves his lover to linger in this frozen world—forever alone.

The whisper became a hiss. With your return, everything will be devoured by darkness and the thawing that has only just begun, will be for nothing.

Kara swallowed. What was the invisible woman talking about? Was she insane? “What happened to you? What happened to this world?”

The breath on her face withdrew. How is it you do not remember, Imogen? The code of this place was written so you would remember everything.

“What code? Who is Imogen?” Kara raised her hands to the sky in exasperation. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. My name is Kara and I come from—”

Impossible. You are Imogen. You wear her beacon around your neck.

The invisible force grabbed Kara by the arm and made her look toward the buildings. Your children did that, Imogen. Every city, every home—buried under ice.

The force tightened its grip. Kara gritted her teeth.

One day, when you breathe the cold air of the surface with your own lungs—your children shall devour you, and they will sleep once more.

A high-pitched shriek split the air as a dark shadow passed overhead. The invisible force let go. Did you hear that? The Great Shadow is here. I hope it tears you apart!

Something blotted out the sun. Kara cried out as a huge, black shape darted toward her. Before she could flee, it was on her.

She screamed as black talons dug into her flesh. The shadow lifted her into the air and carried her out over the lake. Its claws sunk deeper, shredding muscle, snapping tendons and boring holes into her bones.

The light dimmed, the world spinning into darkness and pain.

KARA WOKE TO ANOTHER nightmare.

Men screamed, oxen ran amok and blood puddled into pools on the uneven floor. What was going on?

The caravan guards were fighting. The lethargy of sleep left Kara instantly as her mind caught up with what was happening.

The black-clad figures that burned her home had found her again! She crawled under the wagon and hid behind it, hoping they'd not seen her.

What should I do? If the guards fall...

Morgon backed against the cavern wall a dozen feet from her, his arms raised defensively. A javelin flew through the air and lodged in his stomach. He grasped it as he slowly sank to the ground. Crying out in pain, he rolled onto his side and saw her hiding behind the wagon. He tried to say something but all that came out was a gurgled moan.

Kara held her breath. Aemon lay on the ground near him, his face covered in blood. Was this real or was it still part of the nightmare? It was all happening so fast.

"Hand over the red-headed woman and the rest of you can live," a male voice commanded over the clang of swords and the cries of the dying. "Hand her over now or every one of you will die."

Kara's blood ran as cold as ale from the icy cellar under the Golden Keg. It was the man who had killed Berda.

"Half-blood, I know you're here," a woman shrieked, her voice somehow more frightening than the man's. "Come out. You *need* to be stopped."

The fighting slowed, but a few of the guards fought on.

Kara peeked around the edge of the wagon. Two black-clad figures stood in the midst of the fighting, watching as the last of the guards threw down their weapons to surrender. The taller figure's masked face was lit by torchlight. He had the same cold, dead eyes as the man at the tavern. The second figure standing beside him looked like a woman, her hair hanging out of the back of her mask. She held a javelin poised over her shoulder, ready to hurl it at Kara if she dared come out of hiding.

The black-clad man went up to several dead traders, grabbed them by the hair and studied their faces. When he shook his head, the woman holding the javelin screamed, "Half-blood. Show yourself."

Kara backed away from the wagon until she was out of the light. She needed to flee before they found her. With no torch, it wouldn't be easy but at least it would make her harder to spot.

She crept to the edge of camp, staying out of the light. Veladan and one of his companions fought two black-clad figures no more than a dozen feet from her. Luckily, they were too busy hacking at one another to notice her.

Keeping low to the ground, Kara made her way onto the highway. As she moved, her mind raced. The fighting blocked the way to Deep Cave, so she couldn't flee that direction. She would have to head back toward the capital, find somewhere to hide then wait for the enemy to leave. After they were gone, she could come out, grab some supplies from the wagons and try to make her way to Deep Cave on her own.

That idea frightened her. She knew next to nothing about the Limestone Caves or Deep Cave. How could she do it by herself?

When she left the faint glow of the torches, she became enveloped in darkness. Feeling her way along the road, she found a recess in the wall. Climbing in, she

kept her breath low and listened for sounds of pursuit. It was hard to hear over the fighting, but she thought she heard running feet coming her way.

Pressing against the rock wall, she hoped she wouldn't be discovered.

Harsh breathing and booted feet sounded just outside her hiding spot. A moment later, the glow of a torch revealed two figures locked in combat. They moved past her hiding spot before she could properly identify them—but one was definitely wearing black.

Then, to her horror, the figures came back her way, the torchlight flailing wildly. A black-clad figure parried a series of blows from an attacker Kara couldn't see without leaning out of the recess to look. For a moment, an armored back came into view as one of the fighters passed the entrance.

It was Veladan. He held a torch in one hand and his sword in the other. The black-clad figure attacking him glanced past the warrior as he circled by Kara's hiding spot a second time. The figure's eyes widened.

Kara had been seen.

Veladan lunged forward and almost took his adversary in the guts but they dodged away then tried to slip past him to get to her. Now that the black-clad figure had seen her—she needed to move.

When the combatants moved away from the entrance, Kara burst from hiding and made a run for it. Heading down the highway, she raced to get out of the torchlight.

"Stop!" came a commanding female voice from behind her.

Kara glanced over her shoulder as she ran and cried out in shock. The black-clad figure was only a dozen steps behind her.

Where was Veladan? Had he fallen?

Kara kept running, but the enemy soon caught up and grabbed her arm and spun her around. The woman raised her sword—ready to plunge it into Kara's neck.

Suddenly, her head separated from her body, sending torrents of warm blood into Kara's face. The dead woman's hand still clasped Kara's hair as her body toppled sideways. Kara landed on the road in a rapidly spreading pool of blood.

Screaming hysterically, she tore free of the dead woman's grip and crawled through the blood to get away. Something lifted her off the ground and an armored hand covered her mouth. "Shush now, girl. You're coming with me."

Veladan!

Kara called on Lydan to protect her as Veladan dragged her away from the dead body and the distant battle. Fifty feet further up the highway they came to a narrow opening in the wall. He dragged her in.

Once they were well away from the entrance, he removed his hand from her mouth and lit a torch. "Now stay quiet or I'll hurt you."

Kara spat out some of the dead woman's blood, then whispered, "Where are we going?"

He pushed her forward. "We're getting away from those killers. They're probably the ones responsible for all the missing caravans. Now get moving, or they'll find us."

She began to move, wondering why Veladan hadn't taken the black-clad killers up on their offer. They'd given the caravan an ultimatum: If the red-headed woman

were handed over, the survivors would be spared. Kara, being the only woman in camp—and red-headed at that—had clearly been the target of the attack.

What was Veladan thinking?

The passage narrowed and they were forced to walk sideways, their noses pressed against rock. Kara was afraid. Afraid of the dark figures, afraid of Veladan and afraid of the dark. But she had to keep going and hope for the best.

The artifact around her neck seemed to be growing heavier. If only she could take it off and hurl it into some bottomless pit and be done with it. It had brought her nothing but grief. She hated Wrynic, she hated this cave, she hated everything!

Why is this happening to me? I pay my respects to the divines. Why am I being punished?

An hour later, they emerged from the passage into an opening barely large enough for them to stand. The only exit was another small hole in the opposite wall from where they'd entered.

Kara groaned. They would need to crawl if they were to continue, and her knees were already aching from having crawled through the last passage.

Carrying through the passage behind them were the distant screams and pleas for mercy from back at the caravan. What was happening? Were they going to butcher everyone?

"Sounds like a bloody slaughterhouse back there," Veladan growled. "Poor fools. May Lydan the Shield ease their passing."

He strode over and grabbed Kara by the arm, his eyes like iron. "You have some explaining to do, girl. Why were those scum after you, eh? Don't tell me your cousin sent them—we both know that's a lie. I lost two comrades back there, so you better come clean."

Forcing a smile, she said, "How do you know they were after me?"

He slapped her across the face with his mailed hand and she'd have fallen to the ground had he not grabbed her by the hair. She tasted blood in her mouth and her jaw throbbed. Swishing her tongue around her mouth, she was relieved to find all her teeth still there.

Veladan twisted her hair around his hand to pull it tighter, bending her neck at an awkward angle. She tried to push him away. "Let go, you're hurting me."

He yanked her forward until they were nose to nose. "I'm not here to listen to any more of your lies. Those *rats* could be on us at any moment. Now tell me who I'm up against or I'll make you scream."

Kara spat blood onto his armored chest, shaking in fear. "I don't know who they are. They attacked my home five nights ago and killed my family." She touched the artifact through her cloak. "I don't know what they're doing here or what they want from me."

He tightened his grip on her hair.

She sobbed in pain. "Please, I'm telling you the truth."

Veladan glared at her, the torchlight giving his eyes an intense, primal look. His neck muscles bulged, a vein popped out of his temple and his lips slowly peeled back to reveal his crooked teeth.

She screwed her eyes shut, waiting for him to strike her again. Instead, he let go of her hair and put his hand around her throat. "If I find out you've lied to me,

girl... I'll do things to you you've never imagined in your darkest nightmares. Got me?"

Kara nodded.

Why isn't he talking about handing me over to save his own skin?

The warrior let go of her throat and pointed to the narrow opening in the opposite wall. "Now get in there, and I'll follow."

As Kara got down on all fours, her hand went to the hilt of the knife hidden in her cloak. Though the odds were against her, she needed to find a way to kill Veladan. But she would need to be smart about it. He was a trained fighter, armored in mail and much stronger than her.

Her mind played out possibilities. Perhaps she could slit his throat while he slept, find a way to ambush him or run away while he was still climbing through the passage behind her.

But if she did manage to rid herself of Veladan, then what would she do?

She knew nothing of these caves and could barely defend herself if something fell upon her. Then there were the issues of light and food, and their general lack of supplies.

Entering the passage, she gave up on coming up with a way to escape. For now, she wanted to focus on getting as far from the black-clad killers as she could.

The new passage was worse than the last they'd crawled through and contained tight squeeze after tight squeeze. After an hour of pulling herself forward on her stomach, Kara's whole body ached like never before. She gritted her teeth. The pain was becoming excruciating!

Another hour went by, fatigue set in and Kara wished she could fall asleep in the passage, discomfort and all. Never had she endured this level of torment.

How she longed for her days working at the Golden Keg, sitting near the warm fire, listening to some drunken man tell her his stories while she sat on his lap, gratefully accepting his coin. She drew comfort from her memories of that time, and in the love the people who worked the tavern had for one another.

Eventually, she heard the distant roar of a river from somewhere ahead. Half an hour later, she emerged onto the gravel bank of a whitewater river. The roar of the rushing water was disorienting as it bounced endlessly off the stone walls, making the area an echo chamber.

Veladan crawled out of the passage and staggered to his feet, a trickle of blood running from a scrape on his forehead. The torch was burning low and he didn't seem to have any spares.

He held it up so they could see what was around them. They were in a chamber a few hundred feet long and forty feet wide. The river ran under the rock on both ends, which would prevent them from following it.

They moved along the edge of the water, searching for another way out. A short time later, Kara had all but given up on finding another passage.

She wiped moisture from her face. They would have to head back the way they'd come.

Veladan suddenly pointed at something on the opposite side of the river. "Look. See it? There's an opening up there."

Kara stared up at the opening some thirty feet up the limestone wall. It didn't look promising.

“We want to be up in that hole before the torch burns out,” Veladan said.

It’d be a difficult climb up the slippery rock, and if the torch burned out, they’d be stranded on the wall in darkness. Not an inviting prospect.

Then again, why did it matter when the light ran out? It was going to burn out, no matter where they were—and the same dark fate would meet them.

Kara gestured at the torch. “What are we going to do when it goes out?”

He gave her a hard look. “We feel around in the dark and hope we find our way out of here.”

She kicked some gravel at him. “Then we’re as good as dead.”

Sneering, he said, “When it’s gone, we can burn your clothes, then your pretty red hair. That should give us enough light to get out of here. Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that, eh?”

Her heart shriveled. She wasn’t ready to die. “Why did you bring me out here? You must’ve known it would be suicide.”

“Staying back there and handing you over would’ve been suicide too. Those bloody swine are probably the ones responsible for all the missing caravans. Even if I’d handed you over, they’d have killed me. They’ve never spared anyone before—why would they start now?” He glanced around. “At least fleeing out here, I have a bloody chance.”

He was probably right there. Nothing she’d seen of the black-clad killers suggested they’d keep their word. They murdered innocent people and were insane enough to attack the Priest King’s town watch, in the capital itself! That branded them all as heretics.

But why would they be in the Limestone Caves attacking trader caravans to find Kara? The man leading them had claimed not to know of her existence until he saw her in the room with Wrynric. Yet, traders had been disappearing the last few months, long before the man discovered her.

It didn’t make sense.

“Maybe we should put out the torch and wait here a few days, then head back to the highway,” Kara suggested. “The enemy might be gone by then.”

Veladan pondered this as he pulled down his chain pants and urinated into the river. When he was done, he pulled his armor up and said, “No. We keep going. Our torch will be out long before we get back to the highway. There might be someone out here who can give us food and torches.”

Kara was appalled. “Are you insane? What are you expecting? A town? Aemon said there was nothing out here until close to Deep Cave.”

He let out a great belly laugh, then pointed the torch at her. “You *bloody* betcha, I’m insane.” His laugh ended with a menacing snarl. “Now start crossing the river before I throw you in.”

She stared at him hoping he would come to his senses, but all she saw coming from him was fear. He was afraid, and it was driving him to make the wrong choice.

Growling in her throat, Kara went to the edge of the river. Before attempting to cross, she cupped her hands and drank some water. She wanted to take another moment to clean some of the dead woman’s dried blood off her face, but he stomped over and shoved her forward.

Veladan held Kara's arm as they made their way through the strong current. When they got to the opposite bank, Kara was shivering from the cold.

Starting up the wall, she found the ascent slow going and treacherous. Trickle of water ran down the slippery rock, and there were few handholds. A single mishap could send her plunging back into the icy river.

Once she was ten feet up the wall, Veladan began climbing after her. He'd taken off his mail gloves, though still wore the rest of his armor. Holding the torch and climbing one-handed made his ascent more perilous than hers.

The warrior struggled to make headway up the wall. "Take the torch, girl," he shouted over the roar of the river.

Kara reached down and took it from him. Lifting the torch, she almost let go of it in shock. Light shone from the opening on the other side of the river.

Someone had come after them! There was nowhere to hide and she was still some distance from the hole above her.

She was trapped.

A man emerged carrying a torch. He looked over and Kara let out a relieved sob. It was Aemon!

Veladan must've seen the light too, because he glanced over his shoulder. The two men stared at one another for a long moment. Then Veladan waved. "You brought torches and a bag of supplies. Well done, boy. Well done."

Kara didn't like the vibe the warrior suddenly gave off. Courtesans who failed to read men's behavior didn't last long, and she'd felt that vibe several times over her years working at the Golden Keg. Men got that vibe when they were about to commit violence.

Veladan was going to kill Aemon.

Aemon stared at the warrior like a stupid boy with his hand caught in the sweetened mushroom jar. The warrior slid down the wall and started to wade across the river.

Kara's mind raced. She held the torch, so could have escaped while Veladan was distracted, but her guts were twisting into knots like they did when she was thinking something they didn't like. Running would be the wrong choice.

"Aemon! Get out of here, you fool," Kara screamed, though her words were probably lost to the roar of the rushing water.

When Veladan was halfway across the river, his hand went to his sword. Aemon didn't move. He only stared. Couldn't he see what was happening? Was he that thickheaded?

Kara had to do something before it was too late.

Dropping her torch, she leapt from the wall and landed on the warrior's back. The impact knocked the wind out of her, and sent Veladan face-first into the river. They both went under and were swept along with the current.

Kara's head broke the surface. She gasped for air. In the dimming light coming from Aemon's torch, she saw she was speeding toward where the river flowed under the lip of rock. A sharp barb of chilling fear ran through her entire body.

If she couldn't swim to the shore in time, she would be dragged under and drown.

Trying to stand, she found she wasn't able to touch the bottom. Worse still, her body felt like it was rapidly turning to ice. The light from Aemon's torch was fading and already she could barely see.

Something grabbed her arm. "I'll kill you for that, girl," Veladan roared. Blood spurted from his shattered nose and his front teeth were missing.

He looked hideous.

On instinct, she ripped out her hidden knife and stabbed him in the face with it. The blade cut a deep slash across his cheek, and he let go of her arm. Now was her chance to escape.

Weakened from the intense cold, Kara swam toward the gravel bank. Only seconds remained until she would be swept under the lip of rock. She was almost out of the water when a hand grabbed the hood of her cloak. She screamed and tried to break free, but the hand held fast.

"Kara, stop fighting me. He is right behind you."

Thank the divines. It was Aemon.

He dragged Kara onto the gravel bank. She curled into a ball and shivered. Though she'd only been in the water for half a minute, she was frozen and her muscles felt stiff.

Veladan struggled against the current to reach them. Aemon stared at him like a dolt.

Kara hissed through her chattering teeth. Using the last of her strength, she picked up a rock and threw it at Veladan. The rock struck him on the forehead and sent him reeling backward.

A moment later, he was dragged under the lip of rock and was gone.

Chapter 6

Aemon.

Aemon struggled to carry Kara back to where he had dropped his torch. His back ached and his arms were close to giving out. She shivered violently, and it was a struggle to keep hold of her. If only he had not been born short and small of frame.

Kara had saved his life. Aemon knew Veladan had meant to kill him, yet he had stood there, unable to move. All he could see had been the warrior's eyes. Aemon shuddered. That had been the first time he had ever seen the eyes of someone who wanted to kill him.

What Kara had done... he still could not believe it.

In the torchlight, Kara's skin looked blue. Her teeth chattered and her clothes were soaking wet.

There was nothing to make a fire with and the torches needed to be used sparingly. The journey back to the highway would take hours, and they dared not risk running out of torches. Plus, the light would make them visible to anyone or anything nearby.

That meant he needed to extinguish it.

But the darkness terrified him. The blood. The screams. What if the people who had killed Morgon were still out there?

Aemon gently put Kara down as far from the river as he could, then wrapped her in his blanket. She was too cold to speak or even look at him. He grabbed the canvas bag of supplies he had brought with him and placed it beside her.

After scanning the darkness at the edge of the torchlight and seeing nothing, he doused the torch in the river. It took a moment to get his bearings in the dark. When he had, he climbed in the blanket with her and shuffled around until he got comfortable. The gravel was wet and cold, but it beat lying on hard rock.

“Put—put your arms... around me. Need to—get warm,” Kara yelled over the roar of the river, her teeth still chattering.

After a brief hesitation, Aemon put his arm over her. Snuggling against her back, he buried his face in her wet hair. He was uncomfortable and cold, but discomfort was worth the price of holding her.

Too bad it was under such dire circumstances. She was the first woman he had ever held and he wanted to hold her so tight that nothing could separate them. Now, he knew why men fell in love and would stop at nothing to protect their lovers. He had to make sure the people after Kara never got their hands on her.

Aemon owed Kara his life.

The comforting thoughts were swept away by horrifying memories of blood, twisted limbs and terrible, drawn-out screams—some filled with such pain they barely sounded human.

What he saw when he regained consciousness was horror beyond belief. So much blood. So many dead. And for what?

When the last of the caravaners had been murdered, the attackers had started checking the bodies to see if anyone still lived. Aemon had closed his eyes and played dead, praying they would not notice he was still alive. His face had been covered in enough blood to make it appear he was deceased.

When one of the enemies had rolled him onto his back with their boot, he let his body go lax and held his breath. His ruse worked, and the enemy moved on to Morgon’s corpse. After they had finished checking the bodies, the enemy briefly argued amongst themselves, came to some sort of decision, then disappeared into the darkness as if they had never been.

Aemon had survived the slaughter with a bad headache, a throbbing wound on his forehead and a hole in his soul that would never heal. But it beat being dead.

He screwed his eyes shut, his tears running into Kara’s hair. *Morgon, you fool. You got yourself killed. Now you will never get to have that drink at Deep Cave.*

Aemon had spent most of his life with Morgon, and since starting at the bank, they had not been apart for more than a few days. Now, Aemon would never see him again, never hear his voice or get to tell him about anything new he learned while reading a book.

Sobbing, Aemon focused on pleasant memories of their time together. There were so many to pick from, each holding its own special place in his heart.

His favorite was the time he, Morgon and some of the other boys who lived in the Capital Spire had snuck into House Endahl’s bathhouse and swum in its heated water. They had been so afraid of being caught, and yet had surprised

themselves by managing to overcome their fears and doing it anyway. Luckily, they had not been seen.

The memories left an ache in Aemon's heart. Kara, through no fault of her own, had awoken something in him that he had never felt toward his friend before. Jealousy.

What if Morgon knew I thought ill of—

He stopped himself. Thinking that way would not bring peace. It would only bring suffering. Morgon would want him to be strong and would forgive him.

The lump in Aemon's throat eased. *Goodbye, my friend. May Lydan watch over you.*

Half an hour later, Kara stopped shivering. "Thank you, Aemon. You saved my life." She spoke loudly, so he would hear her over the sound of the river.

"You saved mine first."

Kara rolled over so they faced one another. He stroked the back of her head, running his fingers through her damp hair. It was too dark to see her face, but he felt her warm breath on his nose.

"How did you get away?" she asked.

With a pang of sadness, he said, "I got hit on the head by something—a rock, I think—and was knocked out. I woke up some time later and waited for the enemy to leave before I fled."

"How'd you know where I'd gone?"

"Well, truth be told, I was not certain where you went but I saw a dead... woman and two bloody footprints leading away from her body. I did not see you in camp, nor could I see Veladan. I assumed the foot prints belonged to you two, so I followed them into the passage hoping I could catch up to you."

"You saved me. Veladan would've led me to my death."

He gently wound her hair between his fingers. It was so soft. "You saved me too. We are even."

Kara pressed herself against him and her body trembled. "I'm so sorry about Morgon. He, he was..." Her words trailed off into a sob.

The lump came back to Aemon's throat at the mention of his friend. "I know. I saw. They are all dead."

"They died because of me." Her voice was filled with pain.

He moved his hand from her hair and stroked her face, picturing her sad green eyes. "You cannot blame yourself for what happened. You did not wield the blade that killed them."

Kara shuffled closer and put her cold lips to his ear. "That man who asked the traders to hand me over... he killed everyone I ever loved."

There was clearly more to her story about running away from the capital than she had let on. He had to find out what it was.

"The man leading the enemy—I know his name," Aemon said.

She gasped. "What? How?"

"Before the crazy red-headed woman murdered the last few traders, he told them his name was Kahan. He said he was after you because you carried something dangerous and that you posed a threat to us all. If they did not tell Kahan where you had gone, he said they would be to blame when you brought doom upon Stelemia. The traders had no idea where you were, so they—"

"It isn't my fault," Kara cried, cutting him off. "An old warrior gave it to me. I never asked for it."

Aemon's heart thumped. "What were you given?"

Kara did not answer straightaway. He continued to stroke her face while he waited for her to speak. It took a few minutes for her to say, "His name was Wrynric. I met him at the Golden Keg tavern, five nights ago." She paused, then said, "He paid me a silver coin and I took him to the back rooms to... pleasure him. But he was not there for that, and instead told me he carried something belonging to me."

Aemon stopped stroking her face. "What do you mean pleasure him?"

"I am a courtesan."

A courtesan? His mind spun as a thousand thoughts and emotions hit him at once. How could someone so perfect sell her body for the pleasure of others?

He had never seen a courtesan before, but he had read about them. They were often portrayed as depraved villains or poor people forced into the profession. He had imagined them to be ugly, dirty and deceitful.

Yet, Kara was none of those things.

She snatched his hand away from her face. "Don't you dare judge me for what I did to put food in my belly and keep a roof over my head. I hurt no one."

He bit down on his tongue. *Not everyone was born into a wealthy family like me. I cannot think less of her for what she did. She saved my life.*

"I am sorry, I was not judging you. I did not know what to say." He cleared his throat. "It does not matter now anyway. What did Wrynric give you?"

"He claimed the item was an ancient artifact from a dead city, somewhere in the Great Dark. He put it around my neck before I could stop him. Then Kahan attacked the tavern, and Wrynric made me flee." She sobbed as her words spilled out. "When I got the opportunity, I tried to leave the artifact behind, but started to feel sick. The further I walked away from it, the sicker I became."

"So you put it back on?"

"Yes, and the sickness went away." She sniffed. "Odd, isn't it?"

"Indeed." He thought back to all the books he had read, but nothing like the artifact stood out in them. "I have never heard of anything like that. Do you know if it does anything else?"

"Not that I know of. Wrynric didn't get time to explain much about it because..." She took a deep breath. "Kahan killed everyone." She started to cry again so he pulled her close and she snuggled her face against the side of his neck. "What else did Kahan say about me? Did he say how I'm supposed to be a threat?"

"No, all he said was that you have something which could bring about the end of all life. One of the women he led called you a half-blood." Aemon shivered, despite the warmth under the blanket. "She went around to every survivor in the caravan and gave them your description and demanded they tell her where you went. No one knew so she... she cut their throats. They must be willing to do anything to find you."

"But I'm not a threat," Kara wailed. "Why won't they leave me alone?"

"I am sorry. I wish I knew."

"Where are they now? Could they find us here?"

“I do not know where they are. Kahan left suddenly, and the crazy woman was not happy about it. She was so angry, I thought she was going to attack him. She kept insisting you were close.”

Kara’s long sigh warmed his neck. “All I want to do is find a way to get rid of the artifact. What am I going to do, Aemon? I don’t want to die.”

The desperation in her voice made his heart twinge.

He needed to find a way to make things better for her, to free her from this madness. But how? He had read so many books. Surely something in one of them could help her.

Then, out of nowhere, he had the answer. “The temple. We go to the temple.”

“The temple?”

“The Temple of Sacred Lights, home of the Order of Ibilirith. They might be able to help you.” Aemon stood and lit the torch, blinking in the bright light. “Show me what Wrynric gave you.”

Kara waited until her eyes had adjusted, then got to her feet and held up the artifact. It was attached to a silver chain and looked like a playing card with strange writing over it. A small, dimly lit red light bulb protruded from one end.

Aemon leaned closer. A copper-colored circle with small wires running across it sat near the center of the artifact. The wires reminded him of the ones that powered the sacred lights, except these were smaller and not pitted from corrosion.

Shaking his head, he said, “No idea what that is, but it looks like something the Order of Ibilirith might know of. They have records dating back to the old world that tell of the technologies of the past. We should go to the temple. They might be able to tell us more.”

She clasped her fingers around the artifact. “What if they decide to hand me over to the Inquisitors? What if...”

“They are the only people I can think of that might know of what you carry.”

“But the Inquisitor General. The way she looked at me. What if Wrynric lied about where he got the artifact? He might have stole it from the Order.”

That had not even occurred to Aemon. “All I can say is that if I was in your position, I would go to the temple. What other choice do you have?”

“I don’t know,” she sobbed.

“The decision on whether you seek their help or not is yours.” He gave her a reassuring smile. “I will help you, no matter what your decision is.”

What did he have to go back to anyway? His parents did not want him, Morgon was gone and the bank would send assassins after him if they knew he still lived. For better or worse, he and Kara were in this together.

Kara began to pace back-and-forth, the artifact clasped in her hands, the light from the bulb shining out from between her fingers. Aemon let her be, while she thought things through.

Eventually, she stopped pacing and said, “I suppose I have little choice.” Her eyes became unfocused. “I have heard of the temple, but know little beyond my home in Westhollow. Where is it? Could you take me there?”

A surge of joy overwhelmed the ache in his heart. He had found a way to bring her hope. “Of course I can take you there.”

Her relieved smile quickly faded. “Oh no, I just remembered. Before he made me flee the tavern, Wrynric said he would meet me in Deep Cave. I doubt he’s still alive, but there’s always the chance he is. Perhaps we should find him first.”

“And if we cannot?”

“Then we head to the temple.” She looked down at the artifact. “He’s the only one that knows anything about this thing—who isn’t trying to kill me.”

Aemon’s heart sank. He had wanted to help Kara on his own. “Did he say where he would meet you? Deep Cave is a big city.”

“The Shrine of Lydan. Do you know it?”

“No, but I am sure someone there will. Do you think he will give you answers if we find him?”

She made a fist. “I will make him tell me everything. He was the one that got me into this. He owes me.”

Grinning, Aemon kicked some gravel into the river. If Wrynric was not forthcoming with answers, he may well suffer the same fate as Veladan. From the sounds of it, he deserved it too. What sort of man would force something like the artifact on someone and not warn them of the consequences?

“I will help you find him then,” Aemon said.

Kara put the artifact away and closed her eyes. “Thank you.”

“If Wrynric does not turn up in Deep Cave, we will head straight to the temple.” Aemon plotted out the path they would need to take in his head. “To get there, we need to find the entrance to Radashan Crevice and follow the River of the Gods, which flows through it. From there, we head to the Rift Gate.”

“I’ve heard of the River of the Gods. A pilgrim who... ah... visited me told me about it. He said it’s a holy place with statues and shrines to the divines.”

“I have never been there myself, but I have read about these places in my books and seen them on maps.”

Aemon grabbed the blanket and draped it over their shoulders, holding the torch in front of them for warmth.

“Why is it called the River of the Gods?” Kara asked.

Aemon leaned against her to speak into her ear so he did not have to shout. “The River of the Gods is where the Four Divines are said to have climbed to heaven to drive out an ancient enemy that had seized control of it. The divines failed to kill the enemy and managed only to put them to sleep.” He chuckled. “At least, that is the story the priests and Inquisitors would have us believe. I am not so certain it is true.”

“If that is what they tell us, then it must be true. They are chosen of the divines. Why would they lie?”

Was Kara truly that naive?

“Do not believe everything those in power tell you. There are many self-serving, deluded and corrupt people in high positions and they will do anything to further their own ends and undermine or kill their enemies. Those who run Stelemia use our religion as a way to control us.”

Her eyes began to glaze over, like Morgon’s used to when Aemon was giving him a diatribe on history or philosophy. He awkwardly cleared his throat. “Back to the matter at hand. As I said earlier, we need to head to Deep Cave, then to Radashan Crevice and the Rift Gate and then from there, find our way to the temple.”

“So you can find these places and lead me through them?”

Aemon glanced away and sucked in his lower lip. By Lydan, he hoped he could.

When he turned back to face Kara, he was struck by how vulnerable she looked. Her shoulders were slumped, like she carried a great weight on them, and bags were under her eyes.

Aemon squared his shoulders. “I am no hero, but I promise I will help you rid yourself of this curse—no matter where your journey may take me.”

Kara gave him her special, radiant smile and kissed him lightly on the cheek. “I’m so happy you’re here. I’ve been on my own and didn’t know what to do. Thank you, so much.”

Seeing that smile and the light it brought to her beautiful eyes was the only thanks he needed.

Then he remembered his duties. Rubin. The bank... His mission in Deep Cave. He started gnawing on a fingernail.

His life as a banker was over.

Kara watched him. “What’s wrong?”

Aemon broke off a bit of nail and squished it between his teeth. “Tell no one I work for the Royal Stelemian Bank. They have intelligence agents everywhere who keep them abreast of everything. Some I know. Others I do not.”

“What will they do to you?”

“They will inform the bank I am still alive, and the Banking Council will put a price on my head. The penalty for deserting the bank, losing their gold and not fulfilling their task will be...” He found it hard to swallow. “Death.”

“What task did they give you?”

“I cannot tell you. If the bank ever found out I shared their secrets, they would kill my family.”

She shook her head. “The bankers sound horrible. Why does the Priest King allow them to get away with things like that?”

“Because, without the bank, there is no Stelemia. From food production and minting coins to loaning gold and storing the wealth of the noble families—the bank has their corrupt hands in everything.” Laughing bitterly, he added, “The banking council and the secretive people who own the bank are the *real* power in Stelemia.”

Kara must not have known what to say to that, for she turned to stare at the river.

Aemon prepared to douse the torch. “I think we should wait here one day, then head back to the caravan and grab supplies before we travel to Deep Cave. We do not know where the passage you were climbing up to goes, and honestly, I doubt I could climb up that slippery rock anyway.”

Kara nodded absently and sat. He put out the torch and huddled close to her for warmth. It was not long before both were asleep.

A DAY LATER, THEY EMERGED onto the highway and cautiously approached the dead trader caravan. The reek of rotting flesh made them cover their mouths. Stopping at the entrance to the chamber, Aemon peered in. It looked the same as when he had left. Bodies, blood and overturned wagons everywhere.

There was no sign of Kahan or his companions, nor any indication that anyone had stumbled upon the slaughter. Rats skittered in and out of the torchlight, beady eyes glittering.

A large one ran over Kara's feet. "Yuck." She kicked at another who came near her and sent it fleeing back into the darkness. "Let's get what we need so we can get out of here. This place... it belongs to the dead now."

Aemon entered the chamber, walking among the rats and the corpses, careful to avoid looking at where Morgon had fallen. An image of his friend being fed on by vermin came unbidden to his mind. The stench of death overpowered him and he fell to his knees and vomited.

Kara, gagging herself, put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. When there was nothing left in his stomach, the nausea eased but the lightheadedness remained. His books rarely spoke of the aftermath of battles, other than their political ramifications. Around him were only a few dozen bodies. What would a thousand corpses smell—

He retched bile. *Stop thinking, fool. Go get the supplies and get out of here.*

When they got to the supply wagons, they grabbed food, water, a short sword, a few knives and half a dozen spare torches, and shoved them in a sack. Aemon wrapped a belt around his waist and attached a scabbard but struggled to sheath the sword in it.

It was harder than it looked!

Aemon swore under his breath. The absurdity of it all. He had never held a sword in his life and he was all that stood between Kara and the people who would see her dead.

How Veladan would laugh if he saw Aemon now, struggling to get his sword point to go into the top of the scabbard. It looked so easy. You slide the sword in, and then you are done. Yet, when he tried to sheath the weapon, the point kept missing the opening.

Luckily, Kara was too busy keeping watch to notice.

Finally, Aemon got the sword sheathed. Shaking his head at his lack of coordination, he went over to the cart belonging to the bank. One of Veladan's mercenary companions lay sprawled beside it, a javelin sticking out of his neck. Aemon tried not to look at the man's face when he stepped over the body. A rat leapt from the cart at his approach, almost making him drop the torch.

"Go away. Get," he snapped at the rodents feeding on the dead mercenary. The rats looked up at him, then went back to feeding.

Breathing through his cloak, Aemon climbed onto the cart and opened the chest. All the pouches of gold were still there. He picked one up and emptied the coins onto the floor of the cart.

Kara came up beside him and gasped. "Wow. I've never seen so much gold in my life."

Aemon grabbed another pouch and emptied it too. Silver coins spilled everywhere, some rolling off the cart. He took half a dozen silvers and shoved them into his pocket.

Kara's eyes widened. "Why aren't you taking the gold?"

"Gold coins will draw too much attention. Few people use them. Silver, on the other hand, is more common."

“Oh.” She picked up a gold coin and studied it. “It’s heavy.”

“Please, put it down...” Even out there, he felt Rubin’s gaze on him. “I do not like the idea of stealing from the bank.”

She tossed the coin away. “Whoever stumbles across this cart is gonna steal it all anyway. Why not take what we can? There’s enough gold here to live like—”

“When the bank learns their gold is missing, they will have their agents keep an eye out for anyone who has stumbled upon a recent fortune. I feel nothing but pity for the person who takes this gold. The bank will make sure they do not live to enjoy it.”

Sighing, Kara backed away from the cart. Aemon climbed off and grabbed the sack of supplies they had gathered earlier. With a last glance at the carnage, they started down the highway toward Deep Cave.

They endured the journey in silence, their attention focused on their surroundings. Kahan might lay in ambush somewhere along the road, knowing Kara would have few options to get out of the Limestone Caves. Fortunately, side passages leading from the highway were abundant, giving them ample places to hide if they saw something. These passages also gave Kahan plenty of places to ambush them from, but Aemon tried not to think on that.

When they were too tired to go on, they decided to find a place to sleep. Heading down a side tunnel, they found a small chamber to hide in. After extinguishing the torch, they ate a meal, and then Aemon took first watch.

Staying awake when it was pitch black was difficult, but that was not the only thing he had to contend with. A stream flowed nearby, making it hard to hear if something was approaching, and the stench from the dead caravan wafted along the highway, turning his stomach. Then there was the water dripping from the ceiling, slowly drenching him.

Aemon was wet, miserable and afraid.

He attempted to hold back a bitter laugh, but it came anyway. To think he had once thought counting coins and cleaning the vault were the worst things imaginable! How insular and sheltered his life had been.

It was a relief to wake Kara for her turn on watch. He only hoped his fatigue would outweigh his discomfort and fear and that he would slip off to sleep easily.

She woke him hours later and they set out along the highway. Aemon’s eyes were heavy with fatigue and his back ached. He had barely slept, though Kara did not look like she had fared any better. She shuffled her feet, shoulders slumped, eyes half closed.

Some time later, light appeared in the tunnel ahead. *It has to be the guard post near the entrance to Deep Cave*, he thought, elated. He increased his pace. How he wanted to get to the city, find a room at an inn and go to sleep beside its warm fire.

His heart kicked. The lights were moving.

Aemon grabbed Kara’s arm. “We need to hide.”

She watched the lights, then nodded once. He led her into a side passage and doused their torch in a pool of water.

If it was Kahan, they had to be ready.

He unsheathed his sword and waited. Instead of black-clad figures, a column of peasants shuffled by the entrance, their haggard faces grim in the swaying light of their torches.

Some were covered in blood, others looked like they were in shock—many were both. Had the war between the noble houses in Deep Cave gotten out of control?

Only once had the peasantry of Deep Cave been driven from their homes by the war—when both noble houses had escalated the conflict by hiring thugs from Gravelbank Bridge who had gone to Deep Cave to offer their services as mercenaries. Once on the payroll, the thugs went about robbing, beating and sometimes killing anyone who had been accused of supporting one side over the other. The thugs were also more than happy to kill one another in drunken brawls that often spilled over from taverns onto the streets. In one such fight, things had gotten so bad that the local garrison was unable to bring order to the streets and the people of the city began to flee.

The Priest King had sent an army to reestablish order in the city and end the war between the noble houses. He succeeded but the peace lasted no more than a generation before the ruling houses were fighting again but as long as the fighting was kept off the city's streets and remained in its back alleys, sewers and noble estates; the current Priest King seemed content to let it be.

The refugees continued to trickle by in the dozens. Things must be really bad, for it seemed as if the entire population was fleeing. Maybe now, the Priest King would be forced to intervene.

"Let's find out what's going on," Kara said and started to make her way back toward the highway.

Aemon struggled to sheath his sword in the dark. He did not like the idea of going out there, but it was too late to stop her. Growling under his breath, he raced after her, still trying to get the sword back in its scabbard.

He caught up to her just as she had finished asking a man what was going on. "War," the man said, shoving past her.

Kara stopped a plump woman with a black cat cradled in her arms. "What's happening? Why are you fleeing?"

Aemon finally got his sword sheathed. "Is it the noble houses?"

"It's not the noble houses," the plump woman said. "They've joined forces, for once."

Aemon watched a peasant couple with six children hurry past. "Then who is driving you from your homes?"

"Not who... What."

"What?"

"You dumb ox." The woman stamped her feet. "I'd have said if I knew. All I've heard are rumors. Rumors of this and that, and metal beasts that breathe fire."

Kara looked at Aemon as if he would know what the woman was talking about. Metal beasts that breathed fire? It sounded like madness.

Aemon was about to ask another question when the cat looked down the side passage he and Kara had just emerged from and started hissing. They peered down the passage, but the gloom made it impossible to see far.

"Something's back there," the woman said, and hurried away.

Kara grabbed Aemon's arm and dragged him through the throng of refugees. "If it's Kahan, we can try to lose him in the crowd."

"But we are the only ones heading toward Deep Cave."

"Have you got a better idea?"

No, he did not.

When they were half a mile further up the road, a commotion began behind them. They turned to look, but there were too many people in the way to see what was happening.

Screams and curses echoed along the highway. The passing peasants stopped and peered ahead warily. Aemon and Kara had to push their way through the refugees so they could keep moving toward Deep Cave. Behind them came the sound of hundreds of running feet, along with screams of pain and terror.

All at once, the column of peasants turned and hurried back toward Deep Cave. The retreat quickly became a rout, with the sick, elderly and slow trampled underfoot.

Aemon cursed. He wanted to stop and help those who were being trampled, but there was nothing he could do. If he went to their aid, he risked joining them. Kara held onto his hand as they tried desperately not to be torn apart.

They crossed a stone bridge spanning a noisy river that almost drowned out the sounds of screaming and running feet. "Kara, that must be the Vadose Canyon, which means we are close to the end of the Limestone Caves."

A minute later, they ran past a deserted guard post lit by a lone torch. Aemon would have jumped for joy if he could. Deep Cave was near.

Soon they emerged into a huge cavern lit by phosphorescent bacteria and sacred lights connected to one another by electrical wires on mushroom stem poles. This end of the cavern was dominated by the city from which the cavern took its name—Deep Cave.

About a mile from them, at the center of the city, stood a large castle on a rocky precipice, its windows reflecting the glow of the sacred lights illuminating the gardens around it. Like a flock around a shepherd, the stone buildings of Deep Cave stood around the base of the precipice, some with minarets reaching almost half as high as the spires of the castle. Looming beyond the city was the legendary Iron Tower of Jharman, the tomb of the founder of Deep Cave and blessed servant of Lydan.

As peasants jostled by them, Aemon dragged Kara away from the entrance to the side of the highway. When they were free of the stampede, which continued to spill down the road, he stopped and stared.

Fires raged inside Deep Cave's walls and thick smoke blanketed the cavern roof, partially obscuring the bacterial light. A host of strange figures moved on the far side of the city. They had to be the metal beasts the plump woman had spoken of. Squinting his eyes, Aemon tried to get a better look at them.

It was no use. Between the dimming light and the smoke, he could not get a clear view. A bright flash erupted from among the teeming mass of figures and then an explosion ripped a hole through part of Deep Cave's outer wall. Bits of stone and metal flew in all directions, some ejected so far they would land outside the city. Two seconds later came the roar of the explosion.

Three more explosions followed the first, then seconds later—Boom. Boom. Boom.

“Lydan, protect us,” Aemon said, calling upon the Shield of Heaven.

Heart thumping in his chest, he took Kara’s hand and began to move deeper into the chamber, aware that whatever was coming up behind them would be drawing near. They should stay among the flock of refugees. There was safety in numbers.

As he ran, he watched the city—which had stood for years beyond count—slowly crumble under the barrage of mysterious enemy projectiles. People were everywhere, fleeing toward the city, away from it or milling around in the mushroom fields growing on this side of the city, as if uncertain what to do.

Kara scanned the chaos, her face ashen. “How can we find Wrynric in all this?”

Aemon’s stomach clenched as a whole section of wall came crashing down. The enemy seemed to want to destroy Deep Cave, not capture it. If the barrage continued, the city would not hold out long.

“I am... not sure.” Panic began to take hold of him. *What are we going to do? We need to flee*, his brain screamed.

A long moment passed before he got a hold of himself enough to think straight. “We dare not approach the city while it is under attack.”

Aemon tried to speak to some of the peasants fleeing beside them and ask the location of the entrance to Radashan Crevice, but none would listen.

Increasing her pace, Kara held tightly onto his arm to make sure he did not fall behind. “We need to hurry up and decide what we’re going to do.”

Aemon grimaced and put a hand to his forehead. *Think, Aemon. Think.*

A spark of hope flickered within him. “I know someone who might help us find the entrance to Radashan Crevice. He is an agent for the bank and lives in one of the small hamlets outside the city.”

Kara frowned. “But if we go to this agent, won’t he tell the bank you’re still alive? You said—”

“I know what I said, but we have to risk it. We have no choice.”

Kara touched the artifact. “Let’s find him, then.”

Aemon nodded. Now all they had to do was find their way through the chaos before the city fell and the enemy moved to destroy everything around it.

Chapter 7

Kara.

The flood of people around Kara and Aemon grew. They sprinted deeper into the mushroom fields growing along the edge of the road to avoid the worst of the stampede. There were distraught refugees everywhere, some stumbling over rocks or each other in their haste to flee the tunnel. Their cries of terror and pain were not enough to drown out the sound of enemy projectiles tearing holes through the city walls.

Deep Cave's defenders fought back with a volley of liquid fire hurled by catapults. The flames landed amidst the mass of enemies arrayed two hundred feet from the city walls. As the great fire raged among them, a large, rotund figure holding something in its arms moved over to the flames. White mist sprayed out of the object in its hands, obscuring the burning enemy. When the mist dissipated half a minute later, it revealed not charred bodies—but scorched metal.

The scorched metal moved.

No wonder the woman with the cat had thought the city faced metal beasts. Some had two legs and arms like humans while others walked on all fours like dogs. Several of the larger attackers carried a long, cylindrical pipe over their shoulders.

Kara focused on one of the metal beasts. It knelt and shoved something into the end of the pipe, then leveled it at the city. A moment passed, then something trailing smoke shot out of the pipe at high speed. The projectile smashed into the castle of Deep Cave and seconds later came the crack of shattered stone.

Whatever was destroying the city was coming from those pipes! But, what were they?

Another round of liquid fire flew from the city walls. Again, it had no effect. Kara recalled a time when a horribly burned soldier had told her all about liquid fire. He'd only been close to a liquid-fire spill, not doused in it, yet had still suffered major burns. The men around him, unfortunate enough to be in plate, had roasted alive in their armor.

No one could survive being doused in liquid fire.

She let go of Aemon's arm and pointed. "Look, they're still alive. What do you think they are?"

Aemon studied them as he ran. "I am not sure. Some must be four times the size of a man." He faced forward again. "Maybe they are not human."

Not human? That was a scary thought. She felt for the artifact around her neck as something occurred to her. Could the metal beasts attacking Deep Cave be linked to it? Was this somehow her fault?

Kara tried not to cry. So much was changing, all at once. She'd been told she was something called a scion, had the artifact forced upon her, then seen her friends die.

And now... she was being chased by evil killers, having strange dreams and had even been forced to kill a man! Things were spinning out of control and she didn't understand any of it. All she could do was run and pray she would survive.

How much more could she take?

It would've been impossible for her to endure it all if Aemon weren't there helping her. She'd have been lost without him. The fact he was willing to risk his life for her—a mere courtesan and someone well below his social standing—still surprised her. Most nobles she'd met had been too self-absorbed in their own grandiosity to care about the likes of her.

Aemon waited for her to catch up. "Hurry, we need to move."

She reached him, and he led her toward a hamlet near the city walls. There was no sign of the enemy on this side of the city but panicked people were everywhere. If the enemy tried to flank the city, the people would scramble over one another to escape.

But where would they go?

Aemon ducked as the enemy fired another projectile at the castle. “The city will not stand long against this,” he said, his voice almost lost to the crash of falling stone.

Kara’s chest tightened, her breath coming fast. “What about the army? Surely they can find a way to save the city.”

“According to the bank’s records, there are three thousand soldiers stationed in this cavern and half as many working directly for the two noble houses. Deep Cave is one of the more formidable cities in the caverns, but I do not think they will be able to stand up to the force arrayed against them. Whoever—or *whatever*—the enemy is, their weapons technology is beyond anything the Stelemian army possesses.”

“But the army has to win. If they don’t... thousands will die.”

They glanced at the city as a guard tower collapsed. A chunk of wall came down with it, sending dozens of defenders to their deaths.

Kara flattened her mouth to a line. Aemon was right. The city would fall, and there was nothing the army could do to prevent it.

When they neared the hamlet, another projectile flew over their heads. It smashed into the cavern wall near the entrance to the Limestone Caves. People still fleeing the tunnel fled in all directions as chunks of rock broke away from the wall and smashed to the ground around them.

A dozen black-clad figures emerged from the tunnel, a wave of refugees fleeing before them. Fear buried itself in Kara’s heart. “We need to hide. Kahan is behind us. He must be the one driving everyone back to Deep Cave.”

Aemon spun around and ran backward, near breathless from all the running. “I do not think he will see us. There are people everywhere.”

Kara hoped he was right.

They made it to the hamlet and Aemon led her toward an inn made of granite blocks, his chest heaving. “The innkeeper is one of the bank’s intelligence agents. If I tell him who I am, he might be able to help us. Assuming he has not fled already.”

A crowd of frightened people were gathered outside the tavern and an old man dressed in bedraggled brown robes stood on a metal crate trying to get them to listen to him. His voice was hoarse, as if he’d been up there for hours shouting at people to heed him.

When Kara walked past, he pointed down at her. “You must listen, girl. The time of the Prophecy of Ibilirith is upon us. The powerful have become corrupt, our defenses have weakened, and ancient vengeful spirits have returned to walk among us.” He gazed out at the besieged city and wept. “All of us who live in the Caverns will be but fuel for the flames of humanity’s final destruction. The end is here—it is here—and our flesh will be cast into iron and we will live no more.”

Poor old man, Kara thought. *The fighting must have driven him mad.*

Or had it?

She gave Aemon a sidelong look. He knew much, yet he looked as bewildered as she did. Something Wrynric had said at the Golden Keg came back to her.

“He saw you enlist the Metal Man’s help and later stand at the head of a great host and lead them against an Ancient Enemy...”

Again, she touched the artifact. Seeing what was happening to the city of Deep Cave made it easy to believe the end had come.

They left the old man to his ranting and fought their way through the press of bodies into the tavern. Inside was almost as hectic as outside, with people standing shoulder to shoulder, some even on the tables. The room reeked of fear and strong drink, and the clamor of frightened voices almost drowned out the sounds of the battle.

The plump innkeeper was busy packing bottles of fine ale and mushroom beer into boxes. Aemon approached him. "I work for the Royal Stelemian Bank. You report to my superior, Rubin Gamaston. I need you to tell me the way to Radashan Crevice."

"Go away," the innkeeper snapped. "I'm leaving as soon as these bottles are packed, and you're in the bloody way."

"Please—"

The innkeeper shoved Aemon away, almost sending him to the floor. Aemon steadied himself on the edge of the bar and gave Kara a desperate look.

There wasn't time to waste. Kahan could appear at any moment.

Kara slid off her hood, messed up her hair, then walked over and put her arms around the innkeeper and cried. With all that was happening, it wasn't hard to get the tears to flow.

The innkeeper tried to pry her arms open, but Kara held on tight and put on her best lost-little-girl act. No man could turn her away when she used that on him.

"Please help me, my lord," she begged in a soft, girly voice. "I need to find Radashan Crevice. My parents are waiting for me there."

His face was iron but it quickly softened. "Girl, you can see I'm busy. I can't help you."

Kara buried her face into his apron and sobbed. "Please, my lord. I need to know how to get there. I don't want to die."

His body deflated. "Fine, come with me."

He led her to a window and gestured toward a mushroom farm. "Go through those fields and you'll come to a lake. When you reach it—" He pointed at a natural granite pillar to the left of the city, well away from the enemy horde and about four miles from the inn. "Head to that, and you'll find the entrance to Radashan Crevice."

Kara dried her eyes on her sleeve. "Why not follow the road? Has the enemy been sighted on this side of the city?"

"No enemies yet, but the road will be clogged with refugees that could turn into a stampede if the fighting moves to this side of the city." He put his hands on her shoulders and his face became grave. "You must be careful. There're a lot of desperate folks out there and a sweet girl like you would be easy pickings for the more unsavory types." He inclined his head toward the city. "All the guards are defending the walls and they won't be able to help you if you run into trouble."

"Thank you, my lord," Kara replied. The innkeeper let go, and she went back to Aemon and winked. "Shall we get going?"

He scowled at the innkeeper and then followed Kara to one of the front windows. She peered through it, trying to see if Kahan was around. The crowd out front had

grown, making it impossible to see beyond the people pressed up against the glass.

Giving up, she glanced over her shoulder and caught sight of a metal door at the back of the inn. She grabbed Aemon and started toward it. The rear side of the inn had no windows, which meant they'd have to open the door blind.

Reaching the door, Kara took a deep breath and opened it. Ducking to the side, she waited for the sound of running feet or any other indication Kahan was outside. When nothing happened, she nodded to Aemon and he bravely headed through the door. A moment later, he reappeared and motioned her out.

Once outside, she found herself in a deserted alley. Someone shouted from inside the inn. She jumped, then slammed the door shut in case it was Kahan.

Pulling her hood over her head, Kara quickly led Aemon along the alley. It ended at a narrow thoroughfare filled with people milling around arguing with one another about what to do.

Why weren't the people heading toward Radashan Crevice? That seemed like the smart thing to do.

The two pushed their way through the crowd until they got to the edge of the hamlet. Pointing to a mushroom plantation, Kara said, "We need to head that way but it looks like we'll be out in the open until we reach the other end of the fields."

It was hard to tell what was on the far edge of the farm, as the ground seemed to drop away. Yet the cavern wall was a good three miles beyond. She saw no reason not to trust the innkeeper's directions. There must be something beyond the plantations.

Aemon stared out at the fields and grimaced. "There is no one out there. How are we supposed to blend into the crowd?"

Kara scanned the nearby people. Some were dressed in dark clothing and others carried weapons, though none wore masks over their faces. "We have to risk it. The innkeeper told me the road would be dangerous and that our best bet was to head this way." She forced a grin. "Kahan might stick to the roads with everyone else, assuming we would too."

Aemon chewed on a fingernail but followed her into the fields. The din of battle and frightened voices followed them as they ran away from the hamlet.

Another enemy projectile roared over the city and struck the roof of the cavern several hundred feet to their right. Jagged chunks of rock, stalactites and a glowing bacterial colony cascaded to the ground in a shower of phosphorescent debris.

The enemy is going to bring the whole roof down on us if they keep that up!

They arrived at the edge of the fields and found themselves overlooking a deep crevice filled with huge, colorful mushroom caps. Kara didn't spare a moment to admire the view, as she caught sight of people fleeing the hamlet she'd just left.

Her heart lurched when she saw what had made the people flee. A group of dark figures had entered the hamlet and were attacking anyone not swift enough to get out of their way.

Kara grabbed Aemon by the arm and half dragged him down a winding path that led to the bottom of the crevice. When they were out of sight of the hamlet, she let him go but didn't slow her pace. "Kahan was back there."

Aemon glanced up the hill. "Did he see us?"

“I don’t think so.”

She touched the hilts of the two knives hidden in her cloak to reassure herself they were still there. Little good they’d be if Kahan found her.

As they continued down the path, the light became dimmer. Aemon relit the torch and held it over his shoulder, the flame spluttering as he ran.

Reaching the bottom of the crevice, the two raced under the canopy of brown mushroom caps twenty feet above their heads. The din of battle was muted, though the occasional thud of a projectile hitting something in the distance filtered down to them.

The forest floor was covered in roots, uneven rock—where the roots had broken through—and dirt that smelled of rot. Their progress slowed, but they pressed on without rest.

Peering up at the underside of the living fungal roof as she waited for Aemon to climb over a root, Kara shook her head in wonder. She’d never dreamed mushrooms could be so large. They were nearly as tall as the trees that grew under the powerful sacred lights in the Priest King’s garden. Like the trees, the stems of the mushrooms were so thick she wouldn’t have been able to encircle one with her arms.

From what Berda had once told her, the stems of the larger mushrooms were used to make torches or were cut into firewood. The stems could also be used in the construction of wealthy homes or important public buildings.

“At least we are alone down here,” Aemon puffed, sweat dripping from his face. “Maybe we can stop a moment to catch our breath.”

Kara leaned against one of the stems, weary and afraid but feeling somewhat comforted by the cloistered feel of the crevice. “This mushroom flesh feels like stone. How do they make them grow like this? The ones we eat are tiny and squishy.”

He collapsed to the ground beside her. When he spoke, it was between breaths. “I read a book by a brother of Ibilirith that claimed the ancients created them with something called genetics. I do not know what genetics is and the author did not either.”

“Maybe it’s magic.”

Aemon studied her, the corners of his mouth twisting upward. Then he giggled. “Sorry, I tried not to laugh, but how can you believe in magic? I stopped believing in that years ago.”

“Why wouldn’t I believe in magic? Lots of stories speak of it and there’s even an old woman in the Great Markets who sells magical scrolls and potions.”

“That woman sounds like she is profiting from other people’s...” He swallowed more laughter. “Sorry to say, but stupidity.”

Kara put her hands on her hips. “How do you know it’s not real? You can’t possibly know everything.”

“Have you seen any?”

“The artifact might be magical. That could explain why it made me sick when I tried to leave it behind.”

He stopped looking so amused. “No one has ever been able to conclusively prove magic exists, so I am certain there is another explanation for what the artifact does to you. We should not dismiss—”

Kara dove to the ground. Grabbing Aemon, she pulled him onto his belly. “Quiet,” she whispered. “I saw something.” She tried to swallow her fear but failed. Her voice quivered. “It looked like one of the things attacking the city!”

He covered the torch in dirt to extinguish it. They peered ahead, trying to catch a glimpse of movement but couldn’t see much in the low light.

Then something thudded onto the mushroom cap above their heads. Freezing, Kara held her breath, not daring to move. An unnerving silence fell upon them, and seconds seemed to become hours. Then a burst of sound—like a cat hissing—filled the air. It went on for several seconds, then fell silent.

Kara felt an almost overwhelming urge to get up and run. Somehow, she managed to resist and keep still. Aemon’s mouth opened and closed, but he seemed to be able to keep a lid on his fear.

Then they saw it.

The metal creature leapt through the air and latched onto a mushroom stem fifty feet in front of them. It had four long, spindly arms that ended in hooks, which were buried in the flesh of the fungus. A strange conical head with two large, circular red eyes swiveled from side to side, as if searching for something.

Its gaze passed over where Kara and Aemon were hidden and then moved on. Evidently, not finding what it was searching for, the beast leapt to the next stem and then the next until it disappeared into the distance.

Maybe it hadn’t seen them, or perhaps it hadn’t cared that they were there. Either way, it was gone. Kara dug her fingers into the moist, pungent dirt. *What if it comes back?*

They waited a long time before they were brave enough to move again. “I do not know what that was,” Aemon said, never taking his eyes off where the creature had gone. “It certainly was not human, nor like any animal I recall ever seeing.”

Kara felt a chill creep down her spine. “Let’s get out of here in case it returns.”

It took close to an hour to make their way through the forest and emerge out the other side. They were close to the cavern wall, in a wide valley spreading along the edge of the cavern. The battle still raged in the distance, the odd boom or crack echoing around them.

They continued their journey to the pillar and passed a group of houses built around a small lake, lit only by the bacterial colonies growing on the cavern roof. Behind the houses were a dozen small boats moored to a wharf, and a drying rack with several fish hanging from it.

Then Kara saw the bodies.

The people who’d made their home here were dead, along with their animals. Around the bodies, blood had pooled into rivulets on the rocky ground. Limbs, torn from their sockets, had been tossed around carelessly, some landing on the roofs of the houses. The back of one man’s head had been splattered against the side of a house, spraying blood and brain all over it.

Had the metal beast they’d seen in the mushroom crevice killed these people? Or had it been Kahan? What purpose did butchering innocent people serve?

Kara felt sick and almost brought up what little she had left in her stomach. She’d seen a lot of death lately. Did it ever get any easier?

Aemon paled, and refused to look at the bodies. She felt a pang of sorrow for him. He had also seen too much death since meeting her.

They avoided the homes and made their way through the paddocks, hurrying toward the distant granite pillar. Only when Kara was safe would she let herself take a moment to come to grips with what they'd seen.

An hour later, they neared the pillar. Heading toward the entrance to Radashan Crevice, they found hundreds of refugees gathering on the road in front of a guardhouse built into the formidable ten-foot-high stone wall. Part of the wall was overshadowed by thick electrical cables that ran from the city to the edge of the cavern.

"This road leads into the sacred crevice." Aemon pointed at the iron portcullis blocking their way. "But unless that gate opens, we are stuck here."

Kara ran her eyes over the barrier in front of them. Did they come all this way to be blocked by a gate?

She'd climb the wall if she had to.

Beyond the wall, the entrance to the crevice loomed. It was brightly lit by dozens of small sacred lights, their glow making the entrance glitter like gold. Huge tapestries depicting the sigils of each Divine hung on wires above it.

Lydan's silver shield, Ibilirith's light bulb, Roryur's healing herbs and the last, Dwaycar's—the Divine spoken of only in hushed whispers. His sigil was the mark of a betrayer, a knife sticking out of the back of a heart.

Hundreds of refugees were still gathering at the guardhouse. Others were strewn out along the road all the way back to the city. It seemed everyone now planned to escape the battle through Radashan Crevice.

Kara and Aemon joined the people gathering at the guardhouse, the air hazy with smoke. A heated argument was taking place.

"You've got to let us through," an old woman was saying. "The tunnel to the capital is under attack and there's no other way for us to escape the fighting."

A female officer flanked by four spear-men stood in front of the metal door leading into the guardhouse. She addressed the growing crowd, but the chorus of frightened voices almost drowned her out. "I order you to leave. You were told to flee via the Limestone Caves."

"To the dark with ya, woman," a sour-faced man yelled back. "We just told ya, the Limestone Caves is being attacked. Are ya deaf or somefen?"

"I don't care. Radashan Crevice is sacred to the divines and must not be desecrated by those of lowly—"

Her proclamation was cut off by jeers and insults.

Another man shouted, "We're not thieves, but simple god-fearing folk who will respect the holy shrines of the divines. For blessed Roryur's sake, let us pass."

A woman held up a baby. "I don't want my daughter to die."

Loud booms erupted from back at the city. The crowd waited for the sound to die down, then the argument renewed with more urgency.

"There's no other way out," another woman cried, her voice sharp with panic.

People in the front ranks of the crowd edged closer to the soldiers. The female officer put a hand on her sword hilt. "Stay back, all of you. Our orders—"

"To the Great Dark with ya orders," a barrel-chested man said. "Let us pass or we'll bloody fight our way through."

Kara and Aemon exchanged glances. Things could turn violent fast.

As more refugees arrived, some of the more desperate people hefted makeshift weapons of cooking pots and farming implements. The female officer drew her sword, while her companions leveled their spears and formed a shield wall in front of her. Rocks and worse began to pelt them as the soldiers backed toward the guardhouse door.

A loud rumble in the distance made everyone stop and turn back toward the city. Kara put a hand over her mouth and froze. The precipice on which stood the great stone castle of Deep Cave was breaking apart, sending thousands of tons of rock and metal cascading down onto the city.

The roar of falling stone and crumbling buildings boomed so loud that Kara covered her ears, gritting her teeth in pain. The stone walls surrounding the city started breaking apart as they withered under another sustained barrage of fire. Hundreds of soldiers ran along the defenses to escape, but disappeared as the wall fell apart under their feet.

The metal beasts destroyed the whole city! How could they do such a thing? The evil...

Long after the last tower had fallen into ruin, the sound of the dying city echoed off the cavern walls as if the ancient stone itself mourned its passing.

The sacred lights throughout the cavern began to go out. The power cables running over Kara's head strained as they were wrenched toward the city, the mushroom-stem poles they were hanging from tilting sideways as the cables threatened to rip them from the ground.

Aemon pulled Kara away just as the cables snapped. An eruption of sparks exploded from the ends of the broken wire, showering those unfortunate enough to not get out of the way in time.

People screamed as they fled the sparks, slapping at their clothes as they caught fire. The sacred lights strung up around the guardhouse flickered, but remained lit. Light still flooded from the entrance to Radashan Crevice.

But for how long?

A billowing cloud of dust and smoke rapidly spread beyond the destroyed city, extinguishing the dimming light still visible from the bacterial colonies on the cavern roof.

"By the divines, they've destroyed everything," someone cried.

The refugees turned back to the soldiers at the keep door. Deep Cave was destroyed, along with the army defending it. Now nothing stood between them and the mysterious enemy. If that didn't make the officer let them pass, nothing would.

The officer slowly lowered her sword as she stared into the darkness where the city once stood. She looked defeated. Ash and dust began to blanket them, choking the air with the pulverized remnants of the dead city.

It didn't take long for the officer to come to a decision. She called out to someone inside the guardhouse. A moment later, the portcullis began to rise.

As the crowd flooded toward Radashan Crevice, Kara and Aemon were swept along with it. Before they got to the entrance, Kara grabbed Aemon's hand to make sure she didn't lose him.

He was all she had.

Chapter 8

Aemon.

The crowd took them into the thirty-foot-wide Radashan Crevice. Aemon held tightly onto Kara's hand as the press of bodies grew. All he could do was hold her and try to prevent one of them from falling. The few who had fallen were quickly trampled underfoot, their wails of anguish lost to the sound of stomping feet.

He glanced back at the billowing dust cloud smothering the entrance to the crevice. Deep Cave was gone. A city that had stood for years beyond count, reduced to rubble in hours.

Unbelievable.

Someone elbowed him in the ribs. It was a young woman clutching a baby, her face covered in dirt and streaked with tears. She seemed to be in shock, her eyes glazed and her hands shaking. Deep Cave had been her home and now it was gone. Maybe her loved ones were gone too.

The young woman's look reminded Aemon of his late grandfather Rodnie, a veteran of the Second War of the Abyss. He had that same look sometimes, the look of someone who had seen things that would forever torment him.

Aemon took out a silver coin and tried to give it to the woman, but she ignored him. Not giving up, he slipped it into the baby's blanket so she would find it later.

He wanted to blame someone for her loss, the enemy—whatever they were—foremost. But the young woman would have known conflict long before the enemy had come along to finish off the destruction of the city. The true blame fell on the shoulders of the noble houses of Deep Cave. Why had they not gotten everyone out days ago, back when the first group of refugees had fled through the Limestone Caves?

Each house had likely been too busy working out if they could somehow use the enemy against the other noble house, and neither had come to their senses until it was too late.

What fools the lords and ladies of House Teradith and Dworebyn had been. For hundreds of years the two families had fought, taking the throne of Deep Cave from one another countless times. What did their conflict amount to in the end? All of them were probably dead now—buried under the rubble of their *precious* city.

Their tomb.

Kara had not noticed him slip the coin to the other woman. Such wealth would mean much to Kara, but to Aemon, a silver meant little. He had always thought his life had been hard. But to the common people of Deep Cave around him now, his life would seem one of unimaginable luxury and ease.

Still holding hands, he and Kara began to pass shrines built along the edge of the path. Some were carved from stone, and others forged from precious metals like gold, platinum and, favored of Lydan, silver.

Pilgrims passed through the crevice and left offerings around the shrines on their journey to the sacred places of Stelemia. Aemon wrinkled his nose. Some of

the offerings were food, much of it in various stages of decay. Only the thick incense wafting from braziers filled with boiling, perfumed water spared his senses from the worst of the stench.

There were other offerings too. Slivers of metals, smatterings of coins and carved stone zhuk symbols lay scattered around the shrines.

Despite the unpleasant odor, Aemon breathed the air reverently. His feet treaded the very path the divines had taken on their journey to reclaim heaven. Religious dogma and mythology often brought out Aemon's cynical streak; yet here, in the most holy of places, it had become easy to set skepticism aside and believe. If not for their current predicament, he would have left an offering and asked for divine blessing for their journey.

On his way past one shrine, Aemon decided to use his sight-counting skill to get a rough tally of the value of the offerings left before it. He widened his eyes. These offerings were worth at least one hundred silver. No wonder the officer at the gate had not wanted the peasantry entering the crevice. With such wealth lying around, how long before someone tried to steal some?

AEMON HEARD THE RIVER of the Gods before he saw it. The river that ran at the heart of the Stelemian faith. It started as a distant roar and grew louder with every step. Then the crevice grew colder, the air thick with moisture.

Further along the path, Aemon caught a fleeting glimpse of the swiftly flowing river through a gap in the crowd. Unable to contain his excitement, he let out a giggle. He had been waiting for this moment his entire life. No longer would the river be a place he knew only from books. Now he would see it with his own eyes!

But curse it all. His short stature made it difficult to see over the heads of the people in front. He tried to walk on his toes but it slowed his pace and the person behind him shoved him forward, cursing.

Kara squeezed his hand. "Aemon, what are you doing?"

"I want to see the river."

Kara did not have the same problem he did. She stood six feet tall, half a head higher than the man in front of her. "I've never seen such beauty in my life," she gasped. "It almost makes me forget the trouble I'm in."

Her happiness eased his disappointment. If it allowed her to forget the danger they were in, even if for a moment, then he was content.

The man in front of Aemon shifted and a shorter woman took his place. Perhaps one of the divines had taken pity on him, for he could now see the river and the beauty surrounding it.

A dazzling display of crystals projected the light of countless candles and small sacred lights onto the moisture-slick walls of the crevice. The kaleidoscope of color reflected off the river, making it sparkle with a thousand different hues. Over a dozen large zhuk symbols carved into the shape of a healing beetle hung on wires from overhead railings, each beetle coated in phosphorescent bacteria to make it glow. Chiseled into the walls of the crevice were shallow nooks that contained other offerings, mostly forged figures of gold and silver in the likeness of the divines.

Aemon took a deep breath and savored it all.

Kara pointed at a crystal pillar, eyes wide with awe. "Aemon, look. It's—"

“Wondrous,” he finished for her.

She nodded, the colored light reflecting in her eyes. By the divines, she was beautiful. Kara belonged in a place such as this.

As they continued their journey through the crevice, Aemon decided to share with her his knowledge of the river. “According to the ancient holy teachings of Radashan—first servant of Ibilirith and founder of Stelemia—the source of the River of the Gods is heaven. When it passes from the holy realm into the mortal one, it flows through rocky primordial channels of crystal cities and cascades down into Radashan Crevice through a black void in the roof. This creates a *vast*, roaring waterfall, two hundred feet high.” He gestured at the water flowing past. “Notice how clear it is?”

Kara licked her lips. “Looking at it makes me thirsty.”

“According to the healers at the city of Celestial Rest, it has curative properties. That is why they use it in their medicines and during their sacred rituals, where they drink it in honor of Roryur.”

She squeezed his hand again. “If I live through this, perhaps you can bring me back here and tell me everything you know about it.”

“I—” His words caught in his throat. “I would like that. Very much.”

Suddenly, Kara slipped on the wet path, and Aemon stopped her from falling. When she was steady on her feet again, she said, “I wish we could stop. My feet are starting to hurt. How long before we get to the temple?”

“I do not know.” His feet hurt too and carrying the bag of supplies had made the muscles in his shoulders ache. But worse than the pain was the fatigue. It had been the better part of a day since they had last slept.

They walked over an arched marble bridge and entered a large courtyard. Four statues ringed by a moat towered at its center. The water in the moat teemed with sightless fish brought there from the dark depths of Crystal Lake.

Aemon recognized the area from descriptions in his books. It was the Central Promenade where pilgrims came to prostrate themselves before the statue representations of the divines. A reverent hush fell over the peasants. None approached the statues but passed wide of them, as if they feared intruding upon the gods.

Aemon and Kara were finally able to break free from the mass of people, stopping to rub their feet and stretch their aching muscles. Even with everything that had happened, Aemon thought if he closed his eyes, he would slip off to sleep in seconds.

“How are you holding up?” he asked to keep his mind awake.

Kara yawned. “I’m alright, except for being crushed, shoved and pulled every which way.”

“And being chased,” he added with a wry grin.

“That too.”

Aemon scanned the people walking past. “We can stay here a few minutes; then we had better get moving.”

A man slipped on the arched bridge and barely managed to drag himself to the side of the road before he was crushed underfoot. “I expect the press of bodies is going to get worse once we reach the Rift,” Aemon said. “The path is built into the

side of a bottomless chasm and there are no railings to stop people from falling into it.”

Kara pulled her hood low over her face. “I hope if Kahan comes this way, he falls off and dies.”

Aemon handed her some stale mushroom bread and tore off a chunk for himself. While he ate, he studied the twenty-foot-high statues of the Four Divines.

At the front was Lydan, the Shield of Heaven, who stood taller than the other three. According to the scriptures, he used his great shield to protect those who prayed to him. Beside him stood Roryur, the Healer, whose face was carved into a serene, contemplative expression. Roryur’s hands were cupped together and from them grew a clump of healing herbs.

It could have been a trick of the light, but her ageless sapphire eyes, dripping with moisture, seemed to look down at them and weep.

Behind Roryur and Lydan stood the twins, who were as different from one another as water and stone. The female was the golden-haired Ibilirith, her metal bird companion perched on her shoulder. In her hands were repair tools, copper wires and a light bulb.

Next to Ibilirith stood her brother, Dwaycar, the Betrayer. Dressed head to toe in polished black tourmaline and armed with twin swords, his face—the half not hidden by a featureless mask—wore a contemptuous scowl.

According to legend, darkness, treachery and disdain were Dwaycar’s domain and the artificial lights of his sister’s creations were anathema to him. Long ago, after the War in Heaven, he was said to have betrayed his sister by seeking to purge the world of her technologies.

The divines had once been mortal children of the One God. In an age long past, they had ascended to heaven by climbing the side of Radashan Crevice. They had entered the hole where the River of the Gods flowed from and followed the river to heaven. Once there, they fought a great war against an ancient enemy who had driven out the One God from the blessed realm. The war was long and bitter, but in the end, the enemy was put to sleep and the four mortals became the Four Divines.

Kara studied the statue of Dwaycar. “He looks like...”

Aemon saw the similarity too. “Kahan. He looks like Kahan.”

“Do you think—” She looked at something over his shoulder, then quickly turned away. “They’re coming. We need to go.”

She grabbed Aemon and dragged him back into the passing crowd. He caught a glimpse of someone dressed in black on the arched bridge but the figure disappeared behind a man with a young girl sitting on his shoulders.

Was it Kahan, one of his followers, or just someone dressed in black?

The refugee column led them out of the Central Promenade and up a flight of stairs carved into the side of the crevice. The river, flowing to their left, had become a tumultuous series of whitewater rapids.

Once they reached the top of the stairs, the path continued to rise in a smooth incline. Even larger shrines than those below were erected along the side of the path, many with large mounds of offerings around them.

A fight broke out in front of them. People cursed one another, then someone threw a punch. All at once, it seemed as if everyone had gone mad. An all-out

brawl started as the refugees fought one another, knocking over shrines and crushing offerings underfoot.

Aemon and Kara were pushed and shoved as those behind continued to press forward and those in front tried to back away from the combatants. Things quickly got out of hand and Aemon started to lose his grip on Kara. People plunged into the river and were swept down the rapids while others were knocked off their feet and trampled underfoot.

A sudden surge in the crowd tore Aemon and Kara apart. "Help," Kara screamed as she was dragged away.

Struggling to fight his way through the press of bodies, Aemon almost knocked a mother and son off their feet. After making sure they were alright, he climbed onto a conical-shaped shrine to search for Kara. Someone with red hair was moving away from him back toward the stairs. It looked like Kara, but he could not be certain.

A chill went down his spine. What if Kahan were to find her?

Aemon had to do something before he lost sight of her!

Taking a deep breath, he leapt off the shrine into the river. The rapids swept him back toward the Central Promenade, and he grunted in pain as his foot struck a submerged stone.

Once he was parallel with the Central Promenade, he swam to the edge of the river and staggered back onto the path. He was dripping wet and the spare torches were likely ruined along with the precious books he had stuffed in the bottom of his bag. But none of that mattered.

He *had* to find Kara.

Frightened crowds of people stood around the promenade waiting for the fighting to cease. Aemon shoved his way through them and raced back up the stairs. The last of the crowd fled by him, leaving only a scattering of injured stragglers behind. Heart hammering in his ears and breath coming fast, he hurried up the last few steps.

He found Kara near the top of the stairs. She was on her knees and leaning against the wall, not far from the body of a disheveled man. Her cloak was gone, revealing an almost transparent orange gown that accentuated her curves and generous bust.

Aemon struggled not to gape at Kara's body like a randy young fool. But her courtesan gown seemed designed to draw male attention. No wonder she had never taken off her cloak.

Cheeks burning, he raced up and took her in his arms. "You are alive," he cried. He pulled away as she retched on the ground beside him. "Kara..."

She looked up at him, her fingers digging into his chest, her face drawn and dripping sweat. "He took it! He took it." She retched again and said no more.

"Who took it?"

With one hand clasped over her mouth, she used the other to point toward the dead peasant.

Aemon approached the body cautiously. The man wore dark clothing but his face was turned the other way, making it impossible to tell if he wore a mask.

Kara let out a pained groan. Aemon glanced over his shoulder just as she toppled onto her side. He hesitated. Should he go back and help her?

Grimacing, he turned away. The only way to stop her from getting worse was to return the artifact to her. He had to go forward.

“Thieving swine,” Aemon snarled when he reached the body.

The man’s eyes were closed, his face splattered with blood and grime. No mask or javelins. Just an opportunistic thief. A bloody knife stuck out of his stomach with one of his hands clenched around it.

Had Kara done that?

Putting aside his reservations about touching a dead body, Aemon searched it. The peasant had nothing in his hands except the knife hilt, so Aemon tried his pockets. Nothing there either. Had Kara been wrong about who robbed her?

He shifted the dead man’s face and let out a sigh of relief. The artifact, now unlit, was around the man’s neck.

Aemon went to grab it but the peasant’s eyes fluttered open. Before he could pull away, the man growled like a dog and sank his teeth into Aemon’s arm.

In a frenzy of panic and unbearable pain, Aemon tore the knife from the peasant’s stomach and stabbed him in the neck with it. The man let go and rolled away cursing.

Deep, bloody teeth marks made Aemon’s arm throb all the way to the bone. Staggering to his feet, he kicked the man in the back and then snatched the artifact away from him. “You filthy animal,” he snapped and kicked the man again. Holding his bloody arm close, he turned and raced back to Kara.

She was not moving. Was he too late?

Aemon dropped to his knees beside her. Lifting her limp head, he put the artifact around her neck. As soon as it made contact with her, the red bulb flickered to life. He blinked. The light was far brighter than before. What had caused it to change?

He started shaking her. “Kara, wake up. I got the artifact back.”

Kara’s eyes remained closed.

His gut clenched. Was she dead? He felt for a pulse but found none. *No, no...* He rocked back on his knees. *Think, Aemon. Think!*

He tried to focus his mind but found it difficult to center himself. Hammering pain grated up his arm. His blood dripped unchecked onto the ground. Freezing water still seeped from his clothes. Kara was dying.

How could he focus with so much distraction?

“Lydan, oh Shield of Heaven, help me,” he prayed. “Help me think through this pain. I can save her. I *know* I can.”

The answer came to him suddenly. Something he had once read in a treatise on medicine. He wiped vomit from Kara’s lips, then laid her flat on her back and blew into her mouth.

Her lips were soft and moist and they stoked a fire in his heart. If only this were their first kiss and not an attempt to save her life. Removing his lips from hers, he used his hands to pump up and down on her chest.

When she did not wake, desperation began to set in. What should he do? The only thing he could think of was to keep blowing air into her lungs.

Just as his hope had all but faded, Kara’s eyes fluttered open and she coughed and spluttered.

“You are alive!” he cried, never having felt so relieved in his life.

When she could, she looked up at him. “The artifact. You got it back.”

Aemon glanced back at the peasant. The man was on his knees, holding a bloody hand to his neck. “Yes, but you were unconscious when I put it back around your neck.”

“You kissed me.”

“I did not!” He wiped moisture from the back of his neck. “Well, not really. I was blowing air into your lungs to save your life.”

Kara gave him a weak smile and patted his cheek. “Thank you.” Then her eyes widened. “Your arm.”

He looked down at it, as if noticing it for the first time. “The thief bit me, but I will be fine.” Aemon used his sword to cut away a piece of his cloak, then wrapped it around his arm to stem the bleeding.

Kara slipped the artifact into her gown but the light shone through the thin material. “I’m not sure why it’s become so bright.” She scanned the path. “I wish I knew where my cloak went so I could cover it up.”

“What happened to it?”

“I don’t know. Someone tore it off me.”

Aemon got to his feet. “Can you stand?”

She got to her knees. “I’m a little shaky but I’ll be fine.”

With the fighting defused farther up the path, refugees cautiously started to make their way back up the stairs. Aemon helped Kara to her feet and she leaned on him as they rejoined the column. As they walked by the wounded thief, Kara scooped up her knife and kicked him in the leg.

A few hours later, an ear-splitting roar pervaded the crevice and the air filled with a fine mist that made droplets of water run into Aemon’s eyes. The moisture felt icy cold but refreshing. A pang of excitement eased the pain in Aemon’s arm. He was close. Close to the very place where the divines had climbed to heaven. The great waterfall that fed the river.

They rounded a corner and there it was. A colossal waterfall sweeping downward from a blackness even the glow of the sacred lights could not penetrate, only hold at bay.

Many an explorer had climbed the slick rocks beside the waterfall in search of heaven. For it was here that mortal Lydan, Roryur, Ibilirith and Dwaycar had ascended to godhood. Almost all of the would-be divines fell screaming to their deaths, but a handful made it to the top and entered the black void high above.

None were ever seen again.

That did not stop more fools from attempting the climb. After all, if the river flowed from heaven, those who braved the ascent stood a chance of becoming divines themselves. People had thrown away their lives for far less.

They were showered in water as the road ran beside the pool at the base of the waterfall. From below, the wall of water looked infinite, as if it truly did flow down from heaven. If only they had time to stop and take it all in.

When the waterfall was behind them, the path continued to steadily rise until it reached the end of the crevice and entered a narrow tunnel. Sacred lights lit the tunnel and thick power cables ran along its roof. Those cables had long fed Deep Cave with electricity, but now they ran to a ruined city and a sacred crevice that would soon fall to the same darkness.

Aemon ran his hand along the wall, and a sudden wave of melancholy made him lower his head. Humans had carved this tunnel, no doubt about it. The work it must have taken to excavate it through miles of solid rock... He let out a long, weary sigh. Much of the great works of the past were now forgotten or unappreciated.

Nothing like this tunnel, nor the work undertaken to flatten the road in the Limestone Caves, was even attempted anymore. From the Priest King down, the powers in the Caverns were corrupt, decadent, self-serving, violent and increasingly—according to the bank’s intelligence reports—irrational.

The destruction of Deep Cave and the appearance of the mysterious enemy who destroyed it should have been a warning cry for all Stelemia that things were on the precipice of great change. People should have looked around and seen how stagnant Stelemian society had become. A civilization living off the glories and technologies of the past, slowly losing its grip on both as the years rolled by.

But it would not wake them.

The bank and those who owned it would seek ways to profit from the arrival of the new enemy. The Priest King would placate the noble houses in the Capital Spire with flowery words while sending his trusted right hand, Lord Laython, to deal with the troubles so the people in the Capital could pretend things were normal. The Inquisitors would root out those who questioned the authorities and put them on trial for heresy—thus ensuring nothing tangible would be done until it was too late.

Aemon ground his teeth. *To the Great Dark with the lot of them.*

WHEN THEY EMERGED FROM the tunnel it felt as if they had gone from one realm into another. Unlike Radashan Crevice, the Rift was dimly lit and devoid of beauty. The path was cut into the sheer sides of the chasm, with no guardrails to prevent anyone from falling over the edge.

A deep silence wafted from the darkness below, leaving Aemon’s stomach unsettled. He had heard stories of people seeing and hearing things here, even voices telling them to leap over the edge.

“This is the Rift,” Aemon said. “The Rift Gate should not be far.”

Kara peeked into the chasm, then quickly withdrew. “I don’t like this place. It feels like something is down there watching us.”

Aemon grimaced as a sharp throb shot up his wounded arm. “Everyone who visits feels unnerved by the darkness. The Order of Ibilirith believes the ancient enemy the divines fought in heaven was cast down into this chasm and that they still sleep down there, to this day.”

Kara gripped the artifact and shuddered.

The path led to a stone bridge spanning the chasm. It was twenty feet wide and a hundred feet long and looked strong enough for an army to march over it. At the far end of the bridge stood the magnificent gold-and-platinum Rift Gate. On the gate, a pictograph depicted proud Lydan towering over a battlefield during the War in Heaven.

A detachment of pike-men stood before the gate and watched the approaching refugees warily. Like the path, the bridge lacked side rails, and calamity would ensue if the guards did not let the refugees pass. The people still coming up from

Radashan Crevice would undoubtedly continue pushing forward, bunching everyone up on the bridge until people started falling over the sides.

When Aemon and Kara neared the bridge, they saw the front ranks of refugees arguing with the guards. Aemon stopped to wait until the gate opened, but Kara dragged him forward. "We need to get to the front," she said as she walked onto the narrow gap at the side of the bridge. "I hope you're not afraid of heights."

Aemon tried not to look over the edge as they made their way toward the gate. People jostled them as someone tried to force their way to the front. Kara was knocked right to the edge, teetering there. Aemon's muscles clenched. If she fell, she would take him with her!

He grabbed the teenage girl beside him and tried to drag Kara back, but a man stumbled into the teen and she and Aemon were knocked down. In panic, Aemon accidentally let go of Kara and lost sight of her. His heart leapt into his throat as he hauled himself back to his feet.

Kara was no longer there.

He could only gape at where she had been. He had lost her. Lost her when they were closing in on the temple. *It was my fault. I should have been braver. Stronger! I should not have led her here.*

Distantly, he felt someone shaking him but he had no interest in seeing who it was. They probably wanted him to get out of their way. But what was the point? Kara was gone and he had lost everything.

Kara's face suddenly appeared before his. Was it a figment? He blinked, slowly coming back to his senses. "Kara... is that—"

She pulled him away from the edge. "Yes, a man grabbed me before I fell. We need to move."

He followed her, still struggling to believe she was there. The Shield of Heaven must have been watching over her. They neared the front of the column and discovered why the Rift Gate had yet to open.

"For the third time, what in Roryur's name is all this about?" the guard captain standing before it demanded with an indignant scowl, ramming the butt end of his pike into the ground. "What are vile, smelly, no-good peasants doing walking the sacred crevice? The captain at Deep Cave was ordered to let none but the most *prestigious* citizens through."

"We've told you already. Deep Cave's been destroyed by metal beasts," someone cried. "The tunnel leading to the capital was cut off, so we were forced to flee through the crevice of the divines."

Aemon and Kara managed to get to the front row, holding those beside them to make sure they would not be accidentally knocked over the edge. When the guard captain saw what Kara wore, he looked her up and down. "Where did you come from, eh? You are no peasant knave. What is with that light around your neck?"

Kara stared at the captain. Her mouth moved but no words came out. Aemon wondered how she was meant to answer that.

"Bah, it does not matter, girl." The captain stood on his toes to watch the long column of refugees. "How many people are bloody coming?"

"Thousands," someone replied.

“Thousands! We cannot allow thousands of people through. Jalarfed is small; it cannot feed or house that many mouths and we do not have enough guards to prevent looting.”

“Soon you will not have a choice but to let us through,” Aemon said. “If you bar us entry, the surge of bodies coming up behind us will push us all over the edge.”

Kara suddenly dug her nails into his arm, close to the bite wound. He gritted his teeth.

“What is it?”

“Kahan! He’s almost on the bridge.”

Aemon spun around. Kahan stood on the opposite side of the span and stared right at Kara. All that stood between him and her were a few hundred fearful refugees. The black-clad killer stepped onto the bridge, making his way along the edge like Kara and Aemon had. Three of Kahan’s companions followed him.

“Scion, stay where you are,” he shouted. “You know not what you will unleash if you go on.”

“Sir, you must let us through,” Kara begged. “Those people in black crossing the bridge are trying to kill me.”

The captain scratched at his beard. “Kill you?”

“Yes. Please—please, let us pass.”

He looked like he wanted to argue but a cry from one of the pike-men made him turn away. “Sir, that woman in black over there just threw someone off the bridge.”

People cried out as they tried to get out of Kahan’s way. The black-clad woman beside him shoved a young man off the bridge. His scream rapidly faded to nothing. She started running, shoving more people aside. Kahan was a step behind her, a short sword in each hand.

The black-clad woman raised a javelin. “Half-blood, don’t move. I’m done chasing you.”

“Stop,” the guard captain ordered, but Kahan and his followers ran on. “Curse it all. Open the gate, lads. Let them through.”

“Please sir, arrest the people in black. Don’t let them get me,” Kara begged the officer as she passed him.

The captain lowered his pike. “Don’t worry girl. We’ll—” He was shoved out of the way by one of his men who held up a shield.

Thunk.

“By the divines,” the captain exclaimed, glaring at the javelin lodged in the shield. “That woman is trying to kill us.”

The soldiers started toward Kahan. Aemon took Kara’s arm. “Time to go.”

Chapter 9

Kara.

They fled through the Rift Gate into the crossroad town of Jalarfed. There wasn’t a moment to spare to look around; Kahan was just behind them and

Kara wasn't holding out hope the guards could stop him. Somehow, that murderer had followed her all the way from the capital.

Why couldn't he just leave her alone?

She glanced at Aemon who ran panting beside her. "Do you know the way to the temple from here?"

"We should reach a crossroads soon," he replied between breaths. "There is a statue there that will point us in the right direction."

Aemon appeared close to collapse and seemed to struggle under the weight of his bags. Working at the bank probably didn't require him to be fit. Kara on the other hand had grown up lifting sacks of food and kegs of ale. She was strong, though exhaustion had begun to wear her down too.

Both had been awake for over a day, all of it on foot. They'd run, been pushed and shoved and, in Aemon's case, bitten. She'd almost died back at the River of the Gods and even now could taste the bile from all the retching she'd done.

If they didn't reach their destination soon they'd both be too tired to go on. Then Kahan would catch them. Kara gritted her teeth and willed herself forward. *Nothing* would stop her from getting to the temple.

Screams of pain and the clash of swords echoed from behind them. Kara cursed. Kahan must've been attempting to force his way through the Rift Gate.

Residents came out of their brightly lit homes and watched Kara and Aemon speed by. Some asked what was happening, but they couldn't spare the time to stop and explain so the two ran on.

As they passed a burly, bald man, he grabbed Aemon by the arm. "Here now," he grunted, almost wrenched off his feet by Aemon's momentum.

"Let me go." Aemon fought to break free. "What are you doing?"

Kara slid to a stop, breath coming fast. The man pulled Aemon closer. "What's going on, boy? What's with the fighting back there?"

"Let him go," Kara screamed.

The man blinked. "I just want to know what's happening. No need for anger."

Some of the residents from the town were approaching, asking the same question. She and Aemon didn't have time for this.

Drawing her knife, Kara tensed her muscles, her senses heightening. She felt a sudden, unexpected desire to kill the man holding Aemon. Sneering, she circled around to get behind him.

He deserves to die, she told herself. *He's holding us up.*

"What are you doing?" the man asked, eyes on Kara's weapon. "Are you gonna stab me with that thing, girl?"

"Let him go or I'll kill you."

The bald man held Aemon before him as a human shield. "Put it down before you hurt someone." He pleaded with some of the onlookers, "Get the guards, this woman is crazy."

Two of the bystanders walked toward Kara, arms stretched out to subdue her. She bared her teeth. "Go away or I'll kill all of you."

The men stopped and watched her warily.

"Hurry, get the guards," the bald man insisted.

A murderous haze descended over Kara. She charged at the man holding Aemon. "I'm going to bloody gut you!"

Shrieking in terror, the bald man shoved Aemon toward her. Kara sidestepped, and Aemon flew past her. The man backed away hurriedly. He was speaking, but Kara wasn't listening to what he said. *The swine will die for getting in my way.*

She held the knife over her shoulder, ready to plunge it into his neck. Rage made the world around her burn away.

Someone grabbed her wrist. "Kara, you do not have to do this. We can go."

She fought to free herself from the grip. The bald man was right in front of her!

"Stop. Please, Kara."

She knew that voice. Her eyes blinked rapidly, her brain feeling like it was rolling around in her head. Then the searing rage ebbed away, leaving behind a giddiness in its wake. She staggered slightly, unsteady on her feet, the artifact so hot it burned.

The hand steadied her. She slowly lowered the knife. "Aemon?"

"Yes. Are you all right?" Aemon's voice sounded jittery. There was fear in his eyes, and it seemed to be of her.

"I think... so, yes."

"Thank the divines." He studied her closely. "We need to keep going. Are you up to it?"

Kara looked around, dazed. Dozens of onlookers were watching her, some angry, others afraid. Then it hit her what she'd done. More terrified than embarrassed, she put the knife away and tried to cover her face and the artifact glowing under her gown. The artifact glowed bright, but it no longer burned her.

What is happening to me?

She'd frightened Aemon and the onlookers. Never in her life had anyone been afraid of her. She made people happy, made them laugh and want to touch her. The powerful anger had come on so unexpectedly. She'd never been so enraged before. It almost felt like she'd lost herself somehow, like something else had taken control.

Veladan had deserved his fate. The man at Radashan Crevice had, too. But the bald man... he had only wanted to know what was happening. He hadn't hurt anyone. She sobbed. What if something like this happened again?

The people made no move to intervene as Aemon led her away. Their gazes burned into Kara's back, even after they'd disappeared around a bend in the road.

Minutes later, Kara and Aemon reached the crossroads. They stopped to catch their breath under a four-armed statue. The statue had the body of a naked woman with a head that resembled the serpent at the royal zoo Kara had visited as a child.

Aemon grimaced, then said, "I do not know what happened to you back there. Is it really over now?"

Kara's mind felt strangely calm, the rage a distant memory. "I think so. Yes. It came on so suddenly... I barely knew what I was doing."

Aemon stared at the hand she had clasped around the artifact. Kara gave her best reassuring smile, as much for him as for her. The rage and giddiness might be gone but the fear they'd brought with them remained. Fear of herself and what she might do.

She let her smile fade. "Don't worry about me, I'll be alright. What way do we go from here?"

Aemon turned to examine the statue. "Give me a moment."

Kara played with the hem of her gown and kept an eye out for Kahan. The only people she could see were residents of Jalarfed and none of them were close. Not letting her guard down, she studied the settlement.

There wasn't much to the town. Just a cluster of houses, a warehouse and a small tavern, all carved out of the rock lining the road. The sacred lights hanging from overhead wires that lit Jalarfed were barely enough to hold back the cavernous void of darkness above it. Kara couldn't tell how high the ceiling was because, unlike in the larger caverns like Deep Cave or Stelemia, the phosphorescent bacterial colonies were absent here.

Aemon pointed toward a well-lit tunnel. "The temple is eight miles that way."

They set off again, the sound of battle fading into the distance. A mile along the passage they found an old man dressed in the brown robes of the Order. He rocked back and forth on his knees before a copper shrine forged into the shape of a giant cog. When they tried to speak to him, they noticed his eyes were half open, as if he were in a trance. He said nothing, and continued to rock.

They left him and continued toward the temple. As Kara ran, near collapsing from exhaustion, she turned her thoughts to Aemon. He'd been so good to her, even after losing his best friend and his position at the bank.

She'd never met a noble as selfless as him, a man willing to risk everything for a woman—a mere commoner he barely knew.

But why was he doing it? Was it her pretty face? He clearly was infatuated with her. There'd been no shortage of men like that in her life but none would have stood by her in a situation as dire as she faced now.

Yet Aemon had.

No, there was more to his motivation than lust. She pondered on that for the better part of a mile. Perhaps it had something to do with his work at the bank. From what he'd said, the bankers were evil and conniving. Yet it was difficult for her to picture Aemon being that way. Did he take up her quest to atone for the sins he'd committed while working for the bank? She could imagine him doing that.

Whatever his motivation, she couldn't have asked for a better companion, especially when there was no going back for either of them.

A pain somewhere deep inside made Kara clench her fingers around the artifact. When they got to the temple she'd tell Aemon they needed to go their separate ways. What was the point of him continuing to risk his life for her? The Order would protect her and give her the answers she sought. With the leftover silver, he could start a new life somewhere. He had the brains and could read and write, which was more than most could claim.

Aemon had done more than enough for her already.

Yet, the thought of separating from him made Kara's heart shrivel. She'd come to like him during their short time together—and in a different way to the other men she'd known. Men in her life were either clients, adopted little brothers or protectors like Mensig.

Aemon was none of those things.

She allowed herself a small chuckle. No doubt he'd see himself as her protector. Men often underestimated a woman's ability to defend herself. Several clients in the two years she'd worked as a courtesan had learned that lesson the hard way.

Aemon was no fighter, but what he lacked in strength he made up for with intelligence and a surprising resolve to stand up for those he cared about. He'd stood up to Veladan on that first night and risked his life to find her back in the Limestone Caves. He'd even brought her back from the edge of death at the River of the Gods. Considering how short he was and small of frame, he certainly gave larger, stronger men a run for their coin in bravery.

No doubt, if Kara's pursuers caught up to them, Aemon would stand up to them too!

She grimaced. As brave as Aemon was, they still needed to go their separate ways. He wouldn't be happy about it, but it'd be for his own good. The artifact was her burden, not his. It might be hard splitting up, but it would be best for the both of them.

A short time later, they saw a group of people ahead of them heading toward the temple. They seemed to have not noticed they had company coming up behind them.

Kara's hand hovered near her knife. Who were they?

Aemon slowed their pace as they drew closer to the people. Kara studied them. Some carried metal boxes, others had hoops of copper cable sitting over their shoulders, but each carried a metal staff.

"They are monks from the Order," Aemon whispered, peering ahead.

Kara wanted to jump for joy. "Let's see if they'll help us."

Aemon nodded and they raced to catch up. Kara put her hand around the artifact to hide the light. When they got close, the monks spun around, dropped their tools and cables then raised their weapons.

"Wait, we mean you no harm," Kara said, coming to a stop ten feet from them.

The monks eyed her suspiciously. A stern-looking woman with dark, short, spiky hair stepped forward. "Who are you, girl? Why are you dressed like a harlot?"

"Harlot?" Kara's mind reeled. She wanted help, not to listen to someone call her names.

"Look at you." The woman curled her lip and motioned her away. "Go back to whatever *vile* pit you crawled from."

Kara made sure to keep the anger and disappointment from her voice as she said, "Please listen to me. We're being hunted by a man called Kahan and a group of women who follow him. He's dressed head to toe in black and has been after me since I was given this." Kara held up the artifact and bathed them all in red light.

Several monks let out surprised gasps, others muttered prayers. The woman took a step backward. "Where did you get that?"

"I can explain everything once we're at the temple. Right now, we're being chased by black-garbed killers."

The woman's gaze became distant. "This Kahan you mentioned. I've never heard that name, but the way you describe him..." She refocused then motioned for the other monks to lower their weapons. "We must get you to the temple to see the patriarch. He'll make sense of this."

The monks gathered their things then formed a protective circle around Kara and Aemon. “Let’s move,” the spiky-haired woman said. They set out at a jog toward the temple.

Kara let herself relax a little. Finally she had some protection from Kahan. Now all she needed were answers.

The woman walked beside Kara and Aemon. “Tell me your names.”

“I’m Kara.”

“And I am Aemon.”

“And what’s your role in this, Aemon?”

He glanced at Kara before answering. “I got involved several days ago. We were attacked by Kahan in the Limestone Caves and a lot of people died. After we escaped, I made a promise I would get Kara safely to the temple so she could find out what it is she has around her neck.”

“What made you decide to bring her to the Order?”

“I read about the temple in a book called *Ilimdalis and the Order of the Lights*. The way the book describes your order made me think you might be able to help her.”

The woman scoffed, “Ilimdalis’s book paints us as fanatics and suggests we’re behind every bad thing that happens in the caverns. You should not be reading a book by a man banished into the Great Dark for blasphemy.” She studied Aemon through narrowed eyes as they walked. “Perhaps you hold the same views of us as he did.”

Oh no. Now Aemon has done it. Him and his books. Kara bit the inside of her lip. The last thing they needed was for him to accidentally insult the Order.

Aemon went to chew a nail but seemed to think better of it and lowered his hand. “Your order is good and holy. I only read the book because... ummm...” He took a breath. “I wanted to see how heretics think, so I could recognize them and report them to the Inquisitors. Heretics, they... you see—”

Before Aemon could place another cobblestone on his own tomb, Kara spoke over him. “You know our names, so what’s yours?”

The woman glanced at her then looked straight ahead, her jaw set. “Call me Meglen.”

They followed the monks until they reached the edge of a precipice overlooking a large chamber lit by a bright, fiery glow. Kara’s mouth dropped open in awe. Beyond the precipice, on an island surrounded by fire, stood what could only be the Temple of Sacred Lights.

A crenellated stone wall with half a dozen turrets circled the imposing structure. Perched atop each turret on the wall were strange machines with fingers of metal pointing upward. Arcs of electricity shot between them with loud cracks.

Yawning beyond the wall stood the imposing central temple keep, its sides sparkling with half a hundred almost blinding sacred lights, windows glittering like flames. The temple looked ancient, as ancient as the rock foundation it was built upon. A swarm of bats—a rare sight in Stelemia—flew around it, while countless others perched upside down on the cavern roof.

Kara struggled to breathe. The air of the chamber reeked of sulfur and left an afterburn in her lungs. Already she dripped with sweat and she thanked the

divines for being scantily dressed. The others must've been sweltering in their heavy cloaks.

Wiping sweat from her forehead, Kara peered down at the fire ringing the island temple. After a moment, she frowned. It was no ordinary fire. The air above it was hazy, and the rock around it looked superheated. Could fire burn that hot?

Aemon seemed too busy gawking at the temple to notice the heat. Eventually, his eyes fell to the lake of fire and he bounced up and down like a child given a new toy. "That red stuff down there is lava! I saw an illustration of it in a book. It is said that lava is so hot it can melt stone."

"Few not of our order see what you do now," Meglen said. "This is our most holy place, for it is the final resting place of Ibilirith. Our temple is built over her sacred tomb."

Aemon snapped his head around to face her. "I thought she ascended to heaven by climbing the waterfall in the River of the Gods."

"Ibilirith *did* ascend to heaven. She resides there still, watching over us."

Aemon scratched his head. "So... how can her body be entombed under the temple?"

"She is a Divine. She can be anywhere she chooses."

"But you said she was dead. How can she *choose* anything?"

A horn blared, making Kara and Aemon jump. A bridge started to lower from a stone gatehouse at the edge of the island. The bridge seemed to be the only way to cross the lava.

Meglen glared at Aemon, her face dripping sweat. "Be silent, fool. If you were not with Kara, I'd have you handed to the Inquisitors for questioning." She wiped her sleeve across her face. "For now, I'm willing to put your lack of piety down to fatigue and stress—but don't try my patience any longer."

Aemon lowered his eyes, his thumb nail clenched between his teeth. Kara touched him and he glanced up at her.

She smiled. "It's alright. We're here now. Thank you."

He nodded and turned away. Kara understood his confusion, though she was willing to take the Order's contradictions at face value. After all, they were the Order of Ibilirith, chosen to represent the immortal Divine. How could their beliefs be wrong?

Hopefully, Aemon had learned his lesson and would keep his skepticism to himself, lest it wind him up in the hands of the Inquisitors. He was a good man—a little naive maybe, but certainly not a vile purveyor of heresy.

One of the monks raised his staff. "Someone approaches."

The monks dropped their tools and snatched up their weapons. A chill ran through Kara, despite the heat.

Kahan and a dozen of the women who followed him were standing sixty feet back up the road. Heart lurching, Kara glanced up at the bridge. It was still some distance above their heads. *Can't the stupid thing lower any faster? I'm so close to reaching the temple!*

Kara slowly turned back to face her pursuers. They all watched her through the eye slits of their masks. The monks guarding her were outnumbered two to one.

She clasped the artifact in pale fingers slick with sweat. It was hard to believe that after all she'd been through, Kahan had finally caught up with her at the doorstep of the very place she thought she'd be safe.

Chapter 10

Aemon.

Kahan slowly walked toward them, his eyes on the glowing artifact around Kara's neck. Aemon fumbled for his sword, his weariness overrun by adrenaline. He moved in front of Kara to protect her, the fact he had never used a sword probably apparent to everyone.

Sweat ran into his eyes, blinding him for a moment. Then his mind raced, *Run! You cannot stop them. Get away while you still can.*

No, I must stay and protect Kara, Aemon raged back. *We have come so far. I must not let her down. I always wanted to be a hero—now here's my chance.*

Aemon swiped sweat from his forehead and struggled to silence his frightened thoughts. There was nowhere to run anyway, at least not until the bridge finished its descent.

He had to stand and fight.

Meglen took a cautious step forward. "Why are you here, Dark Brother? This place belongs to Ibilirith. Your kind is not welcome here."

Kahan stopped and studied her with the same look he would have given a sump leach. "Step aside," he said coldly. "Our fight is not with you or your order. I have no wish to reopen old wounds."

"We of Ibilirith believed the scourge of your kind gone forever. Yet, here you are."

"Your order came close to wiping my ancestors out during the *Zatemneniye Voyna*," Kahan spat. "But we hid deep in the Nether and rebuilt our order with the help of those the Inquisition exiled as heretics. Now we have returned, to save those who in times past hunted us down like vermin. We have come to save Stelemia."

"Save?" Meglen snorted. "How are you *saving* anyone by coming here with murder in your hearts?"

Remembering the bridge, Aemon glanced up. Curse it all, it was only halfway down. If they could keep Kahan talking another few minutes they would be able to flee across it.

A masked woman with long, red hair spilling over her shoulders came to stand next to Kahan. Aemon's blood chilled several degrees. It was the crazy woman from the Limestone Caves who had executed the men from the caravan. She held a javelin, her posture rigid like a cat about to pounce on a mouse.

Kahan held her back. "Stay there, Herald," he said to the woman, not trying to keep his voice down. "We must tread carefully here. I have no desire to renew our conflict with the Order."

Why was the woman called Herald? Herald of what?

Herald acted like a dog on a leash, eager to be given the command to kill. “No matter the cost... the half-blood *must* die.”

“She will. Be calm. This is a time for words, not swords.”

Kahan turned his attention back to Meglen. “You know what that young woman behind you is. She will bring an end to all life. What happened at Deep Cave is only the beginning.” He made a slashing motion with his sword. “If you do not have it in you to do what must be done then hand her over to me and I will put an end this quickly.”

“I heard rumors of what was happening at Deep Cave, a day or two ago.” Meglen shrugged. “They said there was fighting in the outer settlements, which isn’t exactly something new, given the political climate of the cavern.”

“A lot has happened in the last few days, then. The city of Deep Cave is no more, its people scattered or dead.”

“You lie. The ruling houses—”

“I had nothing to do with that,” Kara cried. “The metal beasts were the ones who destroyed the city. I was fleeing like everyone else.”

Meglen blinked. “It is true then?” She sounded off guard, as if she did not know what to think or what to believe.

“Indeed,” Kahan said grimly. “The city is in ruins.”

Meglen’s face paled, her staff slowly lowering. “Stelemia has faced threats from within and without before. Cities have burned and innocents have been slaughtered. Perhaps...”

“This was something new.” Kahan pointed at Kara with a sword. “The enemy who attacked the city is here because of her.”

Kara whimpered under her breath, “It wasn’t me. It wasn’t.”

Aemon wanted to turn around and tell her everything would be all right, but he found he could not take his eyes off the woman beside Kahan. She looked ready to hurl her javelin at any moment.

Meglen raised her staff. “It could be coincidence.”

“It is no coincidence,” Kahan said. “You know the ancient prophecy—it is sacred to your order, as it is to mine.”

“The old language is difficult to translate and much of what was written by Ibilirith in her prophecy hasn’t survived. The patriarch must meet this woman so he can decide who or what she is and if she had anything to do with what happened at Deep Cave.”

Kahan glared at her. “Let me remind you of what Ibilirith wrote: *‘The soulless enemy shall return and with them the Scion who shall wear a glowing... and the Scion shall use it to unseal the wards and unleash that which must not...’* It breaks off there and ends with stating the Scion will bring an end to all life.” Kahan inched forward, Herald pushing eagerly against his arm. “You know the words, as broken as they are.”

“Do not presume to lecture me,” Meglen snapped. “I know what Lady Ibilirith wrote.” She gestured at Kara. “But this woman is coming with me into the temple and nothing you say will change that.”

Aemon had heard of the prophecy, but doubted it had anything to do with Kara. The Scion was clearly a force of evil. Kara on the otherhand, only wanted to free herself from the madness that had befallen her since the artifact had been forced

upon her. When she found a way to remove it, all this would be over and she would be able to return to some semblance of a normal life.

Kahan struggled to hold Herald back. "Easy," he said to her. "Heed my words, you of Ibilirith. Thousands are already dead at Deep Cave and many more in the other caverns will die in the days to come. The next city to fall could be the capital itself." His voice cracked with emotion. "You and I could end the threat now. Look at what she carries. Look at it. She is the Scion of the prophecy and has come to extinguish the light of humanity and everything else that walks or breathes."

As Meglen studied Kara, Aemon's heart summersaulted into his throat. Her eyes were filled with uncertainty. Was she going to hand Kara over? He shook his head at her, silently pleading for her not to betray them.

Meglen's eyes hardened and she turned back to Kahan. "Leave. Here. Now." She touched Kara on the arm. "This woman is under our protection. The patriarch will decide her fate, not some black-clad spawn of Ibilirith's traitorous twin."

Herald pushed Kahan's arm aside. "Enough talk. It's time to kill."

Kahan raised a fist and his followers took hold of their javelins. The monks of Ibilirith got into defensive crouches and raised their staffs.

Aemon shoved Kara back toward the edge of the precipice, his breaths coming in short fits. "Kara, stay behind me. I will protect you."

This was it. They had made it to the temple minutes too late. They were going to die.

Kara said something but her words were drowned out by the beat of his heart. Perhaps he had read too many stories of heroes who had fought for those they loved, or perhaps it was nothing more than his stubborn streak, but Aemon felt ready to die for her. The fact he barely knew her did not matter. His soul compelled him. It was meant to be this way.

The compulsion was not enough to completely override the logical part of his brain as it renewed its demands for him to flee. *What are you doing?* it said. He should be running for his life, not standing there waiting to be impaled by javelins or skewered on swords.

His legs trembled and he had trouble standing, his bowels ready to empty themselves at any moment. *Some hero you are*, his mind screamed. *Get out of here while you still can.*

The sword started slipping from his nerveless grip. *Kahan is going to kill me!*

Aemon pictured Kara in his mind. She needed him, she really needed him. He liked to feel needed, especially by her. Biting down hard on his teeth and steadying his hand, he raised his sword again.

Suddenly, Kara shoved past him. "Stop this. Enough people have died already." She focused her ire on the black-clad figures. "I've done nothing to any of you, yet you've hunted me for the better part of a week. I'd give you what's around my neck if I could, but if I take it off it will kill me."

"That's because it's bound to you," Herald snarled.

"Leave me alone and I'll find a way to rid myself of it so no one else has to die."

The bridge finished its descent but no one moved. After a tense silence, Kahan burst out laughing. "You really know nothing of what you are and what you carry, do you? I have nothing against you personally; it is because of *what* you are that you must die."

Kara threw her hands in the air. "What am I? Just leave me alone."

"You are a threat to us all. The destruction you witnessed in Deep Cave is only a small fraction of the horror you will unleash if you are allowed to live."

Herald hurled her javelin. "Die, Half-Blood!"

The missile flew at Kara. Meglen tried to knock it aside with her staff but missed. Without thinking, Aemon tried to interject himself in front of it. But he was a moment too slow.

The javelin buried itself in Kara's chest.

She staggered a few steps, then turned to Aemon, eyes wide, lips moving but forming no words. They looked at one another for several seconds, then Kara collapsed and did not move. Aemon stared down at her in a stupefied daze. "Ka—Kara. Are you all right?"

As he asked the question, the reality of what had just happened struck him like a falling chunk of rock. He collapsed at her side, grazing his knees. "Kara! No. Kara."

Blood... So much blood.

A great cry filled his ears. "For Ibilirith!" Moments later came the whacks and thuds of battle, but the sounds were distant, muted. Meaningless.

Aemon stared at the javelin, cold shock numbing his mind. He knew he should do something, but he could not focus on anything except the javelin sticking out of her. Kara...

Someone had started shaking him. "Snap out of it, fool. Get her up and carry her to the temple."

He did not look away from the blood. Could not look away.

"Listen! We'll hold them off long enough for you to cross the bridge and retract it."

He glanced up. "Meglen?"

"Are you listening?" Meglen shook him again.

Aemon nodded slowly.

"Get her to the temple."

Lydan, help me. The blood. The blood. Kara, I am sorry. I tried to save you.

Meglen was saying something. "There's a lever on the other side; pull it and it will raise the bridge. Get her to safety, and tell my brethren the patriarch must know of her arrival."

When he did not move, she slapped him across the face. "Go."

Finally, he came to his senses. Letting out a great cry of anguish, he lifted Kara, his spine bowing, wounded arm throbbing. A javelin flew past him and a second would have found its mark in his neck had Meglen not batted it aside with her staff.

Aemon stumbled toward the bridge, teeth clenched against the pain in his arm, weak banker muscles straining. A blood trail followed as he carried Kara across, her body limp in his arms.

His heart kicked. What if she was dead? Her skin was bone white and the artifact no longer glowed.

If he pulled the javelin out, would it help or make things worse? It was buried deep, the tip likely perforating her lungs. He quickly decided not to touch it, to let someone who knew what they were doing remove it.

“Please live,” he moaned. “You came all this way.”

He reached the end of the bridge and pushed the lever down with his elbow. The bridge jerked, then began to rise. The fighting continued on the opposite side of the lava. Only three monks remained on their feet; the rest lay dead or dying.

Meglen was locked in combat with Kahan, who used his twin swords to parry a forward thrust of her staff. Her face was covered in blood from a cut on her forehead. The wound looked bad, and the more she swung her staff the weaker her blows became.

When the bridge neared head-height, one of the black-clad women grabbed hold of it. A wounded monk launched himself at her and took hold of her legs. As the bridge continued to rise, they became a human chain and were carried over the edge of the precipice. The monk rocked back and forth, trying to weaken the woman’s grip on the bridge.

Somehow, the black-clad woman held on.

Herald threw a javelin into the monk’s back. The attack came too late for the black-clad woman though. She lost her grip on the bridge and plummeted into the churning lava. The monk fell with her, and both erupted into flames that fizzled out in moments.

Bile filled Aemon’s mouth. What a horrible way to die. At least it was quick.

With a final cry to Ibilirith, Meglen fell to her knees, the tip of one of Kahan’s swords protruding from her back. Aemon turned away. Thanks to Meglen and her companions, he had gotten Kara across the bridge. Now all Kara had to do was live so the monks’ sacrifice would not have been in vain.

A horrible scream made him look back. Herald stood on the other side of the chasm. She pointed at him with a broken javelin and shouted something. Aemon could not make out her words, but the tone had been clear.

She would find a way into the temple and kill them.

Kahan came to stand next to her and they watched Aemon carry Kara away. Aemon wilted as he hurried toward the temple. Their gaze burned into his back, hotter than the lava. But they could not touch him. He was safe now.

Fatigue overwhelmed him as he reached the outer gate of the temple. His arms gave out and he collapsed to the ground, landing on top of Kara. He quickly rolled off her. “I am sorry I am not strong enough to carry you.” He choked back a sob. “If I were stronger, if I knew how to fight, this might not have—”

A dozen armed monks ran through the gate. “What happened at the bridge?” Their leader stopped in front of Aemon. “We saw the fighting from the walls.”

Aemon grimaced. “The people standing on the other side of the lava killed your brethren.” Sticky blood covered his hands. Kara’s blood. “Take me to a healer. She needs help.”

“Who are they and why are they after—” The man caught sight of the artifact and his eyes widened. “You... you were right to bring her here.” He motioned for two of his companions. “Get them to the healer, then inform the patriarch.”

As two monks picked Kara up, the rest hurried toward the bridge. Aemon got to his feet and followed the monks, who carried Kara through the gate and into a large, paved courtyard. Strange, rusted machines cluttered the pavement, many looking like they had not functioned in years. A group of acolytes meditated in

front of a flashing machine while three others tinkered with its innards. Not one of them looked up as Aemon and the two monks rushed by.

Reaching the entrance to the central keep, Aemon and the monks burst through the great copper doors of the temple. They hurried along stone corridors, through an antechamber filled with plants and then into a brightly lit room. A short, elderly woman with a large, metal-framed magnifying glass over her left eye peered up at them from behind a heavily bound book. A younger woman sat beside her, taking notes on parchment.

The elderly woman opened her mouth to speak but must have seen something on the monks' faces—or perhaps she saw the blood—for she rose from her chair and ordered her young assistant to gather equipment. Then she hobbled over to the operating table as Kara was placed upon it.

The two monks left without a word, their robes splattered with blood, hands dripping with it. The healer, shorter than Aemon, looked up at him, her left eye magnified to an almost absurd proportion through the glass. “Who is this woman and why has she been brought to me?”

“Her name is Kara. She is important. Sister Maglen gave her life to defend us.”

The healer ran her eyes over Kara and spied the artifact. She tried to take it off but Aemon stopped her. “Do not remove it. The last time it was taken away it nearly killed her. It is bound to her somehow.” Kara’s wan face ran with sweat, blood trickling from her mouth. He swallowed back panic. “Normally it glows, but it went out after she—”

She snatched her hand away as if she had burned it on a candle. “I have read of such a thing in the old files...”

The young woman returned with the healer’s equipment and the two of them set to work. They cut Kara’s clothes away, revealing her naked breasts. Her skin was covered in blood and Aemon quickly turned away. He did not want to see Kara like that.

He took her hand and listened to them work, staring out the window. It overlooked the churning lava hundreds of feet below.

“See the residue around the wound?” the healer asked her younger aide. “The end of the javelin has been dipped in some form of poison.”

Poison? Aemon’s heart sank. As if things had not been dire enough already.

“It looks deep,” the assistant said.

“Yes, it has pierced her left lung.”

“Can she be saved?” Aemon asked without turning around.

The healer wrinkled her nose. “There is a distinct odor rising from the wound. I believe it is the poison of a fungus that grows somewhere in the Great Dark. But...” She whispered something to her aide.

Aemon half turned. “But what?”

The healer opened a jar. “There is no antidote. Kara will almost certainly die.”

Tears flooded Aemon’s eyes. He faced Kara and gripped her hand tighter, silently willing her to live. Her breathing was labored, and he expected each breath to be her last.

Aemon knelt and prayed. “Oh Lydan, Shield of Heaven, protector of the weak and holy, save Kara. Please save her. Let her live.”

“You might not wish that when you find out what she is,” the healer said.

The prayer died on Aemon's lips. "I do not care what she is. I want her to live and rid herself of all this madness."

Shaking her head, the healer poured clear fluid over Kara's chest. "If I had not made a solemn oath to protect human life, I'd let her slip away into the dark."

Why would the healer say such a thing? Maybe he had made a mistake bringing Kara to the temple. Back at the river, she had said she was afraid to come here and he had convinced her it was the right thing to do. The only thing.

Closing his eyes, he resumed his prayer, listening to Kara's ragged breathing, guilt eating away at his soul.

Chapter 11

Kara.

Kara woke and found herself at the end of a concrete corridor. The corridor was empty except for a pile of rubble fallen from the roof. The place was freezing, like it was buried under ice.

Where was she? The last thing she remembered... pain then blackness. Little else.

Kara hugged herself to retain some of her diminishing body heat. The low temperature reminded her of the strange visions of the surface. Perhaps that was where she was now. But what had brought her here again? The invisible woman who'd accosted her above the lake or the shadow that had tried to kill her?

She spun around, scanning for movement. If the invisible woman or anything else was around, she needed to be ready.

There were no lights in the corridor, yet she could see. How was it possible?

The world was a blend of grays, whites and blacks. She held up her hand and studied it. She could see so well that the lines running across her palm were visible.

This had to be a dream. No one could see so well in the dark.

Dropping her hand, she spied a corner farther up the corridor and hurried toward it. Her bare feet padded across the floor, the sound breaking the deep silence.

Reaching the corner, she found herself facing another corridor, but this one had six doors, three on each side. At the far end stood a set of metal doors with long daggers of ice hanging from their handles.

Kara cautiously made her way to the first of the doors and tried to open it. The knob snapped off in her hand and the door fell off its hinges and crashed to the floor. She winced as the sound echoed along the corridor.

Hopefully, nothing was around to hear it.

Inside she found a small living quarters with a bed, table, chairs and a washroom. A thick layer of dust covered everything, some still settling again after the falling door disturbed it. The blankets on the bed looked so old that if Kara touched them they'd probably disintegrate.

The room appeared to have been undisturbed for a very long time.

On a whim, Kara entered the washroom to look at herself in the cracked mirror. What she saw made her recoil. A strange woman wearing a colorful courtesan gown stared back at her.

Wait. Kara blinked. It was no stranger. It was her. But what had happened?

Her hair had turned white and her eyes... looked like they belonged to a blind woman. She was thinner, her cheeks sunken, skin almost as pale as someone who didn't live under the sacred lights. The artifact still hung around her neck but the bulb was as dead as the room, the silver chain so cold it left a pink mark across her skin.

Your body is poisoned, Imogen, and near final death.

Kara jumped. "Who—who are you?"

I am vengeance. This is my world and I can hurt you here and make you suffer for what you did.

It was the same voice from the other dreams.

The faint outline of a woman appeared in the mirror behind Kara. Swinging around, she raised her arms defensively but no one was there. "Where'd you go?"

Invisible hands grabbed Kara's arms and lifted her off the ground. *You must suffer, Imogen. I shall enjoy hurting you.*

The next thing Kara knew she was flying through the air. She slammed into the wall and fell to the ground, landing on her stomach. The impact left her gasping. Something heavy landed on her back and cold hands wrapped around her throat and began to squeeze.

"Stop, please. Kara, my name's Kara."

You are Imogen, Mother of Steel Children. You wear her beacon.

"I'm not. I worked as a courtesan at the Golden Keg Tavern. My mother's name... Kristia. We lived—"

The invisible hands tightened. Kara's vision dimmed. The woman was going to kill her!

With fading strength, Kara reached behind her back to grab the woman. But there was nothing to grab. Her assailant wasn't there. "Please—don't kill me... I'm Kara."

The hands slowly loosened their grip. Kara sucked in lungfuls of blessed air and her vision cleared, though her throat throbbed. "Please stop. I don't know who Imogen is. The thing around my neck was given to me against my will by a man named Wrynric."

The invisible woman climbed off her back. *You are Imogen.* The voice sounded less certain. *You have returned to finish what you started. Your children have woken and seek to purge the world of life.*

Kara rolled onto her back. "Where are you?"

Where I have been since you murdered me.

"How could I have murdered you? I don't even know who you are. Why won't you show yourself?"

I do not want you to see me, Imogen.

Kara sat up. "For the last time, I'm not Imogen, I'm Kara. Now, can you at least tell me your name?"

My name? The voice fell silent for a moment. *I do not remember my name.*

"What do you mean?"

The code has become corrupted through the degradation of time or through the deliberate machinations of those who want the truth forgotten. This corruption has fragmented my memories... Much is lost to me now.

“What is a code?”

The code is the language of this place. It is what brought you here and made everything you see around you. This world is shaped from the real and the real can be shaped from it.

“I don’t understand what you’re saying. Why do you keep bringing me here?”

I do not bring you here, Imogen who is not Imogen, the code does. You are not the first living person to come here, but you may be among the last.

Kara caught her breath as something occurred to her. “Wrynnic said my father was a scion and that he and the people like him had visiondreams. I’m a half-blood, for he was a scion while my mother wasn’t. Is it possible I’m in a visiondream?”

I do not know. The name visiondream has the same duality as this world. It might be so.

“What do you mean duality?”

Visions are fantasy—dreams are real. The duality of this place is that it exists between life and death, dark and light. It is real, but not real.

Kara studied herself in the mirror. “Is this what I’ll look like when I wake up?”

Poison has ravaged your body and it will never recover. Cold fingers stroked Kara’s cheek. How is it you are not Imogen? You carry her beacon around your neck. What is different about you?”

The woman’s touch made Kara shiver. “What do you mean different?”

The world has begun to thaw, Imogen’s beacon is lit and her children stir. What has happened to Imogen? Why has she not returned like she was meant to? Something is different about you, for she has not claimed you as her own. The fingers stopped moving. Has her code been corrupted too? Does she still languish in the void? What of my poor lover who left to find her?

Kara clutched the dormant artifact. “I don’t know who Imogen is or why she hasn’t claimed me, nor do I know of your lover. All I know is that since I was given the artifact around my neck, I have been hunted by a group led by a man called Kahan. They murdered everyone I ever loved and forced me to flee my home.”

It took close to a minute for the voice to speak again. *Imogen once carried your artifact around her neck. It would work for no other because it was bound to her. For you to be able to activate it proves she must be inside you.*

“No one is inside me. Please, can you tell me how to get rid of it—or better yet, destroy it?”

The fingers withdrew from her face. *You will die if it is destroyed and perhaps with you, the human race. Imogen’s steel children are linked to the beacon, as is she. Until we know where Imogen is, I suggest you try not to die.*

Kara climbed to her feet and brushed dust from her clothes. “How are her children linked to it?”

That part of my memory is corrupted, Not Imogen. I no longer remember.

“Then tell me what the artifact is.”

It is a beacon, a tool and perhaps more. I remember little else other than it is important and that I once carried one much like it.

Kara sobbed, "There must be something I can do to get rid of it. I want things to go back to normal. So many have died because of this stupid thing."

Somewhere, deep underground, is an ancient city named Annbar. I lived there once, alongside Imogen and her handsome brother Dressen. Deep within Annbar's concrete halls is a great library, where much of the knowledge of our dead world was stored. Go there, find the library, and learn what you can. It is the only advice I can offer, besides this—the people that hunt you will not stop until you are dead.

An ethereal woman appeared in the mirror beside her. Kara looked over her shoulder but the woman disappeared again. "How do I find Annbar? I've never heard of such a place."

I cannot help you, for I no longer remember its location. Perhaps the man who gave you Imogen's beacon knows.

"Wrynnic said he found the artifact in an ancient dead city. Could it be Annbar?"
Perhaps.

It was a start at least.

"One other thing, at the Dead City he claimed he heard a voice coming from beyond a door. I thought it all nonsense at the time; but he said that in one of my father's visiondreams Arden saw me go to the door and speak to a metal man. What do you know of this metal man? Could he help me?"

I know nothing of this metal man. But be warned. Many died in Annbar because of Imogen's children and he could be one of them.

Kara licked her lips thoughtfully. "In my home in the Caverns of Stelemia, there were metal beasts attacking a city called Deep Cave. Could they be Imogen's Steel Children?"

I do not know.

"What do Imogen's children look like then? These looked like giant men and dogs in heavy plate armor."

My memories of what the enemy looked like are corrupted. All I know is they are not flesh and blood, but steel, and that they will think nothing of killing you. Be careful, they have woken and will seek to finish what they failed to achieve long ago. The destruction of humanity.

"Could something in the library reveal a way to defeat them?"

Again, I do not know. Perhaps if you learn to use Imogen's beacon you can use it against them.

That wasn't the answer Kara had hoped for. She wanted to be rid of the thing, not wield it as a weapon. "How am I meant to use it? I don't even know what it is."

My memories. Corrupted. You must learn on your own, Not Imogen.

Kara sighed. Why did the voice insist on being so obtuse?

The woman appeared in the mirror beside her again. "How come I can see you in the mirror yet when I search for you beside me there's nothing there?"

I am here but not here. What is in the mirror is real but not real. It is but a reflection of reality.

Oh. Yet another obtuse answer that would give Kara a headache if she tried to decipher it.

Leaning closer to the mirror to get a better look, Kara found the woman's features were as indistinct as her answers. One moment she appeared to be in her

thirties, with short hair and an expressionless face, and at others she looked old and skeletally thin, with long gray hair and deep wrinkles.

One thing that didn't change was her eyes. They were filled with an eternity's worth of sorrow and guilt. Their eyes met. It was too much. Kara backed away and put her hand over her mouth and shuddered.

The woman suddenly looked up and quivered.

Kara glanced at the ceiling too. "What is it?"

The Great Shadow is waking, and with him the ghosts that haunt this world. I must leave and return to those I have hidden, lest he find them. If his shadow falls on you, run and hide but do not linger here long, for night approaches and you will not survive it.

"You can't leave me here," Kara moaned. "I don't know how to leave."

The ghostly woman faded to nothing and a deep silence fell over the room.

She was gone.

What did the Great Shadow look like? How would Kara know if it was after her?

Unnerved, Kara went back into the bedroom. What should she do? She needed to wake and return to her real body. But how did one leave a visiondream?

She thought of herself waking but nothing happened. "Wake up... Wake up, Kara. Ummm, leave visiondream." She looked around the room. "End visiondream. Go home."

Nothing.

Next she tried slapping herself in the face. Still nothing. She slapped herself again, this time harder. "Ow, that hurt."

Grabbing the artifact, she shook it. "Light up. Why are you dead? I want to get out of here."

After half a minute of shaking it, the bulb remained unlit so she gave up. Time to try something else.

The only option left was to open the other doors and see what was beyond them. Perhaps she could find something to help her leave. What that something would be, she had no idea.

Leaving the room, she opened the other doors. Beyond each were more living quarters. One had a thick jacket lying on the floor but when she tried to pick it up, the material turned to dust. After searching all the other rooms and finding nothing of use, she cautiously approached the twin metal doors.

The closer she got to them, the colder it became. Kara tentatively touched one of the handles with a finger. The metal was so cold her skin stuck to it.

She pulled her hand back and sucked her aching finger to warm it. Gathering up the hem of her gown, she used it as insulation and grabbed hold of one of the handles and tried to turn it. It didn't move. Years of ice and rust had frozen it in place.

It took several minutes of wrenching the handle up and down to finally get it to unlock. She pushed the door open an inch but a freezing gust of air blasted through the crack and she doubled over and shivered.

Why couldn't the code that had brought her here have given her something better to wear than a thin courtesan gown? A thick sheepskin cloak would be nice. Oh, and fur gloves too. Her hands were like ice!

When Kara recovered she opened the door wide enough to squeeze through. Instead of it leading outside like she'd expected, she found a stairway leading up to another set of double doors. She hugged herself and made her way up.

Like the last set of doors, the ones at the top were covered in ice and it took all her strength to get the handles to turn. When the lock finally clicked open, she was near breathless.

The doors flew inward, knocking her head over heels back down the stairs. When she came to a stop she waited for a bout of headspins to pass, then checked herself over to make sure nothing was broken. No shooting pain, blood or numbness, just a pounding heart and a slight headache from where she'd knocked her head. Certain she was all right, she got back to her feet.

A dense, white mist slithered down the stairs toward her. Kara backed away before it touched her. It followed her through the other set of doors and along the corridor. She was almost at the entrance to the room where the ghostly woman had spoken to her when the mist stopped and slowly settled, leaving a layer of white dust.

Kara bent down to get a closer look. The dust appeared to be flakes of white crystal covered in fine white powder. Snow. Like she'd seen in her other visiondreams.

Gathering up her courage, Kara walked back up the stairs and into the knee-high mist. Bright light filtered in through the doorway and she shielded her eyes against it.

To her surprise, her eyes adjusted to the glare in moments. They'd changed somehow, at least in the visiondream. Not only could she see in the dark, she could now see in blinding light without excruciating pain.

A waist-high mound of snow filled the doorway. With little choice but to fight her way through, she put her foot on top of it. Her leg sank up to her knee. "Gah, that's cold." Why couldn't this be easier?

Other than being cold, the snow posed no immediate threat, so Kara climbed out the doorway. By the time she was through, her whole body felt frozen.

She looked around to get her bearings but a low-level mist reduced her visibility to a mere dozen feet. Above the mist, the Sun shone from a sky as gray as forged iron.

The Sun radiated an almost imperceptible warmth. How could it do that when the world was frozen? It looked so small and far away. She rubbed her hands together. Too bad the warmth wasn't enough to stop her freezing to death. Her legs were already going numb and the longer they stayed immersed in snow, the worse they seemed to become.

If she didn't find a way out of the visiondream soon, she may very well die.

The Sun steadily descended toward the horizon. What would happen once it slid beneath it? Would it get dark? The ghostly woman had said Kara wouldn't survive the night. Did it become colder or was something else out here that only came out after the sun disappeared?

A loud crack and then a thumping sound broke the silence. Kara held her breath and inched back toward the door, scanning the mist for the shadow.

Nothing moved and the world was silent once more.

It was too cold to stand still for long. With no idea where to head, Kara walked in a straight line away from the door. Fighting her way through the waist-deep snow was hard going. Her gown became wet and froze to her skin, adding to her discomfort. Soon the cold made her bend over double and she had to do her best not to collapse face first into the snow.

“Help me,” she groaned to the ghostly woman, through chattering teeth. “Please, come back and help me.”

The mist closed in around her, as if sensing her plight and readying itself to consume her if she fell. Her visibility reduced to a few feet, her keen eyes unable to make out anything but a wall of white.

If she didn’t find cover soon, she’d freeze to death.

Shivering violently, she pushed on and soon forgot the world around her. She put one foot before the other. Then when the snow became deeper, she pulled herself forward with her hands, her progress painfully slow.

Suddenly, a huge shadow darkened the sky and the world went deathly still. Dread unlike any Kara had felt before wound tendrils of ice around her heart, a dread born of instinct rather than thought. The shadow flew overhead then disappeared into the mist.

She hadn’t gotten a good look at the shadow, but from what she had seen, it was huge. A vague shape forged in a nightmare, borne on frigid wings.

Getting to her knees was a struggle but she made it. Breathing shallow breaths, Kara scanned the sky. Nothing up there now, except the Sun slowly sinking below the horizon.

Kara pressed on, but the fear returned, this time greater than before. Her gut roiled, her breathing became a shallow pant. A black mass flew in front of the Sun, and for a brief moment the world became as dark as the Limestone Caves.

Run, screamed a voice deep inside her.

It was not Kara’s voice, or that of the ghostly woman. It was weak and distant, yet sounded strangely familiar.

Run, it screamed again.

Kara pushed forward, her adrenaline overriding fatigue and the cold. Minutes later, a stone wall became visible through the mist. She staggered toward it.

The wall seemed to be part of a large building with colored glass windows and a steepled roof. She followed the wall, searching desperately for an entrance. After rounding a corner, she arrived at a set of huge wooden doors built at the top of a short flight of stairs. The shadow flew low overhead and a monstrous, piercing scream followed in its wake.

Climbing the stairs, Kara stopped and cried out as something fell on her head. *It’s on me, it’s on me!* She rolled around on the stairs, hands thrashing at her unseen attacker.

Another scream sounded, but it was from somewhere high above. She stopped fighting and stared up. A clump of snow fell from the roof and landed beside her. She ran her hand through her hair and found it full of the stuff. Just snow. Perhaps the shadow had knocked some off the roof and it had landed on her head.

The scream drew closer. Kara leapt back to her feet and pushed on the doors. They fell off their hinges and crashed to the floor. Flakes of snow blew in all

directions and several spears of ice fell from the edge of the roof and shattered around her. The sky darkened as the flap of giant wings drew near.

The sound was almost on top of her when she darted inside. A high-pitched cry of frustration echoed through the stone building and for an instant, the light from the Sun disappeared as the shadow flew past the entrance with a great *whoosh*.

Kara waited to see what would happen but her fear began to ebb until it was little more than an uncomfortable presence in the background. When she got her breath back she brushed herself off.

Her eyes swiftly adjusted to the dim light. She'd entered a large room filled with pews. A filthy, frozen carpet ran along the center of the room and ended at a pulpit. Colored glass windows were built high up in the walls on either side. Light from outside shone through them, revealing pictures in the glass. One was of people bowing to a white-robed man who stood on a hill, arms raised to the Sun. Another was of a bearded man with a halo of gold around him. He looked down from the sky, his features as cold as the icy air.

Who was he? The missing One God spoken of in the sermons?

Kara moved away from the door and trudged toward the pulpit. When she got there, she collapsed beside it and curled into a ball and shivered.

The creeping mist from outside followed her through the doors and inexorably made its way toward her. "Oh, go away," she snapped and got back to her feet.

She searched for another way out and spied a door built into the back wall of the room. With no other exit in sight, she went toward it.

Her ears rang with another scream. Kara backed away until her back hit the door. A moving black mass of shadowy tendrils raced across the ground out the front of the building. Then timber and stones flew inward as the shadow slammed into the front wall.

Dark claws reached for her through the flying debris.

Kara turned and shouldered the door. It shattered and her momentum sent her headlong down a long flight of stairs. Curling into a ball, she rolled to the bottom and came to rest on an icy marble floor.

The ground shuddered, dust fell from the ceiling and the roar of falling walls filled her ears. The shadow let out a long, enraged wail. Rubble crashed down the stairs as the shadow frantically fought its way through the collapsing building to reach her. Winded from the fall, Kara crawled away from the stairs toward an open door.

Entering the next room, she sank wearily onto her stomach and prayed the roof would not cave in on her. After long minutes, the building stopped shaking and a profound silence fell.

Kara sat up and groaned. She was covered in dozens of scrapes and bruises and her hands ached from the cold. The pain reminded her she was still alive.

Her eyes had already adjusted to the absolute darkness to a remarkable degree. Dust filled the chilled air and grit crunched between her teeth. She breathed through part of her gown and got back to her feet. Limping down a short hallway, she entered a larger room. It reminded her of the catacombs carved into the rock under the part of the capital where her mother was entombed.

In Stelemia the dead were laid to rest in rows of stone or iron sarcophaguses. Here the coffins were made of tree-wood—something Kara had only seen once—

and set in alcoves in the wall. Some were shrouded in tapestries so old they'd deteriorated to faded fragments of cloth.

Kara limped toward one to get a closer look but froze when the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. The temperature suddenly increased and a light bulb flickered to life on the cracked ceiling. Kara backed against a coffin, heart pounding, muscles tense. What was happening?

Footsteps sounded on the ruined stairs. Someone was coming!

Hide. I have to hide. There was another door at the far end of the crypt. She hurried toward it, but it was already too late. People began to flood into the room from where she'd first entered.

In her haste to flee, she fell over a piece of rubble and landed flat on her face. Dazed, Kara looked around to see the people racing toward her. They didn't slow their pace as they neared and she dove out of their way to avoid being trampled underfoot.

What were they doing? None of them even glanced at her as they hurried past. Was she invisible? Her hair still stood on end and an icy fear pumped through her body with every beat of her heart.

Were these the ghosts that haunted the ruins of this frozen world?

Kara studied the people as they hurried by. They were strangely dressed and spoke in a language she'd never heard before. There were men, women and children, some dark skinned, others light. Many carried bags and blankets.

The last two people who entered were a man dressed in a long, flowing, white robe and... No, the second figure wasn't a man—at least not one of flesh and blood. The second was made of metal and walked with a strange, elongated gait. Its feet went *clank* when they touched the floor and when they rose again they made a whirring sound.

The metal man was the last to walk by, but even he didn't seem to see her. He said something in a monotone voice and the robed man glanced at him over his shoulder and said something back.

Kara called after them. "Please, can you help me?"

Neither responded but walked to the where the rest of the people had gathered around the door at the far end of the crypt. Not knowing what else to do, Kara followed them.

The people at the door looked frightened and held one another as they jabbered away in their strange language. Many were crying—even the men—while others appeared to be in shock, rocking back and forth on their feet.

The group parted for the robed man and his metal companion. The robed man removed something from inside his robes. Kara stopped in her tracks. He held a thin, metallic card like the artifact around her neck. Unlike hers, his glowed a tranquil white.

Kara's mouth fell open. The man held the card up, as if to allow her to get a good look at it. Then he swiped it through a box on the wall beside the door.

With a hissing noise, the door slid open. The people yammered away excitedly and filed into the well-lit room beyond.

Was she meant to see this? Was this why she was still stuck in this visiondream?

After the last person exited the crypt, Kara raced up to the door. Hardly stopping to think, she took her artifact and swiped it through the same box the robed man had used. After a moment, the door started to slide shut.

Was it because of her or was it automatic? It didn't matter. She now knew what the artifact was.

It wasn't only a beacon, like the ghostly woman had called it, but also something like the flat, square-shaped devices the Priest King's royal guards were rumored to carry to open doors only accessible to them. People had called them passkeys.

Before the door closed, Kara slipped inside. It slid shut behind her as she followed the people down a short hallway into a large, square room. The room was filled with beds and boxes made of a light-brown material she'd never seen before. The people put their belongings beside the beds, then saw to their children. The metal man watched them silently from a corner.

While the people were busy organizing themselves, Kara walked over to the metal man to get a better look at him. She waved her hand in front of his round, yellow eyes. "Can you see me?"

He didn't respond.

She reached out to touch him but her fingers went right through him. Maybe he was a ghost.

The metal man suddenly walked through her. Kara jumped away in spite of herself. *That was... weird.* He'd passed through her and she'd felt nothing.

Walking to one of the brown boxes, he lifted it over his head effortlessly. He took it over to the beds and held it out. Two people started removing items from it and handing them out to the others.

Then the room shook as a muffled boom came from somewhere outside the room. Everyone stopped and listened, even the metal man. The sound ceased after a few moments but the people didn't settle down. Instead, they burst into a frenzy of activity.

Men shouted at one another as women took hold of their children and moved them to the center of the room. The robed man pulled a book from his robes and read out loud from it, his metal companion watching on passively.

The temperature dropped rapidly and the people huddled together for warmth. Kara could feel the cold but it seemed to have no effect on her. But why? She'd felt it well enough outside.

Kara noticed the artifact around her neck was glowing again. The light was dim, but it was there. Had swiping it through the box outside somehow woken it? The strange, yet familiar voice inside her head said something but the words were indistinct, as if the voice was speaking through a wall.

Who are you? Kara asked.

The voice that replied was weaker than before and she heard nothing of what it said.

I can't hear what you're saying.

Something brushed against the fringes of her mind. She recoiled. There was anger and frustration in that touch and an overriding sense of urgency.

The touch faded. Kara's attention was brought back to what was happening around her. It had grown colder and the people had become frantic as they

desperately tried to keep warm. They shredded boxes and bedsheets and used them as fuel for a fire.

Smoke quickly filled the room and they doused the flames before they could die from smoke inhalation. The metal man watched on, speaking in his strange, mechanical voice. If only Kara could understand what he was saying.

One of the children screamed and no matter what her mother did to calm her, the girl would not settle. Kara bent down to try to lend the girl comfort but, as with the metal man, she found she couldn't touch the child.

She felt powerless.

Ice spread over the walls and half an hour later the first person succumbed to the cold. An hour after that, almost all the people had frozen to death, except a man and a woman who convulsed on the ground. It would not be long before they were gone too.

Kara looked up at the ceiling. "Why am I being forced to watch this? Who are these people and why is this happening to them?"

Silence was her only answer.

Eyes filled with tears, Kara looked down. Her chest tightened. The room was dark and cold and all that remained of the people were frozen bones, as if many years had passed in moments. Two yellow eyes lit the darkness as the metal man watched over them.

His head swiveled slightly and he seemed to stare right at her. An icy spike of fear shot into Kara's heart. "Can you see me?"

As if in answer to her question, he reached out to grab her arm. Kara reeled backwards until she stumbled over a ribcage and fell and hit her head on the frozen floor.

The last thing she saw before darkness took her was the metal man reaching for her throat.

Chapter 12

Aemon.

Sweat poured down Aemon's face as he stared out the window at the lava below him, his fingers absently playing with a loose thread on the bandage around his arm. His whole life had become sitting at the window, wiping sweat from his face and jolting in fright every time the infirmary door opened. Any interruption could be that annoying monk, Minard, or a bank asset gathering intelligence for Rubin. But worse than the senior banker finding out he was alive and sending assassins after him was the thought of the door opening and a clutch of Inquisitors rushing in to take Kara away. The thought of that had kept him awake into the long hours of the night.

When Aemon was not at the window, he sat beside the stone slab where Kara slept, praying to the Shield of Heaven she would wake.

How many days had she been unconscious and barely clinging to life? Five? Six? Seven? Who knew anymore?

The thread snapped and Aemon dropped it out the window. At least that wretched swine Minard, who stood guarding the door to the infirmary, had left him alone this last half-day. The agony of waiting—hoping—Kara would wake was more torment than Aemon could endure already, without having the monk add to it.

By the divines, he had never met a more detestable man than Minard in his life!

Aemon ground what little was left of his fingernails into the stone windowsill. He was over the monk. He was over the heat. He was sick of worrying about Rubin finding out he was alive and fearing that the Inquisitors would seize Kara and take her away. But most of all, he was sick of all the waiting and hoping.

He glanced at Kara's sleeping form. Every time he saw her like that, it sent a stabbing pain into his heart. *I am sorry I failed to protect you. Please, Kara, wake up. You need to live and rid yourself of the artifact. I'll do everything I can to let you get back to living a normal life.*

The poison had burned through Kara, reducing her to... He turned away from her before the sight of it made him start crying again.

If she ever woke, she would find all color bleached from her hair, her strength withered, face gaunt, eyes... He had only seen them for several haunting moments. White and sightless.

Aemon chuckled bitterly. The great threat of the Prophecy of Ibilirith, nothing more than a poor, sick young woman clinging onto the last vestiges of her life.

I should never have brought you here, Aemon lamented for the hundredth time. I should have taken you to the seers at Echo Hollow instead. I always thought their fortunes as useful as a banker who could not count, but maybe I was wrong. Maybe one of the seers could have helped you.

He rested his chin on the windowsill, the stifling air wafting from below drying the sweat from his face. No. There would be no help for her from the seers. Aemon had read plenty about them, and their predictions were so unreliable, only a fool would trust them.

Who else could have helped her? Where else could he have brought her?

The Covenant of the Shield, the Covetous Sisterhood, the healers at Celestial Rest? None of them would likely have been able to help her either.

He had to face it. There was no other choice but to bring her here. The Order knew much about the technologies of the old world, and remembered things about the past the other orders had forgotten.

Yet, look how it ended. Kara is dying and I am stuck here sweating like a swine broiling in soup, my guilt and fear of losing her tearing me apart.

Suddenly, the metal door to the room flew open and Minard strode in. "What are you up to?" the monk said with an accusatory sharpness to his deep, gravelly voice.

"Nothing," Aemon snapped. "Go away."

After his eyes scanned the room, Minard gave Aemon a knowing grin. "I hope *me*-lord isn't doing anything he shouldn't."

Aemon flew to his feet. "Like what? Sitting at this stupid window?"

The monk leered at him as he approached Kara's bed. "You have to admit, she's quite a stunner. Even with the bandages, sunken cheeks and colorless eyes, she's still girly enough to tickle me."

“Get away from her.” Aemon rushed over. “Leave her alone.”

Minard did not back away, nor did he blink at Aemon’s vehemence. “Uh uh. It’s time for *you* to get out of this room, *little lord*.”

“What?”

“You need to leave.”

Aemon put his hands on his hips. “Is this another one of your ridiculous japes at my expense?”

“Japes?” Minard rolled his eyes. “You nobles. Now listen: I was ordered to remove you from this room, posthaste.”

“Why?”

Grinning, the monk said, “It’s not my place to ask questions of those Ibilirith deems fit to give me orders.”

Aemon’s heart sank. “But I have been here since she was brought to this room.”

“I know. I’ve been the one bringing you food and water and making sure you bathe.” He ran his eyes over the dirty dishes and clothes, then smirked. “Indeed, you’ve made yourself at home here. I give better room service than any inn you’re like to find, don’t I?”

“To the dark with you and your order.” Aemon dug his nails into the side of Kara’s bed. “You have kept me a prisoner in here. I was too afraid to leave because I was not sure I would be allowed back.”

Eyes on Aemon, Minard bent down to whisper something into Kara’s ear. “Listen to the little lord speak. He sounds like he has a stalagmite shoved up his—”

“Why, you pretentious—”

The monk straightened and drove the end of his metal staff into the ground. “Think yourself lucky that I’ve allowed you to remain here with this pretty young woman. The patriarch wanted you handed to the nearest friendly Inquisitor, but I convinced him to let you remain here to help me watch over her.”

Aemon bared his teeth, fists shaking. *How dare this low-born swine talk to me like this. If only I could snatch that staff away from him and break it over his stupid-looking head!*

Never in his life had Aemon hated anyone as much as he hated this grinning, self-righteous monk.

The door flew open and another monk entered. “Brother Minard, you were ordered to remove this man. The patriarch is almost here.”

Minard stood to attention, losing his grin. “Lady Ibilirith, forgive me.” He grabbed Aemon’s arm. “Time to go, little lord.”

With that, Aemon was dragged toward the door. He tried to latch onto Kara’s bed, but Minard yanked him away. The monk was strong, far stronger than Aemon, and it was not long before they were out the door and heading away from the infirmary.

“What are they going to do to her?” Aemon asked as he was dragged along a stone corridor.

“Don’t worry so much.” The side of Minard’s mouth twisted into what might have passed for a grin if it had not oozed such mockery and insolence. “I’m oath-bound to protect her. I swear to you, *me-lord*, she’ll come to no harm.”

The monk’s words were far from reassuring.

Aemon wanted to kick something as Minard led him far from Kara and into a small room. He shoved Aemon into it. "I suggest you sleep. You look like you need it." Spinning around, Minard left, shutting the door behind him.

After a moment, Aemon raced over and tried to open it. Locked. He turned to study the room. Nothing but a hard bed, a chair, a slop bucket and pitcher of what he hoped was water.

A prison cell.

Aemon leaned against the wall. The thought of Minard returning to Kara and leering over her while she slept... He started thudding the back of his head against the wall repeatedly. It hurt, but it might stop him thinking about what Minard or the other monks might do to Kara when he was not there to protect her.

Everything about that stupid monk is irritating. divines, help me. If he or any other in his order lays a hand on her, I will kill them with my bare hands!

Aemon clenched his fists as he imagined them closing around Minard's throat. The monk was around Aemon's age, but stood much taller and had dark-bronze skin and the most obnoxious seductive brown eyes. If by some miracle Kara woke in Minard's presence with Aemon trapped in this cell, she would no doubt be enamored with Minard's thick-muscled arms and handsome face. Assuming she could still see. There was that.

And what do I have? Piddly arms, short stature and an oversized brain. Little good they do me. He banged his head even harder against the wall. *Oh, and the way Minard always postures around, like he is Rexus of Acid Lake, the strongest and bravest warrior of all.*

To the dark with Minard and his entire order!

Aemon's head had begun throbbing, so he slid to the floor. A great sob racked his body. Minard was everything Aemon wished he could be. Tall, confident, strong, graceful and a seasoned fighter. Someone who could hold his own in battle. Just the sort of man Kara needed to keep her safe.

Minard fought and prayed and claimed to fear no one, while Aemon had counted coins for a living and lived in fear of Senior Banker Rubin's wrath. How could Aemon compare with the monk? If Kara woke, what would she ever see in him again?

If she woke. If.

Aemon stared at the stone floor. If.

"HAVE YOU SEEN HER?"

Aemon blinked sleep from his eyes as he slowly sat up in bed. "What—who?"

"Have you seen her? You were out and about earlier."

It was Minard standing at the door.

Shaking his head to clear the fog of sleep, Aemon glared up at the monk. "How could I have seen her? You would not let me anywhere near—"

The desperation on the monk's face made Aemon's heart clamber into his throat. "What is it?" He leapt out of bed. "Is Kara missing?"

"She's not in her room."

"But she was still unconscious, last I knew. How could she get up and leave?"

"I don't know." Minard glanced left, then right. "I went to check on her and found her gone."

Aemon shoved past Minard and started toward Kara's room, the monk a step behind. "You were meant to be guarding her. Maybe she has woken up and is wandering around having no idea where she is."

"She never left the infirmary, at least not through the door... She may have climbed out the window."

The window. A terrible fear made Aemon's guts turn to lead. What if she fell into the lava?

Aemon began to run frantically but quickly lost his way. He slowed to let Minard catch up and take the lead. "Who else knows she is missing?" he asked. "Is it possible someone took her?"

Lydan, help her. What if the Inquisitors have Kara?

"No one has been given the order to touch her," Minard said, pulling Aemon into a hallway and rushing along it. "I sent another monk to inform the patriarch about what has happened. Soon the whole temple will be searching for her."

They arrived at Kara's room and found it empty. Aemon hurried over to the window and looked out. His stomach clenched as he imagined Kara climbing out and falling.

Just below the sill was a narrow ledge running along the side of the building. It was wide enough for someone to walk along, though only a fool would be inclined to do so, for to fall would see them plummet into the lava far below.

Aemon gripped the window frame with sweaty palms. If Kara fell...

He spun to face Minard. "Have you checked the neighboring rooms? She might have crept along the ledge and entered one of the other windows."

"Of course. They were the first places we checked."

A breathless middle-aged man dressed in fine bed clothes burst into the room, two monks taking guard behind him. "Where is she?" he screamed, with such fury Aemon retreated several steps. The man's breathlessness was not so much of exertion but of barely contained—or not-so contained—rage that seemed to radiate from him, like the heat through the window.

Minard went down to one knee and bowed his head. "She's missing, your Holiness. I take full responsibility."

The man glared down at Minard, fury burning feverishly bright in his eyes. "You Divergent heathen! Your conceited brethren wanted her spared the flames, so I acquiesced for the stability of our order." He wrung his hands. "The least you could do is see that she did not leave this room."

Minard cowered like a scolded child. So there was someone the monk was afraid of.

The man held his hand over Minard's head, his fingers curled into claws, hand trembling, lips drawn back, veins almost popping out of his skin. Would he kill Minard for letting Kara escape?

Who was he? Patriarch Lucien, the head of the Order? He certainly fit the description Aemon had read in the banking intelligence reports. The man had a perfectly groomed ginger beard and thin pale lips, with eyes that pinned one with their intense glare. From memory, Aemon recalled reading the patriarch would explode with anger for the slightest of reasons. He was a stickler for the old ways and possessed a near-perfect memory, which allowed him to recite long sermons without the aid of religious texts.

The angry man took a long moment to get a hold of himself. “We will mete out your punishment some other time, Divergent,” he said, his voice lowered but still brimming with anger. “Though mark my words, if she is not found, I will *purge* every last one of you, including your vile master.” He spun around and pointed at the monks who had escorted him. “Mobilize everyone, including the scullions, and search every room and hidden passage. The woman must be found.”

They bowed, then raced from the room. Turning his attention to Aemon, the angry man said, “Remain here with the Divergent. If she returns, I want to be informed immediately.” Then he strode out the door.

Aemon swallowed. He would not want to be on the other end of that man’s ire like Minard had been. Minard got back to his feet and gave Aemon a dark look. “I hope your friend is found, and soon. The patriarch is looking for any excuse to bring about the end of my kind.”

So it had been the patriarch.

“What are you talking about?” Aemon frowned. “Your kind? I thought—”

“I was a monk of the Order? I am, but I’m also a believer in the teachings of Inquisitor Mariot.”

“Who? I have never heard of him.”

“Nor should you have. It’s a closely guarded secret that a fracture has formed in our order. I only tell you this now so you understand what is at stake. If the woman is not found, patriarch Lucien will have his excuse to condemn all of us Reformers as heretics.”

“I’m not sure I understand what this is all about. I thought you of Ibilirith all believed the same thing.”

“Mostly we do, but some of the things written in the old files, the Prophecy among them, are vague and open to interpretation. Some of us, like Inquisitor Mariot, have come to interpret them differently.” Minard inclined his head toward Kara’s bed. “Not all of us believe she is the threat Lucien and his kind think she is. There are other files on the Sacred Computer written about the Scion who paint her in a different light.”

That is reassuring to hear.

“Our numbers are slowly dwindling; it takes us longer to repair Ibilirith’s technologies.” Minard dabbed at his eyes. “One could say our order is dying. But, some of us won’t give in. Some of us think the old ways have come and gone and a new way must be found.”

Right now, Aemon did not care if the Order lived or died. He stepped toward Minard, remembering what the healer had said. “*If I had not made a solemn oath to protect human life, I’d let her slip away into the dark.*”

Kahan had called Kara a threat too, naming her as the Scion in the Prophecy of Ibilirith.

“Tell me everything you know about Kara and of the Prophecy. What does the patriarch intend to do to her?”

Minard grimaced. “It is not my place to speak of it. You will find out soon enough. For now, let us wait for word of her discovery.” He went to stand near the door, shoulders arched as if carrying a great weight.

Aemon lowered himself onto the bed, unsure if he preferred Minard as he was now or when he was busy being an absurd, irritating ox.

HALF AN HOUR LATER, they got word Kara had been found.

They followed a breathless acolyte to a large chapel and found her kneeling before a wall covered in colored glass bulbs and metallic cogs. Aemon glanced around as he entered the room and instantly recognized it from a description in a book. The Machine Chapel. The place where the priests of the Order sang their laments to the passing of their ancient Machine Mother, Ibilirith.

“Kara,” Aemon exclaimed as he approached her from behind.

Several monks and acolytes had gathered around her. Most kept their distance, but some edged closer to her, weapons in hand.

Aemon pushed past them and fell to his knees beside her. “Kara, are you all right? What are you doing here?”

Her eyes were closed and a thin sheen of sweat glistened on her forehead. The artifact hung outside her gown, the light so intense it made it appear as if it were on fire. Aemon put a hand on her arm and found her skin cold and clammy.

Patriarch Lucien, now dressed in regal white robes, came to stand over Aemon. “Move back, fool,” he demanded, a monk looming menacingly beside him.

Aemon glared at him, then turned back to Kara. The patriarch would have to drag him away from her if he wanted him to move.

The light around Kara’s neck dimmed until it was little more than a flicker of flame. Her eyes fluttered open and she stared at Aemon for a long moment, her white eyes circled by dark rings. “Aemon.” Her eyes met his. “Where am I?”

Could she see him? The healer had said she’d been blinded by the poison.

A little hope returned. Not only was Kara awake, but she might not have lost her sight.

“You are in the chapel,” he said, as the weight of his anxiety and grief began to ebb away. “Do you know why you came here?”

“The chapel.” Kara gazed at the flashing bulbs and innumerable wires running along the walls. “I don’t know why I’m here.”

“Can you see? Your eyes...”

“What of them?” She moistened her lips. “Are they white, like I saw...?”

Aemon stroked her cheek. “Kara, you were gravely wounded outside the temple. What is the last thing you remember?”

“Yes, tell us, girl,” the patriarch snarled.

Minard grabbed Aemon’s shoulder and forced him back to allow Lucien to move in front of her.

Kara glanced up at the patriarch, her eyes widening. “Who are you?”

Lucien raised his hand to grasp a cog hanging from his neck by a twisting coil of copper wire. “I am the patriarch of the Order of Ibilirith. Now, answer me. Why did you come to our chapel?”

It took close to a minute for Kara to answer. “I was somewhere else, then... then I had a terrible fright and fell into darkness. I was in that darkness for a time, then something stirred deep within me and I felt myself moving, but I couldn’t feel the stone beneath my feet, nor control my direction.” She shuddered, clutching the artifact close to her. “It felt like something had taken control of me, or I was sleepwalking, but I felt more awake than asleep.” She gave the patriarch such a

pleading look that it broke Aemon's heart. "What is happening to me? Why did I come to this room? It felt like... like there is something I must find here."

Lucien studied her, his face an expressionless mask. Aemon noticed that the patriarch's fingers were clenched around the cog so tightly his hand trembled.

Kara began to sob. Aemon tried to rush over to her, but Minard pulled him back. "Let me go," Aemon said. "I want to comfort her."

The patriarch suddenly wiped sweat from his brow, his features tightening. "This chapel is a most sacred place, for it is here that I hold sermons and pray to our Blessed Mother, Ibilirith, who is entombed nearby."

"I think she was searching for something," Kara said.

"She? What are you talking about?" Minard asked, still holding Aemon firmly.

"I don't know. I'm so tired..." Kara buried her face in her hands and sobbed, "What's happening to me?"

The patriarch glared down at her, his eyes pinpricks of darkness. "Who is this woman your spoke of? Was it our goddess, Ibilirith?" Kara did not reply; she curled into a ball and wept. Lucien stamped his foot like a petulant child. "Answer, girl."

"Leave her alone," Aemon screamed, anger overwhelming any sense of caution.

Spinning around, the patriarch bared his teeth. "How dare you."

Heart pumping rage, Aemon held his breath. He met the other man's gaze and refused to look away.

Aemon, of House Pulmard. A man who had lived in fear all his life. Now staring down the patriarch of the Order of Ibilirith—one of the most powerful men in Stelemia.

Lucien finally averted his gaze and ordered the monks to escort Kara back to her room. Aemon breathed again. What he had just done could cost him his life, but hopefully it had saved Kara hers.

WHEN KARA ARRIVED BACK at her room, the window was locked and a double roster of guards were stationed at the door. Surprisingly, Aemon was allowed to remain with her, but was told that if he let her leave the infirmary, he would never be allowed to see her again.

"My name is Minard," the monk said to Kara as he placed a bowl of soup on the table near her bed. "The patriarch is going to question you in two hours' time. I suggest you get some rest." He gave her a wide grin that made Aemon's blood boil. "You know, even with the white hair and those eyes, you're still as gorgeous to look upon as the shimmering sacred lights at the heart of our temple." He lifted her hand and pursed his lips. "Your beauty is almost divine."

Aemon's temples pulsed. *How dare he touch her like that.*

Kara snatched her hand away before Minard could kiss it. "What sort of holy man are you?"

The monk straightened his back and hefted his staff. "I serve my lady Ibilirith with my every breath. That doesn't mean I can't call a blind fish a blind fish. I say what I feel."

"Well, I'm in no mood to be touched right now."

Minard turned his grin on Aemon and gave him a mock salute. "Watch over her, me lord."

Aemon's nostrils flared. "Do not worry. I will do a better job of it than you did."

To his surprise Minard just shrugged and kept his grin. "We do what we can. Now, both of you, get some rest." With that, he spun on his heel and left the room, closing the door with a thud.

Kara gingerly climbed into bed and said, "Rest. I feel like all I've done is rest." She grimaced as she touched her bandaged chest. "By the divines, it hurts."

Aemon's anger was replaced by the desire to wrap his arms around Kara and hold her for the rest of their lives. But he restrained himself. "I bet it does. You should have seen—"

Suddenly, Kara tried to sit up and say something but fell back, clutching at her wound.

"Are you all right?" He started stroking her face. "What happened?"

"Gah. I shouldn't have done that." Her teeth were gritted. "It just came back to me. I know what it is. I saw how to use it in my visiondream."

Aemon leaned back. "Are you talking about the artifact?"

"Yes. In my visiondream, I saw a robed man use one much like it to open a door. It's a passkey, like the Priest King's royal guards use."

"What is a visiondream? Who was this robed man?"

Kara was not making sense.

She unclenched her teeth and took in a ragged breath. "I don't know much about visiondreams. Wrynric mentioned that my father had them. They let him see the future."

Aemon was skeptical that such a thing could exist, but thought it best to keep it to himself. "And the robed man?"

"I think he might have been some sort of holy man. Other people were with him, and a man made of metal."

This is getting stranger and stranger. Maybe she is delirious. That could explain her trip to the chapel. "Did any of them talk to you?"

"No, I don't think they could see me. I was at something called the surface. It's far above us." She licked her lips. "I think... I think the people I saw there were like us, but lived long ago."

Aemon raised his eyebrows. "What makes you say that?"

With a crash, Minard burst back into the room, followed by a man dressed in a long, flowing white robe. Patriarch Lucien.

So much for two hours.

The patriarch wore a large, black conical hat with a brightly lit sacred light affixed to its peak. Aemon found it hard to look at him without having to avert his eyes. He still wore the copper chain with the brass cog hanging from it around his neck. Two acolytes followed the patriarch in, each carrying a handful of scrolls, metal quills and ink.

Lucien studied Kara with eyes far older than his years. Aemon had not noticed before, but there were bags under them, as if he had not slept in days.

Hobbling up behind the acolytes came the old healer. She ushered Aemon away from Kara's bed, then bowed as Lucien came to stand beside her. Once she straightened, she said, "Your Eminence, I apologize that I have not come to see this woman since she woke. I was told you were not—"

“It does not matter.” Lucien impatiently waved her forward. “Check her over, and be done with it.”

The healer ran her hand over Kara’s face, then peered into her eyes. “Do you see me?”

Kara glanced at Aemon before nodding.

“Interesting,” the healer intoned, then turned her attention to Kara’s bandages. “They appear clean, which means her bleeding has stopped.” She turned to Lucien. “Never have I seen the like of this woman before. The old files ring true. Only one such as the Scion could have survived the poison she has been afflicted with.”

Aemon felt a chill. There was that name again. Scion.

It struck him. Why would Kahan still be out there if the poison should have killed her? How did he know she still lived? Indeed, how had he managed to find Kara amongst the many thousands of refugees fleeing Deep Cave and then follow her to the temple? From what Kara had told Aemon back in the Limestone Caves, Kahan should not have even known she would be heading to Deep Cave. Yet he had.

But how?

Lucien cupped Kara’s hand in his. “I am told your name is Kara.” She nodded, so he continued. “I am Lucien, fourth of that name. I am the eighty-second patriarch of this temple, a pure descendent of Blessed Radashan and a most righteous servant of Holy Ibilirith.”

The patriarch slowly ran his tongue over his thin lips. For some reason, that innocuous gesture made Aemon’s hairs stand on end. The acolytes watched Lucien expectantly, their quills poised over their scrolls as they waited to record his words.

Lucien’s tongue retracted suddenly. “Tell me how you feel.”

Kara put her hand over the passkey resting on her bandaged chest. The patriarch and the healer noticed what Kara did and shared a glance.

“I’m in a lot of pain and it’s hard to breathe. I’m sorry I startled everyone earlier.”

Lucien dismissed the healer, then made a hand gesture to Minard. The monk grabbed Aemon’s arm and pulled him away.

“Hey, let me go,” Aemon snapped. “What are you doing?”

Minard tightened his grip. “Stay where you are and be silent.”

What were they going to do? What if the patriarch ordered her taken to the Inquisitors?

“It is as I thought,” Lucien said. “You, Kara, are the Scion. An heir to a forgotten past. Your presence at this temple spells the beginning of the end of Stelemia.”

Silence smothered the room. Then, after long, tense moments, Lucien let go of Kara and steepled his hands. “The ancient records on our Sacred Computer here at the temple were translated from the old and now unspoken language of our ancestors. Many records are fragmented, corrupted or missing, but each surviving file is painstakingly recited to memory, for they contain wisdoms handed down to us from a distant golden age of the past. In one of these damaged files, titled *The Prophecy of Ibilirith*, an ancient warning is written:

“*The Ancient Enemy shall return and with them the Scion who shall wear a glowing...*” That part is corrupted but the next part reads: *‘The Scion shall use it to unseal the wards and unleash that which must not...’* Again more is lost, then the file finishes with: *‘Harvesters the Scion will use to destroy...’* Words missing, *‘human life...’* more words missing, *‘forever.’*”

“So sayeth Divine Ibilirith,” the two acolytes intoned.

The sacred light over Lucien’s head seemed to grow brighter. “That prophecy was written by our most beloved Ibilirith. In her blessed words, the Scion is a harbinger of doom.” He gripped the side of Kara’s bed. “This makes you—a threat to us all.” He motioned for one of his acolytes who handed him a scroll.

Kara looked at Aemon, her hand clutching the passkey, eyes wide with terror. Aemon strained against Minard. “Let me go to her. She needs me. Please.”

“Shut up, fool,” Minard hissed into his ear. “The patriarch will make me drag you from the room if you keep making noise. Don’t make him do it.”

Aemon’s chest felt like it was being compressed under a ton of rock. The Order were going to send Kara off to the Inquisitors and it would be his fault.

He had brought her here.

Ilimdalis’s book and his subsequent exile should have been enough of a warning. The author spoke about the rigid ways of the Order, their adherence to ancient customs and of how rapidly they would condemn one for heresy. The Order were zealots, just like the Priest King, the Inquisitors, and the Covenant of the Shield that worshiped Lydan.

Yet that had not stopped Aemon bringing her here.

What a blind fool he had been. He had failed her. *I am sorry, Kara. You would have been better off if you had never met me. I should have listened to your reservations about coming here, back in the Limestone Caves.* He felt his lower lip tremble. *Please, Kara, please forgive me.*

Lucien unwound the scroll. “This letter came to me some days ago. The messenger braved the blockade of the road leading to the temple by those murderers who took our brethren from us the day you arrived. It was by Ibilirith’s divine will that he made it through alive.”

Aemon wrenched away from Minard, in a final attempt to reach Kara’s side. The monk caught him before he could make it more than a step. Lucien frowned at the interruption and curtly motioned Minard to let go.

Finally free, Aemon raced over to Kara and put his arms around her. She cried into his shoulder, her tears reigniting his rage. He would defend her from these zealots with his life if need be.

The patriarch waited a moment, then began to read. “The first part of this missive says that Deep Cave is destroyed, the Iron Tower of Jharman toppled and his holy remains desecrated. Not only that, it also states that all the sacred lights in the cavern have been extinguished and that our noble soldiers could do nothing to stop the desolation.”

He paused to let his words sink in, the sacred light over his head surrounding him in a golden nimbus. “Unfortunately, there is more.” He turned the letter over. “The town of Amana Falls and the Covetous Sisterhood at Obsidian Precipice are cut off from aid and without light. The people there cannot leave the cavern

because the enemy scours the ruins of the city of Deep Cave, preventing their retreat.”

Lucien lowered the letter and glowered at Kara, his features hardening to iron. “Our weapons have no visible effect on this enemy. They threaten us all.” He crumpled the letter in his hand. “It is my belief that it is not coincidence that you and these beasts have appeared all at once. The time of the prophecy is upon us.”

Kara pulled away from Aemon and wiped tears from her face. “Kahan, the man who is out there blockading your road, said much the same as you.”

Easing back on the bed, she closed her eyes, her face wet with fresh tears. “All I want to do is rid myself of this light-forsaken thing around my neck and forget any of this ever happened.”

Someone started yelling outside the room. Lucien turned his glare on Minard. “Go see what is happening out there, Divergent.”

Minard shook his head slightly, then started toward the door. Suddenly, he stopped and raised his staff. A moment later, the door burst in, and everyone but Minard startled in fright.

A gray-bearded man dressed in chain armor stormed in, his hard eyes quickly scanning the room. After Aemon moved to protect Kara, he studied the man. The old man wore a leather doublet with a yellow circle insignia Aemon could not place. What noble house did he belong to? Why was he here?

“What is the meaning of this?” Lucien screamed at the two monks who followed the man through the broken door. “I explicitly gave orders that this man was to be kept under guard in the guest wing.” The monks sank to their knees and lowered their heads in shame. “Why are you here?” Lucien demanded of the newcomer.

The armored man pointed at Kara. “I already told you. I’m here for her.”

Chapter 13

Kara.

Kara caught her breath. It was Wrynric. He’d survived the attack on the tavern.

When he saw her, he stopped and bowed his head. Kara threw her blankets aside and stood on unsteady legs. She held up the artifact and bathed him in its red glow. “Why did you give me this? You must have known what would happen.”

“You have every right to be angry at me, half-blood, but I didn’t know things would go the way they did. I should’ve known the Dark Brother would never stop pursuing me and that he’d go after you when I gave you the artifact, but I had no choice other than to force it upon you.”

Kara’s head spun. So he’d known Kahan would never give up chasing her and he’d still forced the passkey upon her with no warning. The room swirled and she teetered forward. Aemon caught her before she fell and gently laid her back on the bed. He remained protectively by her side and watched everyone through narrowed eyes.

Lucien ordered the two monks kneeling at the door to seize Wrynic and take him away. The monks moved to grab the old warrior.

Now that Kara was back in bed, the room stopped spinning. Was it her wound or the artifact causing her to feel so ill? Something felt different since she'd woken. Something more than the pain and weakness. Something deep inside.

Holding a hand to her forehead, Kara said, "Let him stay. He got me into this and owes me answers."

The monks hesitated and looked at the patriarch. Lucien studied Wrynic and a chill descended over the room that the stifling heat rising from below the temple couldn't warm. "Are you the one who gave Kara the Mark of the Scion?"

Wrynic's hand went to his empty scabbard and closed into a fist. Minard saw the move and stepped toward him. "Answer, fool."

Lucien bared his teeth, his fingers curling into claws. "The Inquisitors will be most interested in learning why you would do such a thing. They have the most painful ways of drawing information from heretics like you."

"I'm sure they do," Wrynic muttered under his breath, and moved his hand away from his empty scabbard.

Kara's eyes went from Lucien to Wrynic, then back again. Why were they doing this? She wanted answers, not to listen to them bicker. "Before you drag him away, I demand he tells me why he got me into this."

Beads of sweat ran down the patriarch's face and his hands shook with barely contained rage. With what appeared to be immense effort, he calmed his anger and motioned for the monks to back down. When they'd lowered their weapons, he and his two acolytes promptly sat on the stone bench along the wall and the two warrior monks positioned themselves between him and Wrynic.

Lucien made a backhanded motion with his hand. "Speak what you may, heathen. I shall be most interested in hearing your tale."

"Then ask away," Wrynic said.

Kara got in a question before anyone else could speak. *This is it, I'll finally get answers.* "Last I saw you, Kahan—the man you call Dark Brother—was close to killing you. Yet here you stand, having miraculously escaped. How do I know you weren't working together and didn't plan the attack on the tavern all along?"

The old man's face hardened. "Your father meant everything to me and part of him lives on in you. I'd never betray you, nor would I work with those who murdered him."

"How'd you survive the attack, then?"

"The town watch saved my life. They stormed the tavern and the Dark Brother Kahan fled. Had they not come when they did, I'd not be standing here now."

"And how did you know I was here?"

"Yes," Lucien hissed. "Tell us of your business with the Scion. For not only did you nearly cause the death of more of my monks at the bridge, but you have been here for a week and have refused to answer my questions." He gripped the cog at his neck so hard his hand drained of color.

"I'll start at the beginning," Wrynic replied. "I met the half-blood in the capital nearly two weeks ago. It was there I gave her the artifact. Then we were attacked and I told her to flee to Deep Cave."

"Deep Cave is gone," Aemon said.

Wrynic nodded grimly. "I know, I saw. Everyone was fleeing through Radashan Crevice, so that's where I went. On my flight through the crevice I saw several Knives of—"

"Do not mention that name here," Lucien snapped.

The old warrior cleared his throat and continued. "I saw several Knives and witnessed the aftermath of a battle at the Rift Gate. The whole area was in a shambles, with refugees from Deep Cave trampling over the bodies." Wrynic shook his head sadly. "Anyway, once in Jalarfed, I searched for the half-blood among the refugees. During this time, I heard a guard saying that the black-clad enemies that made it through the Rift Gate had been sighted on the road to the temple. I asked the guard about it, and what they planned to do, but he said they lacked the swords to reclaim the road because they were too busy keeping the refugees in order."

Wrynic shrugged. "Soon after that, I encountered the messenger who was looking for someone to help him reach this temple. So I teamed up with him."

"How did you know the Scion came here?" Lucien demanded.

"The Knives wouldn't be blocking the road to the temple for any other reason than her. They'd not risk another conflict with your order lightly."

Kara wanted to throw something at him, but nothing was in reach. "If the road is blockaded, how did you get through?" Her temples throbbed. "Why didn't they kill you like they killed Berda?"

"We were never attacked and made it to the temple unmolested. But little did we know, we had walked into a trap."

Lucien tapped his foot impatiently on the ground. "Yes, a trap that almost cost me the lives of a dozen of my monks."

"What happened?" Kara asked. His story still seemed improbable. Berda was dead because of this man.

"As the messenger and I were waiting for the bridge to lower, we watched the road behind us," Wrynic said. "Then we saw them. A whole line of knives charging at us from a fissure in the wall some distance back toward Jalarfed. By the time the bridge had lowered, they were almost on us and hurling their javelins." He inclined his head toward Lucien. "Had it not been for the Order, we'd have died out there and the knives would have stormed across the bridge."

Lucien leaned back against the wall. "Knowing the road was beset by enemies, I sent three dozen of my most hardened monks out there to see to the safety of our messenger, once he had been sighted by our lookouts. Once my monks moved onto the bridge, they spotted the enemies of Ibilirith and drove them back into the darkness where they belong." He sighed. "Sadly, we lack the warriors to retake the road and have found ourselves in an unfortunate stalemate with our enemy. But my people should fear naught, for our temple is impregnable and I have sent messages through our secret ways calling for aid. Help should arrive within a week."

The old warrior let out a weary sigh. "I'm not your enemy, half-blood, but I know I've failed you. Much like I failed your father and your sister..." A tremor ran along his sword arm and he grabbed hold of his belt to stop it. "I failed everyone."

He tried to approach her but Minard put the tip of his staff against the old warrior's throat. "Stay back."

Wrynnic's features tightened but he retreated a step, the staff still held at his throat. Grunting, the old man knocked it aside. "Get your weapon away from me before I break it over your head, boy."

Minard watched the patriarch out of the corner of his eye. Lucien gave him a slight nod. Lowering his staff, the monk backed away from Wrynnic and positioned himself between the old warrior and Kara's bed.

"So, tell us how you found the artifact and why you gave it to the Scion." Lucien gestured at a foot-tall statue of Ibilirith in the corner of the room, the light over his head growing a tad brighter. "And do not lie, for you are in the presence of our holy lady."

Wrynnic glared at the statue, then scratched at his beard. No doubt he knew his life depended on what he said next. Kara played with the bulb on the passkey. Her life may also depend on what he said. The patriarch seemed to think her some sort of monster, there to destroy Stelemia.

So far, Lucien's story of the Scion in the Prophecy seemed more insane than Wrynnic's tale he'd told her back at the tavern. What would they think when she told them of her visiondreams? What would Lucien think when she told him she must leave the temple and go in search of Annbar?

Wrynnic repeated the story he'd told her about his journey to the Dead City and the discovery of the artifact, though she noticed he left out the part about hearing the Metal Man's voice.

"We brought the artifact back to Sunholm—our home in the Nether—to allow our Librarians to study it," the old man said. "When they couldn't work out what to do with it, Arden meditated and had a visiondream of his half-blooded daughter, Kara, wielding it."

Wrynnic got a faraway look. "Soon after, we were attacked by the same people who besiege your temple. They wish to kill the half-blood like they killed Arden and her sister Liana, along with the other scions." He shifted slightly, refocusing on Lucien. "Arden ordered me to lead a small band of people to safety and then go to the capital to find Kara."

He lowered his eyes. "I should have refused and had him send someone else, so I could have stayed at Sunholm to die with him. But I made an oath to Arden, and now I must see it fulfilled."

Kara studied the sacred light on the roof. What should she think about hearing how her father and sister had died? She hadn't known either of them. If her father had really cared for her mother, why hadn't he taken her away from the tavern to live with him? Wrynnic had said Arden had visited many times over the years, so he'd had ample opportunity to do so. But then, he hadn't even introduced himself to Kara.

What sort of man would do that to his own daughter? What sort of vile man would leave her mother to die, weeping, with a broken heart?

None she'd shed a tear for. That was for sure.

I suppose, in the end, they're just names. Arden and Liana. They mean nothing to me. Kara touched the artifact. Time to move on. Time to get into the hard part of telling them my tale.

So, she ploughed straight into it. "I know what this thing is. It's a passkey and it's used to open locked doors."

Wrynnic arched his thick, gray eyebrows. “How do you know this?”

“I’ve had what I think are visiondreams. I saw a frozen world, the sky, the Sun—”

“The Lost Sun is the symbol of my order—the Covenant of the Lost Sun—and we bind ourselves to its memory.” The old man stroked his beard. “Our written tradition states that it once watched over the world of our ancestors, the place us humans were exiled from. Once the Final Battle against the Ancient Enemy is won, we can return to it.”

Yes, and back at the Golden Keg when they’d first met, he said it would be Kara who would lead a host against them. *Strange. The idea of that doesn’t seem half as funny to me now as it did when he first told me. Not after all I’ve seen and experienced. Now... I almost believe him.*

“I saw the Sun and I also saw a man who carried another passkey,” Kara said. “He swiped it through a machine and it opened a mechanical door.”

Wrynnic’s face lit up. “There were many mechanical doors at the Dead City where we found the passkey, but none would open. Perhaps this is what’s needed to get past them.” He leaned closer. “What else did you learn?”

Aemon touched her arm. “Be careful what you say,” he whispered.

Kara watched Lucien out of the corner of her eye. He didn’t look like he noticed what Aemon did, though the bright light over his head made it hard to be certain.

Her eyes watered so she turned her attention back to Wrynnic. What she planned to reveal next could end with her being sent to the Inquisitors if she didn’t tread carefully.

“A ghostly woman spoke to me in my visiondreams and told me things. She called me Imogen, Mother of Steel Children.”

She’d also accused Imogen of destroying the world and murdering her. But those things were best kept secret. Lucien already thought Kara a harbinger of doom and seemed enraged enough to order her or Wrynnic killed at any moment.

“Who is Imogen?” Wrynnic asked.

“I’m not sure. The ghost woman said her own code—whatever that is—had been corrupted, which caused her to lose much of her memory. She didn’t even remember her own name.”

Kara ran the passkey between her fingers. What should she say next? If she revealed too much, the patriarch would kill her. And if she revealed too little... he might kill her, too. “The code that allowed the ghost to speak to me was the same one that’s meant to have made Imogen take control of me. But something went wrong because I’m still Kara.”

She glanced at the letter resting on Lucien’s lap. “The ghost warned me that Imogen’s children have woken from eons of sleep and will seek to purge the world of life.”

“Fascinating,” Wrynnic said. “A mere half-blood having visiondreams speak to her. That doesn’t even happen to full-blooded scions. I’ve been told theirs were only images and feelings and the scions had no control over them.”

He gave her a thoughtful look. “The passkey didn’t light when the other scions touched it, yet it has for you. There’s something different about you and we need to find out what it is.”

Wrynic wasn't the first to say there was something different about Kara. The ghost woman had said the same thing.

"The other scions at Sunholm were mere flesh and blood, and lived and died like normal humans," the old man said. "The only things setting them apart from non-scions were their visiondreams and the knowledge of what they were."

Lucien leaned forward, gripping the cog around his neck. "Exactly how many scions were out in the Great Dark with you?"

Wrynic took a step backward, mouth snapping shut. Minard tapped the floor with the butt of his staff. "Answer."

The old warrior grimaced. "By the time Sunholm was destroyed, there were less than forty."

"Why were you living out there in the Great Dark with heretics and vile Dark Brothers?" Lucien asked, leaning back.

"Because that is where my people have always lived. We remained out there in the Nether because we knew if the fanatics of the Priest King ever found our community of scions you'd send an army out there to wipe them out." Wrynic's laugh came out as a bitter hiss. "All because of a fragmented message on an ancient computer..."

Lucien's face reddened. "Watch what you say, churl. That message is the *Prophecy of Ibilirith*, the Divine who created much of the technologies of Stelemia." He lowered his voice. "How many scions still live?"

Wrynic studied Lucien, as if pondering whether to answer the question or not. Finally, he said, "I know of ten, but there could be an eleventh. All full-bloods."

Kara put her hand over her mouth to cover her smile. What Wrynic had just said could work in her favor. She was a mere half-blood. Perhaps Lucien would see the other scions as a greater threat and go easy on her. It was a slim hope, but slim hopes were better than nothing.

Maybe that was why Wrynic shared that information. Why else would he have shared it with a man who would order the death of any scion without a moment's hesitation?

"Who are these other scions?" Lucien asked.

"Two are siblings, little more than children. A third is the half-blood's stepmother, Meridia. A fourth, who I'm not sure is still alive, is her half-sister. The rest are warriors I have fought beside for many years." Wrynic gave Kara a solemn nod. "Your half-sister, Semira, looked much like you, though she always wore a frown. I tried to find her during the attack on Sunholm, but she was nowhere to be found."

Wrynic clicked his teeth together. He appeared to want to say more but perhaps struggled to put it into words.

"Why didn't you tell me I had another sister?" Kara asked.

"I'm sorry, half-blood. I didn't see the point."

Kara dug her nails into the passkey. Why did he insist on calling her half-blood? It was worse than Lucien calling her Scion. "My name's Kara, *not* half-blood."

"The prophecy never spoke of there being multiple scions," Lucien said, ignoring Kara's protest. "This is dire news indeed."

While he conferred with his two acolytes, Kara returned the conversation back to the her visiondreams. “Aemon, have you read anything about a woman named Imogen?”

Aemon shifted his weight from foot to foot. “I do not think so, but the things we saw at Deep Cave... they could be her Steel Children.”

That’s what Kara thought too. It made sense. The prophecy, the history of the War in Heaven, and Arden’s and her own visiondreams all mentioned an ancient enemy.

But what if the ghost woman was right? That they’d woken because of the passkey, or beacon as she’d called it? A chill passed through Kara’s body. Lucien would order his monks to kill her or she would die screaming at the hands of the Inquisitors.

With a final bitter glance at Wrynric, Lucien turned his attention to Kara. “Deep Cave is not the only place those creatures have been sighted.” He uncrumpled the letter. “The rest of this missive speaks of a group of metal beasts being sighted near Ebon Shelf. The creatures did not approach the settlements there, but watched them from beyond the glow of the sacred lights and retreated into the darkness when anyone approached.”

He unceremoniously shoved the letter at the acolyte next to him. “The soldiers at Deep Cave could do nothing to stop the destruction of the city. Their weapons were mere pebbles against the armor of the enemy. Had the creatures attacked the settlements...”

Kara had witnessed what the enemy was capable of with her own eyes. Like Aemon had said, their technology far surpassed that of Stelemia. How could they be defeated?

Lucien kissed the cog, then gently lowered it. “Voyna Sveta i Teni.”

“The War of Light and Darkness,” Wrynric said. “Also known as *Voyna na Nebesakh*, which in Stelemian means the War in Heaven.”

The patriarch raised his eyebrows. “You know the old language of Ibilirith?”

Wrynric shrugged. “There were many old languages, most forgotten. I know bits and pieces of some, mostly picked up from my late friends at the repository in Sunholm.” He got a faraway look again. “Would that the Repository had survived, for it contained much knowledge preserved from the old world.”

His eyes refocused. “As to the enemies at Deep Cave. Not only do I think they’re the ones mentioned in your scriptures as having been fought during the War in Heaven, I also believe they’re the enemy from Arden’s visiondream. He told me the half-blood would lead a great host against them in the Final Battle to end our exile here in Stelemia.”

Kara pushed herself up. “Why me, though? I’m a courtesan—not a warrior or military commander.”

Minard’s mouth dropped open and Lucien uttered a prayer, his acolytes so shocked they didn’t record her words. The two monks guarding Lucien glanced at one another, one gulping loudly.

Kara let out an exasperated sigh. “Yes, this harbinger of doom sold her body for men’s pleasure. Think of me however you will, but I make no apology for what I did to put food in my belly and have a roof over my head.”

Wrynric awkwardly cleared his throat. "You're still a scion, Kara, even if only half-blooded. One of the reasons the Covenant of the Lost Sun was founded was to preserve the lineage of the scions. The first verse of our ancient, sacred oath goes: *We who are chosen to carry the lineage of the scions through the ages of the future untold must keep the bloodline pure, protect those who are of the blood and preserve the knowledge handed down to us from our ancestors.*"

"For what purpose?" Lucien asked. "The last thing Stelemia needs is for a clan of scions to destroy it."

"The second verse of our oath tells us why. It goes: *For one day, all three will be needed for the time of darkness, when the Final Battle to end humanity's exile will be fought. When humankind is victorious, we will emerge from the darkness and into the blessed light of the Lost Sun.*"

A flicker of pain crossed his face. "Sadly, some of us failed to uphold parts of our vows."

What had he meant by that? Was he talking about himself? Or about Arden fathering Kara on a woman who was not his wife? Or had he been speaking of someone else entirely?

"We were wrong in our belief there'd be only one scion, which could mean we are wrong in other beliefs too," Minard said, staring at Lucien who returned the monk's stare with a deep frown. Kara could pick up much tension between the two men.

But what was it about?

"To the darkness with you Reformers, and with the *loathsome* scions you seek to protect," Lucien snarled, the sacred light over his head almost blinding.

Minard covered his eyes against the glare. "If he were present, Inquisitor Mariot would say we should learn more of what we face before we decide to act."

"Then spit on him, and spit on this scion." Lucien's light flared about as he sat forward and stabbed a finger at Minard. "A *true* leader acts with courage, conviction and assuredness. Ibilirith chose *me* to lead her people, not Mariot." He lowered his arm. "It will be I that decides her fate, and the fate of the rest of these scions."

"You Stelemians should be thankful for all the scions have done for you," Wrynric said, deep lines forming on his weathered face.

"Did for us?" Lucien chuckled acidly, his gaze switching from Minard to the old man.

Wrynric held his head high, squinting against Lucien's light. "The scions of the covenant have done nothing but protect the Stelemian people from the creatures out there in the Nether born of old-world genetics. Without the scions, Stelemia's boundaries would've been forever ravaged by these monsters."

The old man glanced at each of the brethren of Ibilirith in turn. "Now that my people have been slaughtered, who will stop these ancient terrors from preying on the people you send down the Path of Exile or from attacking your settlements near the entrances to the Nether?"

"Only heretics are forced down the Path of Exile." Lucien's lip curled. "Their lives mean nothing."

“What of the innocents who live in the outlying settlements that will now become plagued by these monsters?” Wrynric narrowed his eyes. “Surely, their lives matter.”

Lucien crossed his arms and said nothing.

Minard drummed his fingers on his staff. “Seems like we’ve more than just scions to worry about then, eh?”

Finally, someone in the Order is getting it, Kara thought. I’m not the great threat the patriarch thinks I am. There are more important things to be worrying about than little old me.

“Genetics,” Lucien intoned. “Our records on the Sacred Computer say our ancestors held great power rivaling that of the One God who ruled before the divines. In their arrogance, our ancestors tried to shape their world in their own image.”

Wrynric scoffed, “Their image must have been horrid, for these are twisted, nightmarish beasts.”

“I read a book claiming every living thing in the caverns was altered by genetics,” Aemon said.

Lucien nodded sagely. “Everything from the humble mushroom to the oxen hauling our wagons to the fruits growing in the Priest King’s gardens was genetically altered by our ancestors.” He fiddled with the cog hanging from his neck. “Our records also say humans were altered. Like their world, the ancients wanted to shape us until we reached heights of perfection even the One God could not achieve.”

“So, they were crazy like some of you Stelemians,” Wrynric said. “Not only are humans far from perfect, but because of the hubris of our ancestors, the One God exiled us from the light of the Lost Sun and then left us to languish long years in the dark.”

Kara grimaced. *Does Wrynric want to get out of here alive? If he does, he needs to learn to shut his mouth before it gets us both purged!*

“Mind your tongue, Old Man.” Minard flexed his considerable arm muscles. “You’re in the presence of the esteemed patriarch, second only to the Priest King, under the sacred lights of Ibilirith.”

Kara’s whole body ached and she felt more tired than ever before. *Why do I have to lay here and listen to a bunch of stupid men bicker at one another about some nonsense a drunk probably made up a thousand years ago?*

She swore under her breath. *Men.*

The only thing that mattered to her was getting out of the temple alive so she could go in search of Annbar. Assuming the patriarch would let her leave, of course. Normally, she respected people of faith, but Lucien... made her courtesan sense tingle. There was something off about him.

Maybe it was the power he held over her or maybe it was something more. The way he squeezed the cog, the way he sounded so vicious when he spoke, the way he held himself so rigidly, making it seem like he was poised to leap up from his seat and attack someone—it all suggested deep-seated anger simmering away inside him. She’d wager it wasn’t fresh anger either, but one that had been building over time and had reached near breaking point.

This was the sort of man she'd avoided at the tavern, the sort of man Mensig, the doorman, would've tossed back out onto the street.

Kara threw one of her pillows across the room. "Stop bickering a moment and listen! The ghost woman in my dream told me of an ancient city named Annbar and of a great library within it that contains much of the knowledge of the old world. I must find it and learn what I can of the passkey."

Holding herself up on her elbow, she reached for Wrynric. "You must take me to the Dead City where you found the passkey. I believe it to be Annbar."

A startled hush fell over the room.

Lucien's gaze made Kara shudder inside. He ran the tip of his tongue over his thin lips, then said, "You will not leave this temple. You are our *guest* here until Inquisitor General Malaris arrives. Once the road is clear of the blockade, I will send a messenger to General Malaris to make haste to the temple."

Kara's guts twisted into knots as she recalled the cold visage of the Inquisitor General. Aemon held his breath while Wrynric inched closer to Kara. Minard and one of the monks guarding Lucien shared a look. Something in it suggested they were not happy with what the patriarch had just said.

Did they have a different opinion?

"But I've done nothing wrong," Kara sobbed. "I'm not a harbinger of doom. I'm a simple courtesan thrown into something I know nothing about."

"I care not what you think you are, Scion." Lucien dismissed her with a wave. "I will send for Inquisitor General Mal—"

"No," Wrynric growled. "You will not hand her over to that white-cloaked fanatic. The warnings of the half-blood and the visions of her father must *not* be ignored. These metal beasts that destroyed Deep Cave won't stop until we're all dead." He pointed at Kara. "She is important. Arden saw that she must go to the Dead City and speak to the voice we heard there so she can bring back an army to fight the enemy."

"Voice?" Aemon asked, but was ignored.

"Utter madness," Lucien spat. "You deserve to be thrown down the Well of Remorse with the other crazed heathens."

Minard spoke to Wrynric in a voice filled with disbelief. "What do you mean this scion is important? She's no fighter. How do you expect her to lead an army? If hardened commanders and thick walls like those at Deep Cave could not stand against the enemy, what chance has she?"

Wrynric scowled at the monk. "Arden's visions always come to pass. This must happen, for it's the only way to end our exile and return us to the Lost Sun."

Lucien slammed his fist down on the leg of the acolyte sitting next to him. The acolyte's quill and parchments spilled to the floor as he cried out in pain. "Your Lost Sun is a heretical fantasy," Lucien raged. "When Inquisitor General Malaris arrives, both you and the Scion will be put to the question. For the good of us all."

For the good of us all. Spoken just like Kahan.

"The Lost Sun is real," Wrynric insisted, shielding his eyes from the light over the patriarch's head. "The half-blood has seen it."

As Lucien rose from his chair, he pointed an accusing finger at the old man. "You speak to me as if you are my equal, when you are but dirt beneath my heel. You come from the vile darkness beyond the sacred lights. For that sin alone—you

should be drowned in the icy waters of Crystal Lake by the righteous hands of an Inquisitor.”

His accusing finger went to Kara. “You and this *wretched* Scion will be handed over and questioned, and then, Ibilirith willing, you will both be purged.”

Aemon, all but forgotten, slammed his open hand onto the bed. “No. I will not let you give her to the Inquisitors.”

His teeth were bared as he glared at Lucien and Minard. A long and perilous silence descended over the room. Kara held her breath. Her life was on the line and she was too weak to run or fight.

A deep ache formed in her throat. The thought of losing Aemon like she had lost so many others wasn’t something she could allow. She touched his arm, but he pulled away and would not look at her. “Please, Aemon. Don’t throw your life away for me. I couldn’t bear it.”

Wrynic tried to move next to her but Minard held him back with his staff. The two other monks rushed forward to flank the old warrior. Wrynic looked formidable in his chain armor but without his sword he’d stand little chance against three armed opponents.

“You’re making a big mistake, holy man,” Wrynic said. “Your prophecy is wrong or you are misreading it. The half-blood will save us.”

Kara glanced at Minard to see his reaction. Was there something in the tension between him and the patriarch? He hadn’t been happy when Lucien said he would hand Kara to the Inquisitor General.

The monk gripped his staff and watched Wrynic with an eager grin. Her heart sank. He was waiting to be given the order to attack.

He wanted to fight, not help her.

Kara climbed to her feet and steadied herself by holding the side of the bed. “Stand down, all of you.”

They turned expectantly toward her. Her guts continued to feel like they were twisting into knots. Now she had to find a way to convince Lucien to let her go. “I’m not a threat to anyone right now. I’m weak and tired and want nothing more than to go back to sleep.” She swayed slightly as her legs weakened. “When I’m up to it, let me go with Wrynic into the Great Dark to find the Dead City and search it for the library.”

She inclined her head toward Minard. “Send the monk with us, so he can kill me if I turn into the threat spoken of in your prophecy. After all, he’s a strong warrior, while I’m a sick and feeble woman.”

“Kara, no,” Aemon cried.

“I *will not* let you come to harm,” Wrynic said.

She motioned for them to be silent and stared at Minard. “What say you, monk? Will you stand with me until the day I prove myself a threat and you need to kill me?”

Minard’s eyes flicked from Lucien, then back to Kara. “Scion, do you mean what you say? You would have me go with you even though I may need to take your life?”

“I mean it. The temple cannot help me and the Inquisitors will not help either.” She held up the passkey so they could all see its red glow. “Perhaps I’ll discover a

way to free myself of this curse and learn of something we can use to fight the enemy.”

Not that she could read, but if Lucien knew that, he'd never let her leave.

“The Scion is right, Holy One,” Minard said. “You should let her go in search of this city. If she isn't the threat many in our order think she is, she might be innocent or be our only hope. Besides, we could learn from this library too.”

Kara's heart lurched. That had been unexpected.

Lucien's eyes blazed. “You only say that because of Inquisitor Mariot's ridiculous, heretical notion that our belief in the old ways is wrong. All he does is sit around in our holy obelisk and make mockery of Holy Ibilirith's words.” The patriarch moaned, “Even her prophecy does not escape his scorn.”

Minard's reply came in a carefully measured tone. “Your holiness, I have no desire to argue semantics with you. Indeed, I am naught but a humble servant of Ibilirith, while you are held by her in high esteem. I only ask that you think this through.” His Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he swallowed. “If the Scion ends up being a threat to us, I will kill her without a moment's hesitation. But if she ends up being our savior, I will—”

“To the Immortal Fire with you and the rest of you *disgusting* Reformers! Inquisitor Mariot is wrong. The Scion will kill us all.”

“You don't—” Minard stopped and took in a deep breath. “We don't know that for sure. Inquisitor Mariot isn't here to make his case, but I can.” Minard took a step toward Lucien. “The Scion and the ancient enemy are linked in the prophecy, but that is not the only file the Scion is mentioned in, and some of the references to her might suggest she is nothing more than a harbinger of change, neither good nor bad.”

“Only a fool like Mariot would believe that,” Lucien spat. “I, too, have read those files. They are more broken and indecipherable than the prophecy.”

“Perhaps the passkey will unseal the wards—whatever they are—and give us a weapon to fight the enemy,” Minard said. “From what the missive said, ours are of little use against them.”

“But what if she unleashes something worse?” Lucien wailed. Minard's words were clearly wearing him down. “A plague, these harvesters the prophecy mentions or something more destructive.” Lucien shook his head. “The risk is too great.”

“The risk of purging her is great too. What if we kill the only weapon we have against them? What if one of the other scions appears and they find out we killed their kin? Who knows what they might do. Indeed, what if this woman is not the Scion of the Prophecy—and one of them is?”

That made Wrynic move a hand to his empty scabbard only to move it away again, as if having been reminded he carried no weapon.

Lucien screamed at the top of his lungs, “I should have cast the lot of you into the fire when I had the chance. You Reformers are insidious, the way you undermine the holy words of Ibilirith and ingratiate yourselves in the ranks of her order.” He took in ragged breaths. “I bet Hammer Targis was the one who posted you to guard the Scion just so you could—”

Minard bowed. “Your Eminence, I apologize for interrupting you, but I wish to make a compromise.”

The patriarch's words caught in his throat. “Com—compromise?”

“As a loyal servant of Lady Ibilirith, I most humbly accept the Scion’s offer of journeying with her into the Great Dark to ensure she remains on the right path. If she diverges from it...” He straightened. “I will *purge* her myself.” He stood. “Then I will return to help you mend the festering rift in our order.”

“How?” Lucien seemed suddenly interested.

“I will convince Inquisitor Mariot that only by following the old ways can we overcome the slow decline of our order.” Minard gave the patriarch a lopsided grin. “Besides, if he is proven wrong on both the Scion and the prophecy—he’ll be left with little credibility while you will have been proven right. The Order will quickly unite behind you once more.”

For a long time, Lucien studied Minard through narrowed eyes, his only movement a muscle twitch on his left temple. His acolytes squirmed on the bench beside him, hovering their ink-drenched quills an inch over their parchments in anticipation of his decision.

Aemon chewed his thumbnail and Wrynrlic opened and closed his sword hand rhythmically. Kara began to feel dizzy again but refused to lie down until she had her answer.

Finally, Lucien muttered something under his breath that might have been a prayer or a curse. “You shall have your wish.” He turned to Kara. “Go to the Great Dark and seek this city and find us the help we need. I pray this generous gesture of mine will *expunge* those in my order that go against the old ways and speak out against the *sacred* teachings of Holy Ibilirith.”

The acolytes let out startled gasps and even Wrynrlic seemed taken aback. Kara staggered against the bed and climbed back in as a wave of dizziness overcame her. She closed her eyes and waited for it to pass.

When she opened them again, she found everyone but Aemon gone. “You fell asleep,” he said, grinning.

She rubbed her eyes, their lids heavy with fatigue. “Why are you so happy?”

“Because Wrynrlic and Lucien have allowed me to go with you into the Great Dark.”

Her mouth flew open. “Aemon, you can’t come with me, it’ll be dangerous. You need to stay here where you’ll be safe.” It hurt her to say that. Leaving him was the last thing she wanted to do; he was the only person she truly trusted and he had stood by her through everything.

He shook his head. “I expected you would say that so I asked them while you slept. Soon, we will begin weapons training in preparation for the journey.”

“No, Aemon, you can’t come. Your life is already ruined because of me. You’ve already lost your best friend and—”

He put a finger to her lips. “I am going, and that is all there is to it.”

By the determined look on his face, there would be no changing his mind.

She took him by the arm and pulled his face to hers. “Then, if you insist on coming with us, you need to promise me. If I become the Scion in the prophecy, you must kill me. Do you understand?”

He swallowed, and wouldn’t look her in the eye. She shook him. “Aemon. Promise me you’ll do it.”

When he didn’t answer, Kara shoved him away. “You can’t come. Not if you don’t make the promise.”

“Kara, please.”

“No, too much is at stake. I don’t want to die, but I don’t want to fulfill the prophecy either. My life is nothing compared to Stelemia.” He began gnawing on his nails. She let her voice become icy. “Promise me, Aemon, or stay here and leave me to my fate.”

With a great sob, he said, “I promise. I promise I will... Kill you if you prove yourself to be the Scion in the prophecy.”

Kara lay back and closed her eyes. “Thank you, Aemon.”

Chapter 14

Aemon.

Aemon neglected his weapons training with Minard to spend as much of the next four days with Kara as he could. Having been allowed to return to sleeping in her room, he kept her company as she rested and let her lean on him when she left the room to exercise. While unsteady the first few days, she quickly regained her balance and her endurance steadily increased. On day two since waking, she had walked no more than a hundred feet; day three, two hundred feet; day four, five hundred.

“Soon, I’ll be running the Eryport to Gravelbank marathon,” she giggled through clenched teeth.

He waited beside her as she leaned against the wall, clutching her wound and fighting to catch her breath. “I am glad you can find humor in this.” He gnawed at a nail. “I was so worried about you that I never left your side until they dragged me away.”

She touched his cheek. “Thank you for everything, Aemon. Without you, I don’t think I would have survived. Your friendship means a lot to me.”

Friendship? *I love you, Kara. I want to tell you, but I am too afraid. I want to be more than friends. I want us to be together forever!*

She tottered about and he grabbed her before she fell. “I guess I overdid it today,” she said, clutching on to him. “Time to head back.”

Kara’s speed of recovery never ceased to amaze him. He admired her bravery and strength as she battled through the pain, and wondered how she kept her spirits up when so many in the temple looked upon her with fear and loathing.

During the long nights of Kara's recovery, listening to her softly snore in her bed, he indulged in his feelings of love for her. Even with white hair and gray eyes, he felt Kara was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He wanted to hold her and never let her go. Run his fingers through her hair and have her wrap her arms around him and kiss him on the lips.

But not all the days were bliss, for to Aemon’s unending irritation, Minard continued to be stationed at the door to the infirmary and would frequently burst in to check on them. The monk often attempted to goad Aemon to anger by insulting him and making fun of the way he spoke. *As if speaking properly, without lazy contractions and foul words, is a bad thing!*

Aemon refused to lash out at Minard and instead dug what little of his nails he had left into the palm of his hand. His dislike of the monk was better kept to himself. Kara had enough to deal with already, without him adding to her stress.

But Aemon did get to see Minard taken down a peg, the memory of which still made him smile.

A few days after Kara had woken, Minard had begun flirting with her and she had told him to go eat a dung pie. Oh, the look of indignation on the monk's face... *I would pay a fortune to see that expression again.*

But Minard soon came back, and it wore Aemon out keeping his mouth shut when the monk began goading him and flirting with Kara again. Worse than any of Minard's insults were the jokes he would tell Kara, especially the one about the three pompous dandies entering a tavern that made her laugh until she cried.

"You're really not what I expected of a holy man," Kara giggled as she clutched her chest. "But please stop with the jokes, you're making my wound hurt."

Minard gave her a pretentious bow. "I shall do as my lady commands."

When the monk had left, Aemon remained in a sullen silence for a long time. Eventually, Kara asked him what was wrong. "Nothing," he said, rather more grumpy than he had wanted.

She lay back on her bed and closed her eyes. "You don't have to worry, Aemon."

He stopped digging his nails into his palm. "Worry about what?"

His only answer was her soft snore.

Striding over to the locked window, Aemon stared out through the metal shutter, his rage roiling like the lava far below. Never in his life had Aemon met such a vile, no-good scoundrel of a man as Minard. As insufferable as the inescapable heat could be, the monk was far, far worse.

Aemon tried not to be jealous. But Kara was the first woman he had ever loved and to have some capricious knave like Minard come along and ruin it for him was too much.

The fear of losing Kara made it impossible for Aemon to sit still. He paced back and forth, biting his nails or grinding his teeth; getting by on little sleep.

Truth be told, he had not had a good night's rest since arriving at the temple.

Six days after Kara woke, Aemon managed to stop pacing and sit beside her as she slept. It had been over a day since Minard had last visited, and Aemon took comfort in being alone with Kara and helping her where he could. In sleep, she looked at peace, the stress and fear of her ordeal forgotten as she ventured into the world of dreams.

To calm his thoughts further, he started thinking of a bright future where he and Kara were husband and wife. A future where he could hold her in his arms and buy her golden jewelry and expensive clothes and tell her how much he loved her. A future where he kept her safe, and made sure nothing bad ever happened to her again.

I love you, Kara. I love you so much it makes my heart melt with joy every time I see your face. Nothing will stop me from seeing you through this ordeal. And when it is finally over, I will get down on my knee and ask for your hand in marriage. That way we can be together always.

AT EIGHTH HOUR ON THE ninth day since Kara's waking, Aemon took her to the healer's herb garden. The plants grew under powerful sacred lights that radiated heat and increased the already stifling humidity. Though hot, the garden was quiet and still part of the infirmary, meaning she did not have to stray far from her room. In short, the garden was the perfect place for them to meet Wrynric.

Aemon and Kara took a seat at a table covered in pots filled with seedlings and waited for the old warrior to arrive. They did not have to wait long for him to appear. "Nice to see you up, half-blood," Wrynric said to Kara and gave Aemon a nod in way of greeting.

Kara touched the passkey absently. "You haven't come to visit me since the day you burst back into my life."

"I'm sorry. The patriarch has made sure he's kept me as far from you as he can by busying me with incessant questions about the repository at Sunholm and of what I know of scions."

"You said there are ten or eleven scions still alive," Kara said. "Why did you tell him that? What if he orders them hunted down and killed?"

Wrynric snorted. "Little chance he'll ever find Meridia. But if he did..." He grinned wickedly. "She'd use his bones for a toothpick. As to the rest, three are children and then there is Semira." He paused to lick his lips, his jaw tightening. "Even I couldn't find her."

"And the rest?"

"I overstated how many scions still live. There are only three confirmed alive."

"So why bother telling him then?" Aemon asked.

"I thought it might increase the half-blood's chances of getting out of here alive. If Lucien knew there were other scions out there, he'd know that the *threat* wouldn't die with her. It was a slim hope, but in the end it mattered not what I told him."

Aemon supposed they were lucky there was an internal division within the Order. It still surprised him the Order had managed to keep it hidden. It might have been possible Rubin had kept the reports from him, but what motive would there have been for doing so?

"I've been thinking," Kara said. "You said Semira is my half sister. Do you think she is still alive?"

Wrynric seemed taken aback by the sudden change of topic. His mouth snapped shut and he turned his back to them and knelt down. Removing a mailed glove, he ran his fingers over a row of herbs sprouting out of the moist dirt. "A few years back, I traded siruswort to a merchant at Celestial Rest. When the leaves are ground up and mixed with a mold that grows on stale mushroom bread, it helps prevent wounds from becoming infected."

Kara frowned. "Why are you avoiding my question?"

He lifted his face from the herbs but did not turn around. "Yes, she could still be alive. I didn't see her during the fighting at Sunholm." His voice had an edge to it now. "Before I fled, I searched for her in her family home but she wasn't there. I took her mother, Meridia, and fled with her and a handful of others through the secret tunnels and escaped the slaughter." He pulled his glove back on, then stood, still refusing to look at them.

Aemon touched Kara on the arm and mouthed the word “stop.” The old warrior clearly did not want to talk about Semira, and Aemon found the old man more than a little intimidating. He had the hardened look of a veteran warrior about him, a man that had seen more than his fair share of blood, with the scars to prove it.

It would be wise not to push him.

Kara ignored the warning. “I want to find her. I’ve never had a family other than my late mother. I was close to Berda and the other courtesans, but to have a sister...” She stared at a row of shrubs with blue berries growing on them. “It’s lonely having no family anymore.”

Tears wended their way down Kara’s cheeks. Aemon reached out to comfort her and she nestled against him, her hand still on the passkey.

She sucked in a deep breath. “If I don’t end up being who you think I am, perhaps Semira might.”

Wrynic spun to face her. “Why do you say that?”

Kara shifted backward as the old man glared at her. “Well, she grew up with the other scions and would know what is expected of one. Me, on the other hand... You know what I’m good at; you saw me at work.” Kara sniffed. “I know nothing about fighting, battles, ancient, abandoned cities or divine prophecies. I can’t even read or write.”

As she spoke her body deflated. Aemon’s heart ached to make things better for her. If he could take her burdens upon himself, he would do so in a heartbeat. She had the weight of Stelemia on her shoulders and there was little he could do to change it.

Though he knew his words would bring her little comfort, he said, “You are strong, Kara, and you have me here to protect you.”

She smiled at him through her tears. “Thank you, Aemon. It’s just hard being at the center of something so vast and so beyond comprehension that it makes you feel smaller than a flea. I feel like I’m being swept away—like back at that river with Veladan—but this time I won’t be able to swim ashore and will drown.” She closed her eyes. “It might be better if Semira were here. She’d—”

“Shut your mouth, girl,” Wrynic snapped. “I don’t want to hear you speak that name again.”

Aemon bit a sliver of nail while Kara stiffened. Wrynic glared at her, his whole body tense. Slowly, the fire in his eyes dimmed and a sad, weary grimace took its place. “I’m sorry, girl. I lost many loved ones at Sunholm. I hope Semira lives, I really do, but she cannot help us.”

The old man shuffled forward a step. “The great heroes of the past often felt uncertain and struggled against their destinies. But like them, you’ll find it in yourself to fight on until your journey is at an end.”

Kara did not look convinced but slowly nodded her head.

Aemon cleared his throat. “The other day, you said something to the patriarch about hearing a voice in the Dead City. Who did it belong to?”

Kara answered for the old warrior, “He thinks he heard the voice of the Metal Man from the old tale. He wants me to go there so I can talk to him.”

The Metal Man... a character in a tale told to children about love being able to change the nature of a man. The story was clearly fictitious. No one could turn themselves to metal, let alone live for centuries.

But perhaps Aemon needed to reassess this assessment of the tale. After all, the enemy at Deep Cave appeared to be made of metal. If they were real, and Kara truly was the Scion, then what was stopping the Metal Man from being real?

Wrynric nodded. "Kara's father, Arden, saw her go to a door within the Dead City and speak to the Metal Man. She enlisted his help for the coming war against the ancient enemy."

Grimacing, Kara said, "Which is unfortunately the exact opposite of what Lucien and Kahan believe." She gently took Aemon's hand in hers. It pleased him that his touch could bring her comfort. "I know so little about the people who want me dead," she lamented bitterly. "Who are the Knives of Dwaycar? Who is Kahan?"

"Don't let the fanatics hear you say Dwaycar's name within their halls," Wrynric cautioned. "We're treading on slippery stone as is."

"So who are they?" Aemon asked. He had read about them once but could remember little.

"According to our historians at Sunholm, they are an offshoot of those who worshiped Ibilirith's twin, the Divine Dwaycar. His followers have been around as long as those of his sister and for many years they lived openly in Stelemia in areas not lit by the sacred lights."

The old man's eyes followed the row of electrical wires running along the roof. "Their holy women, who call themselves the Luddite Council, long preached against the use of the ancient mechanical technologies of Ibilirith. Things like the sacred lights, computers and any other devices that survive from the time of our distant forbears that Stelemian civilization depends upon."

Wrynric scanned the room, making sure they were still alone. Satisfied no one was about, he continued. "That dependency on the old technologies, especially the sacred lights, is why speaking ill of them within Stelemia is considered an act of heresy. Humans, after all, are not apt at living in total darkness, and the glowing bacteria lacks the nourishing properties of Ibilirith's lights and only lives in certain areas. This means Dwaycar's followers, with their—some would say counterproductive—views, have always been few but fanatical."

"So why do they care so much about Ibilirith's prophecy if she is Dwaycar's enemy?" Aemon asked. "Kahan mentioned the same prophecy as Lucien. It's the whole reason he is after Kara."

"They are after the passkey and I don't know why. Dwaycar and his followers have always hated Ibilirith, so why they'd believe fragments of a prophecy she supposedly wrote is beyond me."

"Because Dwaycar wrote those words, not her," Kara said.

Aemon caught his breath. "How do you know that?"

Kara put a hand to her forehead and grimaced.

"What is it?" he asked, heart skipping.

"I'm dizzy all of a sudden. I think I need to go back to bed."

Wrynric took her from Aemon and carried her back to her room. When they arrived, they found Minard and two of his fellow monks waiting for them.

“Who let you in? You were told to keep away from the Scion,” Minard said to the old warrior.

“Your friend there did,” Wrynric replied, inclining his head at the monk beside Minard.

The monk muttered an apology but Minard ignored him. “Why are you here?”

“I came to check on her and found she’d gone for a walk,” Wrynric said. “I meant no harm.”

Aemon took Kara from the old warrior and carried her toward the bed. He was surprised at how easily he held her. She had lost a lot of weight since the last time he had carried her into the temple.

Minard moved to block his path. Stopping, Aemon glared at the dark-skinned monk, who stood over a foot taller than him. They stared unblinkingly at one another. No way would Aemon back down. Whichever one of them looked away first would lose face in the other’s eyes.

Kara squirmed in his arms. *Just hold on a moment longer. I do not want to move until Minard looks away. I cannot let him think I am weak.*

She let out a low moan, “Please, Aemon, put me down, I feel sick.”

“Get out of my way so I can lay her on the bed,” Aemon snapped.

Slowly, Minard moved aside and watched Aemon put her to bed. When Kara had settled, the monks escorted Wrynric from the room. After they had gone, another monk arrived to guard the door to Kara's room.

Aemon went and sat on the bench along the wall and tried to bite his nails but found them all chewed down to the quick. Sighing deeply, he began to repeatedly thump the back of his head against the wall until it gave him a headache.

By the divines, he hated Minard.

TWO DAYS LATER, AEMON and Kara began martial training under the watchful eye of Aemon’s nemesis. Minard had Aemon running around a large stone hall and lifting gravel-filled sacks while Kara did easy stretches to build her strength.

The monk seemed to take perverse satisfaction in making Aemon suffer. By the end of the first day, Aemon was so exhausted he collapsed onto his bed and fell asleep in seconds.

When he woke, he was sore and stiff and Minard had to all but drag him to the training room. The following day was worse and the day after that, he begged Minard to kill him and be done with it.

The monk laughed in his face. “Stay in bed and be a weakling. In the days to come, the Scion will need strong men like me beside her. Weak boys who refuse to train have no place at her side.”

Then he tried to tuck Aemon back into bed like a child. “Stop that.” Aemon shoved away the monk's hands. “I will get up.”

“I can call for your mother to come collect you. We both know you’re going to wet yourself at the first sign of danger.”

Aemon flew out of bed and shoved his clothes on while giving Minard an indignant scowl. When dressed, he stormed to the training room.

On the way there, Aemon vowed he would not give the other man the opportunity to call him a weakling again. The Monk was right; Kara needed strong

men around her, not coin counters and quill pushes who could not hold their own in a fight. He would build his strength and learn to wield a weapon so he could stand by Kara's side and guard her with his life.

Now was his chance to become what he always dreamed of being.

A heroic warrior, like the ones of old.

THAT NIGHT, AEMON GRABBED his bag of books that he had carried all the way from the capital and took them to the bridge, where Meglen had died. Thankfully, the bridge remained retracted and no one seemed to be about. Beyond the flickering glow of magma, the precipice on the far side of the chasm was eerily dark. Kahan had extinguished the sacred lights running along the road.

Were the Knives of Dwaycar watching him from the cloak of darkness? Why had no help arrived? Lucien had sent a messenger through a secret exit to request aid, and yet no soldiers had arrived to clear out the knives blockading the road. As far as Aemon knew, there had been no word from the outside world since Wrynric and the messenger arrived well over a week ago.

Hopefully, it was only due to the refugees from Deep Cave keeping the army occupied with the logistical nightmare of feeding, housing and keeping order that so many people brought on. He did not want to think about the other possibilities. The messenger could have died and never got his message out, or another city—perhaps even the capital—had come under attack by the mysterious enemy.

Aemon stopped beside the edge of the chasm, one eye ever watching the precipice across from him. *Time to get this over with.*

Sweat poured down his face as, one by one, he began throwing his books into the roiling lava. Once, they had been his most prized possessions, each lovingly cared for and bearing his name in the cover. Now they meant nothing to him. No longer would he read of the heroes of old. He had learned all the lessons from them he could. Now he would strive to emulate them. To help Kara, to help humankind. To help himself.

One by one, he condemned each book to their fiery end and felt lighter for it.

Stories of flawed heroes, merciless villains, strange anomalies, fierce love, unscrupulous nobles and bitter wars. The history of Stelemia, all consumed by flame in an instant. There was something poetic in that—or perhaps a foreshadowing of what was to come.

When the last book had burned away, Aemon took a moment to reflect upon his past life. Morgon, Rubin, his uncaring mother and apathetic father who had given him over to the care of the bank. Their faces came and went, one by one, and he imagined tossing them into the fire with his books. When they were all seared away, his old life consigned to the purifying flames, he felt renewed. No longer would he carry books and quills—but swords and shields.

He caught sight of movement over on the precipice. Black on black.

One of the knives emerged from the darkness and stood watching him. It was not Kahan, as long hair spilled down the knife's shoulders.

Herald. It had to be.

Aemon clenched his fist, feeling no fear, only anger. This was the knife that had almost taken Kara's life. The two stared at one another, neither moving, too far

apart for her javelins to reach him. All they could do was watch each other, each knowing that either one would want nothing more than to slay the other.

Once I learn to fight and conquer my fear, like Rexus of Acid Lake, I hope to meet you face to face in battle, Aemon raged to Herald in his mind. *You deserve to die for what you did to Kara, and to those back in the Limestone Caves. The blood of Morgon and the caravaners is on your hands.*

Eventually, he turned and made his way back to the temple, never looking back to see if Herald still watched him. Aemon burned her image in his mind. He vowed to bring that image to mind every time he thought of giving up, for it would spur him to greater feats of endurance.

When he met Herald in battle, he must be at his best so he could avenge the dead.



THEIR DAYS WERE LONG and hard as they lifted weights and ran around the training room. Kara tired easily at first. Her wound still pained her, but day by day she built her strength.

Two weeks after Kara had woken, Wrynric and Minard watched as Aemon practiced fighting with an assortment of weapons to find one he liked. After an hour of trying everything from a staff to dual-wielding daggers, Wrynric stopped him. “How many more weapons do you need to try? Just pick one, so you can start perfecting it.”

“I am not sure what one I like.” Aemon frowned. “Most of them feel too heavy, ill balanced or cumbersome. How am I meant to fight when I can barely hold them up?”

Wrynric chuckled, “Get stronger. It’s as simple as that.”

“I am trying. It takes time.” *Too much time. Kara needs me strong.*

The old warrior picked up an iron mace and held the handle out to Aemon. “Use this. Maces are easier to learn than swords. All you do is smash your enemy to mush and be done with it. Once you’re strong enough to use it one-handed, you can try using a shield or, if you’re really skilled, an off-handed weapon.”

Aemon took the mace and hefted it. Not bad. When he swung it one-handed, it made him stagger sideways. Planting his feet, he tried two handed and managed to get a decent swing while keeping his balance. “This will do. Simple is good.”

“Fine choice, little *lord*.” Minard said. “Now go beat that practice bag to a bloody pulp.”

Aemon cursed the monk under his breath, then set to work on the bag. For the last few days, the monk had started to show Aemon a modicum of respect. At times, he still mocked Aemon, but rarely did he go out of his way to embarrass him.

The practice bag tore open under the barrage of Aemon’s blows, sending pulverized stones spilling over the floor. He went to the next bag and lay into it.

“Good, keep it up,” Minard said. “Won’t be long before you’re pounding heads and breaking arms with that thing.”

If only the monk always acted like he did now, handing out praise rather than mockery. The monk was like a two-sided coin. One side the infuriating one Aemon hated, the other a serious, intense side Aemon had only seen a couple of times.

Minard could flick between that persona and the other instantly, making it hard to know what the monk would say or do every time one saw him.

Aemon did not think he could be friends with Minard, and the monk probably felt the same way about him. But at least they could learn to respect one another. After all, they were going to be heading into the Great Dark together, a place of danger and hidden mysteries, and Kara needed them to work together to protect her.

Another practice bag tore open. Aemon moved to the next, his arms beginning to tire. He had trained long and hard and felt stronger for it. Best of all, earlier in the day, Kara had told him how impressed she was with his progress. Her words had spurred him to train all the harder.

He would grow strong enough to protect her or die trying.

Near the end of the following day of training, Wrynric approached Aemon and commended him on his progress. "I didn't know what to make of you when I first met you. I was told you helped Kara get to the temple, but seeing how scrawny you were, I found it hard to believe. Yet you got her here, and then stood up to Lucien not once, but twice, and refused to back down."

He patted Aemon on the shoulder. "Seeing how far you've come in the short time I've known you makes me think there's more to you than meets the eye. We'll be stronger with you than without you."

Aemon held his head high. "I do it for Kara. I want to protect her with my life."

Wrynric watched Kara as she practiced thrusting a blunted short sword at Minard. "I can see why you love her."

"Love," Aemon spluttered. "I do not. I mean..."

"Don't deny it—I've seen the way you look at her." He let out a weary sigh. "You need to put your feelings for her aside, and stop touching her the way you do. She likes you too, but she'll need to forget such girlish notions." Wrynric's face became granite. "She's a half-blood scion, with a great destiny ahead of her, and what she does will determine the fate of us all. She *cannot* be distracted by lust, love or any other pleasures of the flesh."

Aemon bristled at the old man's words, even if he could see the sense of them. Kara chuckled as Minard made a joke, then playfully lunged for him with her sword. Aemon slowly balled his fists. He never made her laugh like that.

Wrynric must have seen Aemon's anger. "I don't like the monk either, but we both need to put our animosity aside."

"Why? He means to kill Kara if he thinks she has become a threat." Aemon had made that promise too, but the old man did not need to know that. Unlike Minard, Aemon never intended to keep his word.

"He's a good fighter and we'll need all the help we can get in the days ahead. For that reason, I'm willing to put my dislike of him and his kind aside. For now." The old man put a mailed hand on his empty scabbard. "Trouble yourself not, boy. If he ever tries to hurt her, I'll kill him."

Aemon nodded. "I will help you."

Wrynric was silent for a long time. Then, in a troubled voice, he said, "Something bad is coming, I can feel it in my bones. Already I fear we have lingered here too long. Keep training and building your strength, for I think our days here are near an end."

Before Aemon could ask what he meant, Wrynruc strode off. Aemon turned back to Kara and Minard. She swung her practice sword clumsily at the monk and he side-stepped her attack and whacked her on the buttocks with his staff, making them both laugh.

Aemon no longer felt jealous of Minard. He felt sorry Kara would never be able to live a normal life again. The passkey and the poison had changed her, and she would never be the same person again. She would be something more.

Late in the night, five days later, the old warrior's premonition came to pass. Kahan had come.

Chapter 15

Kara.

Minard burst into Kara's room. "Get out of bed and grab your things."

Kara sat up, still half asleep, gripping the glowing passkey. It had been with her in another dream of the icy surface where she'd watched the Sun rise over a colossal statue of Imogen.

As she went to stand, another bout of headspins made her clasp the side of the bed for support. Her wounded chest ached terribly and her muscles were stiff and sore. Sleep had been her only escape from the unending nightmare of pain.

The headspins passed and she let go of the bed. Then she heard bells. "What's happening?"

"The temple is under attack."

Her fatigue drained away instantly. "Attack. By who?"

"Do you really need to ask?"

Not really.

Minard handed her a brown, hooded robe and a leather vest to wear under it. "Hurry and put these on. We need to leave."

She took them and started to undress out of her bed clothes. He didn't turn his back to give her privacy, nor did he look uncomfortable with her stripping down in front of him. Only when she'd stripped to her small clothes did he finally look away. Lucky for him, she was used to being naked in front of men.

When she finished dressing, he turned to face her again. He was about to say something when his eyes darted to the door as a distant scream echoed along the corridor.

Kara put a hand to her heart. "Where is Kahan? How did he get in?"

"Our best guess is he used the secret tunnels under the temple. We don't know how he found them. Only those of my order know of their existence." He grimaced. "Or so we thought."

As Kara slid the passkey under her robe, her stomach clenched. "Where's Aemon?"

Before Minard could reply, Aemon strode in. He was dressed in leather armor and carried a mace. Without a word, he positioned himself to guard the doorway.

Well done, Aemon, you've changed a lot since you started your training.

His arms were stronger, his back straighter and he had the beginnings of a beard. It wasn't just physically he'd changed either; his personality had too. No longer was he a naive boy, but a young man coming into his own.

It was heartening that he and Minard were getting along better too. The thought of them continuing to bicker as they ventured into the Great Dark was enough for her to seriously consider strangling them both. The last thing she needed was the added stress of listening to them fight.

Once Aemon saw beyond the shell Minard armored himself with, he would see the monk was just as fragile and insecure as he was. Kara had quickly seen through Minard's veil, but had yet to learn what he was hiding. Something dark from his past, maybe; or maybe it had something to do with him being a Divergent. Either way, the monk was not half the impervious man he made himself out to be.

Aemon ducked his head out the door as a woman screamed somewhere nearby. When the scream faded to nothing, Aemon glanced at Minard and shook his head. Nothing was coming. They were safe. For now.

Watching him stand there playing soldier made her heart ache. Did he really understand what they were heading into? Unlike Minard, he wasn't a warrior and hadn't been tested in battle. What if he lost his life in some foolhardy attempt to save her? How could she go on without him?

Kara lifted her arms to let Minard wrap a belt around her waist. When he'd buckled it up, he attached a leather scabbard to it.

If only Kahan had given them more time. The javelin wound and the poison had taken a staggering toll on Kara's body and the healer had claimed it would take months to heal. Now, he had her on the run once more and she was too weak to flee on her own. Others were being forced to put their lives at risk to protect her. But for what? Some vision seen by a father she'd never known that revealed her to be the savior of humanity?

Kara, a lowly commoner, who couldn't read, write or wield a sword. The whole thing sounded like a bad joke slurred into her ear by a randy drunk as she sat on his lap and shared his ale. Unlike those jokes, this one was real, and she couldn't pretend to laugh at it.

Too bad if she ended up being the dreaded harbinger of doom Lucien thought her to be. The joke would be on all of them.

Minard sheathed a short sword into her scabbard, then led her over to Aemon. "Take hold of the Scion and don't let her go. I'll guard you as we make our way to the Machine Chapel."

"What about Wrynric?" Aemon asked as he took Kara's arm.

"Your crusty old friend will have to look after himself. My brethren are buying us time to escape—so we must make haste."

Kara grabbed the monk's arm. "But he's meant to show us the way to the Dead City."

"There's nothing I can do; we may have to find the city ourselves." Minard made her let go, then led them out the door. "The acolytes have left us equipment at the entrance to the tunnels under the temple. We'll grab it, then escape through the catacombs."

“But you said Kahan got in that way,” Kara snapped. “What if some of his followers are still down there?”

Minard tapped his staff against the floor. “Then we fight our way out.”

He briskly led them from the infirmary and headed along a hallway. The air was filled with distant screams, chanting and the hum of machines, but it was difficult to tell what direction the sounds were coming from.

Soon they passed a body. Kara could not help but look at the dead man’s face. A young monk, no older than her, his insides splayed out on the ground beside him, spilled from a gaping slash across his abdomen. Blood and the contents of his shredded bowels had pooled on the floor around him. His face, covered in bloody froth, was a mask of terror and pain so great Kara had to look away before it scarred her for life.

He died horribly, because of me. She swallowed bile. Will it ever end?

The temple was a labyrinth of rooms, hallways, stairwells and antechambers, and if it weren’t for Minard, Kara would have been lost within minutes of leaving her room. From the outside, the temple hadn’t seemed nearly as large.

Aemon’s grip on her arm was firm, his mace held ready. He peered down every corridor and into every empty hall as they passed, his face a mask of focus. She drew comfort from his strength. He would stand by her, no matter what.

They entered an antechamber with cables and square, glass windows affixed to its walls. Words moved across the windows. Wait. The glass wasn’t windows. It was computer monitors.

She’d only ever seen one at the templeshine of Ibilirith in the capital. Here there were dozens, each with writing scrolling across so quickly Kara doubted the acolytes standing before them could read it before it disappeared.

At the center of the room stood patriarch Lucien, with six hard-faced monks and two scroll-carrying acolytes. He gripped the cog around his neck like he meant to crush it with his bare hands. The light over his head shone like the Sun from her visiondreams, making it hard to look upon him. Minard fell to his knees and bowed his head at the patriarch's feet.

Lucien removed his hat and the light adorning it, and passed it to an acolyte. Then his icy blue eyes studied Kara, sweat beading on his forehead.

Kara’s courtesan intuition tingled. Lucien meant her harm. His escort of warrior monks were busy watching for danger and none seemed to be paying her any mind.

But that didn’t mean they weren’t a threat. They could turn on her in an instant.

She lowered her gaze to Minard. Had Lucien ordered him to lead her into a trap? Surely not. He’d had ample opportunity to kill her and she’d never picked up a hostile vibe from him. If Lucien meant to betray her, Minard wasn't part of the plan. The patriarch mightn’t care about Minard either, and might see him as expendable.

Minard was a Divergent after all.

A thought struck her like a falling stone and she flinched. What if Lucien was the one who’d let Kahan in? Would he sink so low as to work with his mortal enemy? Lucien still studied her, icy daggers in his eyes.

But also fear.

The attack wasn't his doing, then. He would find some other way to betray her. Perhaps it wouldn't come until her return to Stelemia, where she'd find an army of Inquisitors waiting for her. Or perhaps when she turned to leave, he'd plunge a knife into her back. Either way, she needed to be ready.

After a long moment, Lucien let go of the cog and took a deep breath. "I shall pray you do not fulfill the prophecy and that you will return to us as our savior—not our destroyer." He blew out air through his teeth. "I should hand you over to the Inquisitors, but our enemy, those who assault our holy temple, want you dead. That, and my desire to end the rift in my order, is all that stays my hand."

Though still ill at ease about the patriarch's intentions, Kara gave him a deferential nod. When Minard stood, Lucien reached out to grab him. "Remember your promise to me, monk. I place great trust in you to see it done."

Promise? Was he talking about the one where Minard would return and help him mend the rift in the Order, or was it the monk's promise to kill Kara if she ended up being a threat?

Minard stared into the distance and nodded once. Lucien let go and Minard motioned for Kara and Aemon to follow him as he led them from the room. As she walked away, Kara felt Lucien's gaze burning into her back. Even when they'd left the room, it felt as though his eyes were still on her. Eyes of blue flame.

They reached the end of another hallway and Minard slid aside a tapestry hanging on the wall to enter a hidden passage concealed behind it. With one last glance behind them, Kara and Aemon followed him in. After thirty feet, the passage ended at a blank stone wall. The monk struck a hidden button with his staff and the wall soundlessly slid open. Beyond it lay the brightly lit Machine Chapel where Kara had woken a few weeks earlier.

A battle raged somewhere nearby, and above the clamor came a man's wail of terrible agony. Minard glanced about. "There's no one out there but the fighting is close. We should hurry while it's still safe."

"Then go," Aemon said. "I'll guard our rear."

Entering the chapel, its walls crisscrossed with innumerable lights and wires, Kara and Aemon followed the monk between the pews, Aemon walking backwards to keep an eye on the entrance. They approached the metallic altar, which shone with a thousand, tiny, multi-colored bulbs. Some winked on and off, while others went from bright to dim and back again. A thick, golden wrench leaned against the altar, its shining surface sparkling in the light of the glowing room.

Kara watched Aemon, still struck by how far he'd come. His eyes seemed to take everything in, but not with their normal sheen of wonder. They searched for danger.

Her heart ached for him. He'd lost something since reaching the temple. She'd come to like his incessant lectures on the history of things she took for granted. The last few days, he'd become aloof and hadn't seemed to want to be as close to her as he once had. Hopefully, the changes in him were only temporary, for he could remain his old self and still learn to be a warrior. She'd known men who could wield quills as well as they could swords.

They stopped at the wall where Kara had woken. While Aemon stood guard, Minard pulled a lever and part of the wall began to slide open.

“This leads to the entrance of the Tomb of Ibilirith,” Minard said. “Near it, there’s a ladder we’ll climb down. At the bottom, an acolyte will be waiting for us with our equipment.”

Kara peered into the darkness beyond the opening in the wall. She could make out a passage leading into the distance. Could the tomb be why the dream had brought her here? Kara hadn't even known the tomb was there, but had the dream?

Footsteps carried from across the chapel. The three of them spun around to see a black-clad Knife of Dwaycar sneak into the room. The knife stopped when it caught sight of them.

After spending a moment to take them in, the knife hurriedly retreated from the room. Outside, she started up an elated cry. “To me, sisters, to me. I have found the Scion.”

“We have to stop her,” Kara said. “She’ll tell—”

Minard shoved Kara and Aemon into the hidden doorway. “I’ll deal with her. You two follow the tunnel until you reach a grotto. Wait for me there, and don’t touch anything!” The monk raced through the chapel and out the door, after the elated knife.

Aemon took her arm and led her down the hidden passage. A minute later, they emerged into a torchlit grotto with a ladder leading down into darkness. Hundreds of hieroglyphs adorned the chiseled stone walls and a row of sacred lights glowed overhead.

A faint murmur at the edge of Kara’s mind beckoned her to get a closer look at the pictures on the wall. Letting go of Aemon, she walked over to study them. The hieroglyphs were clearly the work of a master artist. The intricacy of each was a thing to behold.

Some depicted people at work baking mushroom bread or herding sheep, while others showed people dressed in brown robes prostrating themselves before inscrutable machines. A large one, painted high up the wall, showed a beautiful, tall woman with a golden halo around her head. She towered over a group of men, women and children and pointed upward at something.

Kara followed the direction of her finger and saw a round disk. It looked yellow, like the Sun in her visiondreams, but the ancient paint was far too faded for her to be certain.

At the back of the grotto loomed the entrance to the Tomb of Ibilirith. Kara approached it reverently. It wasn’t everyday one got to stand before the resting place of a Divine. Emblazoned on the formidable metal door was the image of a fearsome-looking bird. She’d seen the feathered animals at the zoo in the Priest King’s gardens, but none had looked as intimidating as the one here. Its body was made of gold and its ruby eyes flickered like flames.

Upon the five steps leading up to the door were countless offerings of metal shards, cogs, nuts and screws. A strange head rested on the bottom step, facing Kara. The head looked like the metal man from her visiondream, though painted darker and with a missing eye.

What was it doing here? Where was the rest of its body?

A strange sense of recognition made Kara stiffen. It felt like she’d known this metal man once, like they'd spoken, or... The feeling passed as swiftly as it had

come, the metal head once again as alien to her as the Metal Man in her visiondream.

Kara drew her cloak around herself and shivered. Until now, she'd not noticed how cold, silent and still the grotto was. As she was about to turn back to Aemon, something began calling to her from inside the tomb. It urged her forward, not by words but by force of will.

Was it Ibilirith?

Offerings crunched under Kara's boots as she made her way up the stairs. When she arrived at the entrance, her attention became drawn to a metallic slot on the wall beside it, large enough to fit the passkey. Perhaps if she inserted it into the slot, the door would open.

Something grabbed her. "Kara, what are you doing? Get away from there before Minard sees you."

Aemon.

How dare he disturb me! I was about to open the door.

With a strength born of rage, Kara slapped him across the face. Head spinning, he reeled backward into the door and slid to the ground clutching his right cheek.

Mouth open, he stared up at her. "What... what did you do that for?"

She took a step toward him, her hand reaching for her sword. He started crawling away from her. Kara lunged after him, sword half drawn, teeth bared. "Come here."

"No, stay back. Why are you doing this?"

Kara's body started to shake and her eyes lost focus. She clutched the sides of her head as a tingling sensation in her brain overwhelmed her senses. The sensation lasted for several seconds, then eased until it became no more than an annoying irritant.

The all-consuming rage fizzled away, but the compulsion to enter the tomb remained. Kara slowly retreated from the door. *What is happening? Someone help me.*

Backing to the top step, she tripped on an offering and fell. She landed on her back and slid head first to the bottom of the stairs, coming to rest beside the metal head, the wind knocked out of her.

The metal head's strange eye seemed to bore into hers. Shuddering, she rolled away, small offerings digging into her flesh.

"Kara," came a small voice from above her.

She lay there for a good minute, just breathing—in and out, in and out. The passkey burned her skin and a wave of headspins made her vision sway.

"Kara," the voice said again.

Aemon! It was Aemon. *What have I done?*

She pushed herself off the floor and saw Aemon standing on the top step. He stared down at her feet, as if afraid to make eye contact. A bright, purple-red handprint marred his cheek. Her handprint.

"I'm sorry." Kara reached for him, hoping he would come down and take her hand. "I don't know what happened. It feels like something in there wants me to enter and when you disturbed me, I—it lashed out."

Aemon said nothing, nor did he move to take her hand. He'd seen Kara like this once before, back at Jalarfed. But this time she'd hurt someone. Him.

The tingling feeling made it hard to focus her thoughts. Grimacing, she cried, "Aemon, please... I'm sorry. Whatever was happening to me has stopped. I feel fine now. I'm sorry I hit you. I was not myself."

Still staring at her feet, he nodded slowly. Whimpering, Kara crawled toward him but he backed away again. Tears streaked down her cheeks and dripped onto the offerings scattered on the floor. She stopped, got to her knees and wiped the tears away. "Please, Aemon, come down and let me hold you." Her heart ached so much she wanted to rip it out. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

His eyes suddenly widened and he pointed at her chest. "Is the passkey on fire? I can see it through your robes."

Sniffing, she peered down. Aemon was right. The passkey shone brighter than it ever had. No wonder it was so hot.

She lifted it and marveled at how bright the small bulb had become. The light silhouetted the bones of her hand and was bright enough to illuminate the entire grotto. It gave off almost as much heat as a candle.

Aemon made his way down to the bottom step and finally met her eye. She shoved the passkey back into her robes, gritting her teeth as it burned her, and stepped forward to embrace him.

Though he stiffened, Aemon let her hold him close. Her emotions felt like they were being sloshed around like a drunk's flagon of ale. "I'm so sorry," she sobbed. "Please say you forgive me."

Wrapping his arms around her, he kissed her hair. "I hope we can rid you of that vile thing." He squeezed her a moment. "The look on your face when you struck me... It was not you. It was someone else."

The ghostly woman's voice whispered in her mind, *You are Imogen, Mother of Steel Children. You wear her beacon around your neck.*

Suddenly, Aemon shoved Kara behind him and raised his mace. "Someone is coming."

After a moment's hesitation, she drew her sword and listened to the sound of approaching feet. Seconds later, Minard appeared and behind him came Wrynric.

"You made it," she exclaimed to the old warrior. He gave her a grim nod and dabbed at a splash of blood on his armor. Kara stepped toward him. "Did you see Kahan?"

"No, but I had to cut my way through several other knives to get here." He raised his eyebrows when he saw Aemon's reddened cheek but said nothing of it. "I don't think I was followed, but I can't be sure. Once Kahan works out the half-blood is no longer in the temple, he might start searching the catacombs for her."

Minard pressed a button and closed the hidden passage. "I killed the knife who saw us in the chapel before she reached her brethren, though I'm uncertain if any of them heard her cries before I cut them short."

"How many more knives are out there?" Kara asked. She almost felt like gnawing on her nails like Aemon.

"I don't know," Wrynric replied. "But on the way here, I saw the corpses of more than a dozen knives and at least a dozen more in a pitched battle near the infirmary. Perhaps Kahan has brought reinforcements from their home in the Nether to help him assault the temple. If he has—there could be more than a hundred of them."

“More than a hundred...” Minard muttered a quick prayer to Ibilirith. “I wish I could stay and fight, but I know I must leave my brothers and sisters to battle on without me.” He rammed his staff on the ground. “What I’d love to know is how they discovered our catacombs and how they knew the Scion survived their poison.”

“They followed me through the Nether for over a month,” Wrynric said. “I know how to conceal my passage, yet still they found me and tracked me to the half-blood’s tavern in the capital.”

“They also tracked me to Deep Cave and followed me here,” Kara added.

Wrynric stared into the distance. “It’s almost as if...”

“As if what?” Kara asked.

He gave her a distracted look. “I don’t know. It’s like someone or something is helping them.”

“Dwaycar?”

Minard winced. “Scion, don’t speak that name here.”

“I’m sorry.” Kara hunched her shoulders. “Kahan always seems to be one step behind me.”

“It’s alright.” Minard glanced at the tomb door. “My order and his have been at war for hundreds of years. His kind betrayed Holy Ibilirith when they assaulted the Serdtse Power Station and almost plunged Stelemia into darkness. I still can’t believe they’ve returned, and that they’ve dared attack our temple.”

“They are as much fanatics as your kind is,” Wrynric said. “Every one of them would throw their lives away in their mad pursuit to kill the half-blood.”

Kara bit her lip as she stared at the blood on the old man’s armor. All this death, all the suffering and horror, because of her. “I want this to end. I want them to stop.” The tingling in her head made her want to scream at the top of her lungs for it all to go away. She dropped her voice to little more than a whisper. “I must reach Annbar.”

Minard got to one knee. “Then fear not, Scion. Until the day you prove yourself a threat, I will guide and protect you. You’re in Holy Ibilirith’s presence, and she’ll strike me down if my staff breaks or my will falters.”

Kara brushed back her bangs. Had he just pledged his life to her?

Wrynric bowed now. “I make this solemn oath to the light of the Lost Sun. I will protect you from the dark and guide you until your task is done.” He straightened and patted her shoulder. “Return us to our Sun.”

Aemon watched the other men take their vows, then knelt and lowered his head. “I make the same oath as them, but I make it to the Shield of Heaven.” When he looked up, his eyes were filled with love. Even after she’d hit him, he still loved her. It warmed her heart.

He swallowed. “In Lydan’s name, I vow I will protect you with my life because I...”

Turning away, he said no more. She could no longer see his face but she could tell he had wanted to say more. Then he looked back at her, his face a mask of control.

“Aemon...”

“Kara, I will protect you with my life. I will see you to the library in Annbar and help you search it for answers.”

She backed into the wall, clutching the passkey through her robes. It was odd to inspire such devotion. She was no lord, lady or Priest King. In truth, she no longer knew what she was.

Chapter 16

Aemon.

As Aemon climbed down the ladder, the heat of the temple began to be replaced by the chill of a crypt. The descent was long, and it gave him time to think through his dark thoughts.

What had overcome Kara back at the Tomb of Ibilirith? What would Minard do if something like that overcame her again? After all, the monk promised he would kill her if she became a threat.

Kara descended the ladder three rungs above his head, the glow of the passkey through her robes turning the wall in front of her blood red. Would she keep it together long enough for them to reach the Dead City?

If she did lose herself again, he would have to act quickly, before the wretched monk tried to kill her. At least Wrynric was there to back him up. Minard could not hope to defeat them both.

Aemon arrived at the bottom of the ladder and found himself in a cramped chamber. There were two exits from the room. One, a stone corridor lit by torches burning in sconces along the wall; the other, a wide flight of stairs that seemed to lead back up to the temple.

Minard led them down the torchlit corridor. Aemon was the last to follow and a glitter from the walls drew his eye. The corridor was carved through coarse-grained rock, its surface speckled with precious metals that glittered in the torchlight. *The Order could make a fortune out of this rock if they ever turned their hand to mining it.*

Cursing himself under his breath, Aemon returned his focus to watching for danger. There was no time for idle thoughts. He had a job to do. Protect Kara.

Soon they arrived at another chamber, far more impressive than the last. The floor was a beautiful mosaic of colored broken tiles shaped into a human-sized portrait of Ibilirith. Her arms were raised over her head and in her left hand she held a wrench and in her right, a sword. On her shoulder rested her metallic bird companion, its eyes two flickering rubies. The mosaic was bordered by a ring of glowing sacred lights set into the floor.

Beside the mosaic, a young acolyte waited for them. She kept her distance, her eyes on Kara. "Everything you'll need for your journey has been prepared for you, Scion," the acolyte said.

When Kara looked at her, the woman took a step back, her eyes darting to the exit. As Aemon went to guard their backs, he grinned. He half expected the acolyte to run away screaming at any moment. Why was she so afraid of Kara anyway? Could she not see Kara meant her no harm?

"Thank you," Kara said, then glanced at Aemon with a hurt look.

Aemon stood as tall as he could, mindful that he was still almost a head shorter than the other two men. Shorter, even, than her. “Do not be upset. I am here for you.”

Minard put a hand on the acolyte’s shoulder to steady her. “Easy, Sister. The scion won’t hurt you.”

The woman nodded, her gaze fixed on Kara. Aemon could identify with the woman’s fear and meek demeanor, for he had spent much of his life meek and afraid. Afraid of his domineering mother, afraid of his older brothers, afraid of Rubin and most of all afraid of being afraid. Now, he had a new fear.

The fear of failing Kara.

But would that fear be enough for him not to end up like the poor acolyte if Kahan found them? Back at the bridge—where Kara was wounded—Aemon had been paralyzed with terror. What if it happened again and he failed in his sworn duty to protect her?

Aemon growled softly in his throat. All he could do was try his best and not let the negative part of his brain get the better of him like it had done then. In the stories, heroes often had to overcome their own fears and self-doubts. If they could do it—so could he.

“Head back up to the temple and tell the patriarch we’ve entered the catacombs,” Minard ordered as he let the acolyte go. “Mind yourself, Sister. May the sacred lights shine upon you.”

With one last fearful glance at Kara, the acolyte bid them farewell then quickly left.

The men began to gather up the sacks of supplies and several long lengths of rope. Aemon was about to sling a second bag of food over his shoulder when Kara stopped him. “That bag doesn’t look heavy. Let me take it.”

Aemon shook his head. “You might hurt yourself. Your wound—”

“Give it to me, Aemon,” she snapped.

He caught his breath. Would she hit him again?

Kara’s face softened. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to get angry.”

“Let her carry the bag; it’ll help build her strength,” Minard said.

Aemon bit back a retort and handed the sack of dried meat and mushrooms to Kara. When she took it, he said, “Promise me, if it gets heavy or hurts you, then you will hand it back.”

She gave him one of her radiant, toothy smiles. “I promise.”

How he loved that smile. It somehow made their predicament not seem so dire.

Wrynric grabbed a shield and strapped it to his left arm then signaled he was ready. When Aemon and Kara had shouldered their loads, Minard lit a torch and strode over to a set of stone double doors.

He pulled a lever on the wall then stepped back. Bits of dirt and chips of rock fell from the ceiling as the doors slowly slid open. Horrid air wafted through the widening gap, making Aemon cough and splutter. The air reeked of death and decay.

Aemon gagged. “What is that smell?”

“This place is where we inter our dead,” Minard said, his voice as indifferent as the rock around them. Torch held high, the monk walked into the gloom of the catacombs.

Aemon went next, then Kara, with Wrynic taking the rear. An oppressive silence hung over the crypt, making their footsteps and breaths unnaturally loud. The air was hard to breathe and left a revolting taste in Aemon's mouth.

The stench grew as they headed deeper into this silent realm of the dead. Finally, they encountered the first body laid to rest in a nook carved into the wall. The dead man was naked, with no jewelry or any markers to identify who he had been or his rank in the Order. He had died recently, as his flesh was in the early stages of putrefying, repulsive body fluids pooling around him, some dripping to the floor.

Aemon studied the man's face to see if he was one of the monks who had followed Meglen, but the smell and the pallor of the puffy flesh made him gag and turn away. Minard should have warned them they would be passing the recently deceased. By the divines, the stench was worse than the cloying smell of animal dung at the village where they had seen the Inquisitor General.

Wrynic gave Minard a disgusted scowl. "You people ever heard of boiling the flesh from the bone before burial? What about using the lava around your temple to dispose of the dead? Anything is better than this."

Minard stopped beside the corpse, his hand over his mouth. "I'm sorry about the smell. My order inters our dead with little fanfare. Our bodies are but engines to serve Ibilirith." He tapped the wall beside the burial nook with his staff. "In death, when our life's power is extinguished, our purpose is at an end and we are sent here to sleep in darkness until the day our Holy Lady has need of us once more."

"This is no way to treat the dead," Kara said, her face as white as her eyes. "The dead should not be hidden away from Ibilirith's sacred lights. These people maintained her lights; surely they deserve to be laid to rest under them."

"It's our way," Minard said coldly. "At least here they are not fed on by vermin like they are in the catacombs under the capital."

Kara breathed through her sleeve as she spoke. "Even people who live in places lit only by torches send their dead to the cities so they can rest forever under the sacred lights. You should honor the deceased, like they do."

Aemon was not surprised about how the Order treated their dead. He had read about their burial customs in the book, *Ilimdalis and the Order of the Lights*. Time and again that book had proven itself accurate.

No wonder the Order had banished the poor author into the Great Dark. His writing hit too close to the truth.

Aemon whispered into Kara's ear, "They are fanatics. When you are dead you are as much use as a broken hammer, and they discard you accordingly."

Minard glared at him, the torchlight flickering in his brown eyes. "You're right, Me Lord. We do serve our lady most devoutly."

Damn, the monk had heard him.

"Get moving," Wrynic growled. "If we stand here any longer we're likely to join the ranks of the dead down here."

Moving off again, Minard led them along dank hallways, through dark chambers and past small shrines with scatterings of metal offerings around them. They walked by dozens of bodies, some skeletons with ragged dried-out sinews, others broken piles of green mildewing bones. Deeper into the catacombs the remains

became older, many little more than fragments of bone or piles of dust that shifted slightly when they passed them.

How many people are buried here? Aemon wondered as they strode along a lengthy bone-strewn corridor. *It must be thousands.*

After descending a long, curved flight of stairs they arrived at a small square chamber with six exits. Minard took one on the left and they followed him down yet more dead-lined tunnels, some containing archaic shrines to Ibilirith.

The Divine looked different than she did in the more modern representations of her nearer to the temple. Some were so dissimilar that they may not have been Ibilirith at all. The statues here looked more like a real person, rather than an ideal representation of one. Was it because they had been made closer to the time Ibilirith was mortal, or was it just a sign that artistry had changed over the many centuries since the Order was established?

Aemon chided himself again. He needed to stop letting his mind wander and keep it focused!

The air became cooler and the smell of rot was replaced by a far more mundane one of wet stone. Aemon's teeth began to chatter so he tightened his cloak and crossed his arms to try to stay warm. He never thought he would miss the stifling heat of the temple.

A draft from a side tunnel made Minard's torch splutter out, plunging them into total darkness. Kara drew her breath in quickly, like something had startled her. Aemon's heart began to race and he reached for his weapon.

He heard Wrynic drawing his sword. "What is it?" the old man hissed.

Minard struck the flint and tinder and re-lit the torch, then held it up to light their surroundings.

Kara cast her gaze forward then backward, scanning the darkness beyond the edge of light. "I... I can see in the dark."

"Why do you sound surprised?" the monk chuckled. "Everyone can see in the dark to an extent, once their eyes adjust and there's a tiny bit of light around."

"This is different. I never noticed it until the torch blew out, but I can see almost as well in complete darkness as I can in the light." She turned to Wrynic. "My eyes... They've changed somehow, just like they did in my visiondream. When I look behind us, I can see the last corner we walked around." She faced forward. "And about fifty feet in front of us, I can see a room with bones scattered all over the floor."

"Interesting." Wrynic studied her closely. "Perhaps you can use your dark-vision to watch for dangers we cannot see. If you see anything, and I *mean* anything—warn us immediately."

Kara wrapped her fingers around the passkey and nodded. She appeared as spooked as she had after trying to attack the bald man back at the crossroad town of Jalarfed. The passkey was changing her, but maybe some of those changes were not as bad as others. Having some form of dark-vision seemed like a useful ability to possess.

Still. The change bothered Aemon. What would be left of the woman he had fallen head over heels for if the changes continued occurring?

With that disquieting thought rolling around his head, Aemon followed the others. They soon passed through the antechamber filled with bones Kara had seen.

When they reached the far end, Minard stopped and made them gather close to the light of his torch. "In a minute, we'll enter a chamber with eight tunnels leading from it." He studied each one of them in turn, as if weighing them up in his mind. "Be on your guard. If I were Kahan, I would set my ambush there."

Aemon fingered the hilt of his mace. "Why?"

"Other than the way we entered, it's the only way out here. Four of the eight passages lead to hidden exits, while the other four lead to the oldest parts of the catacombs. Enemies could assault us from multiple sides and unless they're thick-headed enough to be holding lit torches, we won't know they are there until they're on us."

"How would Kahan even know we would pass through this chamber?" Aemon asked.

Minard gave him a look one would give upon biting into a rotten piece of meat. "We have no idea how long Kahan spent down here before finding his way into the temple. If he scouted the tunnels, he'd know all paths lead to the chamber up ahead and that we must pass through it to escape."

Wrynic snorted. "Then pray to your Divine Lady, monk, that your brethren keep him and his knives busy back at the temple."

"Oh, they will. If he makes it out of the temple alive he'll have lost more than a few followers." He cracked his knuckles, his mouth twisting into an evil grin. "I will kill any knife that gets in my way. They have transgressed against Lady Ibilirith, and there must be a reckoning."

The old man's expression hardened to iron. "Vengeance can wait. We must protect the half-blood at all costs—even if it means one of us gets left behind."

"Getting the scion out of the temple will quell my desire for revenge... for now." Minard cleared his throat. "In any case, if I don't make it, there's a hidden lever near the exit. Pull it and it'll collapse the tunnel behind you and prevent any pursuit."

"If there are eight tunnels, how will we know what one to take?" Aemon asked.

"When you enter the chamber, look for numbers carved in the wall above each passage. We are after the number-four tunnel. When you find the right one, head down it and wait for me and the ol' man at the exit." Minard lost his evil grin. "Assuming we're still alive."

A chill went down Aemon's spine. "Where do we go from there?" He tried unsuccessfully to keep his voice from quivering. "I do not know much about this part of Stelemia."

"The tunnel will lead you to a cave system. Ancient steps have been carved into the rock so it should be easy to follow them until you reach a river. Go the direction of the water's flow and it will take you to the settlement of Rylore Bellholes."

Wrynic took torches from one of the sacks he carried and passed them around. "In case we get separated, we'll each carry a lit torch. Once we reach the chamber, Minard and I will throw ours into it, then charge in with weapons ready." He pointed at Aemon. "You hang back with the half-blood and protect her. If anyone

attacks us, you both need to flee down the number-four tunnel while we engage them.”

Aemon stepped toward the old warrior. “I can help you fight. I promised I would protect her too.”

The old man gently pushed him back. “And you will. If we fall, it is up to you to get her to safety. If worse comes to worst, our lives will buy you enough time to flee and pull the lever.”

“But—”

“Then it all comes down to *you* to get her to Safehold.”

Aemon swallowed his disappointment. He wanted to fight for Kara, not run away and hide from those who would harm her. “I do not know where Safehold is. It might be better if—”

The old warrior pulled a slip of parchment from inside his armor and shoved it in Aemon’s face. “Here. Directions to Safehold. When you get there, you will find a woman named Erinie who will help you. Keep this map well hidden, for if it were to fall into the hands of our enemies, it would doom the last of my people.” He put a mailed hand on Aemon’s shoulder. “Guard the half-blood well, Son.” He let go and drew his sword. “I have faith in you.”

Aemon raised his chin. Wrynic was putting great trust in him. As much as Aemon wanted to fight, it was more important to get Kara to Safehold and then to the Dead City. He would protect Kara until his last breath. Touching his sore cheek, he tried not to wince. No matter what she was, what she did to him or what they came up against.

They lit the torches and followed Minard as he made his way cautiously toward the chamber. Aemon walked at the rear beside Kara, torch in one hand, mace in the other, his heart pounding in his ears. His heart sounded so loud that it was a wonder the others could not hear it.

The silence, the dark, the scattered bones and the tension of walking into danger began to erode away his resolve. As they continued on, it became hard for him to retain his façade of composure. His growing fear made him feel like he was a fraud. He could be walking into battle, a battle in which he may die.

A real warrior feared not these things. Rexus of Acid Lake had not when he faced the armored Slizmaga and nor did Edward of Abyssal Hall, who had fought against the false Priest King until the very end, on the orders of his noble lady.

Minard did not look scared, nor did Wrynic. So why did Aemon?

Damn it. I made a pledge to protect Kara. I cannot allow myself to be afraid.

For her part, Kara looked as frightened as he did. Her eyes scanned the darkness, her breathing shallow, sweat glistening on her forehead.

To combat his growing fear, Aemon began to repeat a mantra in his head. *I am brave. I can do this. I must protect Kara.*

The sad thing was, the mantra did little to make him feel braver. He felt like he had when he was a little boy standing at the door to his mother’s chambers waiting to be punished. The terror he felt then mirrored the one he felt now.

I am brave. I can do this. I must—no, I will—protect Kara.

The mantra allowed him to keep a grasp at the last vestiges of his composure, and he was able to go on—walking ever closer to the place he or Kara could die.

Minard stopped and mouthed they were almost at the chamber. If anyone was hiding out there, they would know someone was coming. The light from their torches would warn the enemy in advance, giving them time to prepare their ambush.

Wrynic watched Kara expectedly. She used her dark-vision to scan ahead but after a moment she shook her head. Aemon let out his breath slowly. Perhaps no one was out there after all.

The old man nodded once to Minard, then gave Aemon a searching look. Aemon bit his lip and squared his shoulders and signaled he was ready. The old warrior patted him on the head, took a deep breath, then raced forward with the monk beside him.

Aemon and Kara followed at a slower pace and watched as the two men hurled their torches into the chamber. Wrynic let out a challenging roar and charged in first, his shield held before him. A javelin flew from one of the side passages and lodged into it with a great *thunk*.

They had sprung Kahan's ambush.

Minard ducked as another javelin flew from the darkness and struck the wall behind him. Aemon and Kara ran into the octagonal chamber.

Four knives burst from the shadows, twin swords glistening in the torchlight. "Bless us, Lord Dwaycar." They launched themselves into the chamber in a desperate attempt to reach Kara. Minard and Wrynic charged, driving the knives back with a flurry of blows.

Finding the number-four passage, Aemon started toward it but Kara stopped him.

"Wait, someone's in there."

Kara backed away as a fifth knife emerged from the number-four corridor, torchlight reflecting off her blades. Like her brethren, the knife was dressed head to toe in black and wore a featureless mask that covered most of her face.

She started toward them.

"Die, Scion," the knife screamed, eyes blazing with hatred and single-minded purpose. To kill Kara.

Aemon's mind spun out of control. He was going to die. Kara was going to die. The knife was almost on him, twin blades poised to strike.

There was little time. He had to do something.

Then his training took hold. Hurling his torch at her, he charged forward and swung his mace.

The torch struck the knife a moment before his mace smashed into her shoulder. Bones crunched, blood sprayed, and a terrible cry exploded from her lips. Her arm crippled, she reeled backward, dropping her left sword.

Aemon's heart pounded, the world around him forgotten. It was kill or be killed—it was exhilarating. The woman recovered and started toward him. "Get out of my way, fool. You know not what you protect."

Gritting his teeth, Aemon moved to finish her. "I do not care what you think she is. You will not hurt her again."

The knife lunged, trying to skewer him on the tip of her sword. "Then die, husk."

Aemon side-stepped, but her thrust tore a gouge from his armor. The knife's attack took her past him.

She leapt at Kara, her blade ringed by fire. “Die, Scion!”

For a moment, Aemon did not know what to do. Kara was backed into a corner and had nowhere to go.

Then Minard backed into him, as the monk fended off an attack from one of the other knives. The jolt broke Aemon’s indecision. Without thinking, he charged after the knife bearing down on Kara.

The knife spun to face him, swinging her sword in a wide arc. He slid under it and rammed the mace into her stomach. Blood gushing from her mouth, she flew backward and slammed into the wall, her mask dropping to the floor.

When she came to rest, her eyes fell on him, her body broken, blood pooling around her. There was fear in her eyes. Fear of him or fear of death.

“Sorry,” he said but the knife was dead. Then he noticed the long braid of auburn hair flowing past her shoulders, the decorative earrings, and the young, smooth face. She was a woman, like Kara, and he had just killed her.

He wrenched his eyes away from that dead face and found Kara panting beside him. She looked afraid but in control. Wrynnic and Minard still fought the other knives.

Aemon scooped up a torch. “Kara, we need to leave.”

She shoved past him, ran to Wrynnic and thrust her torch into his attacker’s face. “Go away, and leave us alone.”

The knife fell back but Wrynnic lunged forward, burying his sword deep into her guts. The knife screamed as she slid from his sword onto the ground, staring in horror at her wound.

Another knife burst from the darkness and went for Kara.

Wrynnic intercepted her and weathered the blows on his shield. “Get out of here, half-blood.”

Aemon grabbed Kara’s arm, and dragged her toward the exit. She started to fight him. “Let me go!”

He started to lose his grip. “They told us to flee down the tunnel and wait for them. Please, come—”

Kara tore her arm away. “I’m not leaving them. I’ve lost too many friends already.”

Cursing loudly, he raised his mace to protect her. She handed him her torch, then scooped up another from the floor.

Side by side, they strode forward and used their torches to drive the enemy back so Wrynnic and Minard could take them down. Suddenly, a knife charged from a tunnel behind them.

Aemon spun to face her. “Kara, look out.”

Kara threw her torch at the knife, breaking her forward momentum. Aemon rushed in and took the knife down before she could recover. It horrified him to kill another person, especially a woman, but he had no choice.

Soon the last of the knives fell. All up, five lay dead in a growing pool of blood, the last still staring in horror at her gut wound, posing no immediate threat. Wrynnic leaned against the wall to catch his breath while Minard kept an eye on the wounded knife while using a piece of cloth to wipe blood off his staff. Kara stood beside Wrynnic, making sure he was all right while Aemon busied himself gathering up the torches.

Once Wrynnic had recovered enough to talk, he said, "We need to go. One ran off and she'll bring back more."

Before he had finished speaking, they heard running feet down one of the tunnels. Minard grabbed Kara and dragged her toward the number-four passage. Aemon and Wrynnic raced after them, faces covered in sweat, weapons dripping blood and gore.

Kara struggled with the monk. "Let go, you're hurting me."

A scream of rage pierced the darkness behind them. Aemon's heart skipped a beat. He had heard that scream before.

Wrynnic shoved Aemon forward with his shield. "Run faster, they're right behind us."

They sped along the passage, their torches near blowing out. Over his shoulder, Aemon saw lights less than fifty feet behind them. A javelin clattered to the floor inches from him and another would have taken him in the arm had Wrynnic not batted it aside with his shield.

Their equipment weighed them down and soon it was a struggle for the men to keep up their pace. A javelin ricocheted off the wall beside Kara and she covered against the monk. She looked close to collapse, her face lined with fatigue.

"How much farther?" Wrynnic shouted over the pounding of their feet and the jingle of his armor.

Minard glanced back at him. "We're close. One minute, maybe two."

Aemon's chest heaved and his muscles burned with fatigue, adrenaline all that kept him on his feet. *Not long now. Not long. We are going to make it!*

At last, they reached the end of the tunnel. Minard let go of Kara and waited for Aemon and Wrynnic to pass him, then he reached into a nook in the wall and grasped a hidden lever. The monk ducked as a javelin smacked into the wall an inch over his head, then pulled it.

The last thing Aemon heard before tons of rock tumbled from the ceiling was a piercing shriek of, "Sister..." Then there was only the roar of falling stone.

Chapter 17

Kara.

Two days later, they emerged from the shallow river onto the stone bank and startled an old man fishing the gently flowing waters. Kara bumped into Minard as he stopped. "Here it is. Rylore Bellholes. The stinkiest town in all Stelemia."

Kara rubbed sleep from her eyes as she saw a village carved out of the limestone walls of a large chamber. Several dozen doors and windows glowed with light, like fiery eyes in the dark. Looming beyond the settlement sat a huge mound of rocks, fallen from a gaping black hole in the roof.

The sharp clang of someone chiseling stone echoed off the chamber walls and the murmur of voices drifted over to the river. Kara sniffed. A most unpleasant

stench hung in the air, a stench almost as bad as the rotting bodies under the temple.

She squeezed her nose shut. "What's that smell?"

Minard laughed. "I told you Rylora Bellholes reeks."

"What causes it?"

"It's a tannery, built some ways up river. They make leather goods there, like the vest you're wearing under your robes."

"I thought Klardna smelled bad," Aemon choked. "This place is worse."

"Don't worry, we won't be here long." Wrynric said.

A group of dirty-faced children ran up to them and rattled off a barrage of questions about who they were and where they'd come from. Wrynric growled at them and they ran off crying.

The old warrior pulled Kara's hood over her head. "We'll stop and eat at a tavern and discuss the next leg of our journey. Try to keep your head down and don't let anyone get a good look at you."

Kara touched the passkey through her robes and nodded. The light had dimmed again, yet the weight of it felt like it had grown. Her back and neck ached, and she found it hard not to hunch her shoulders. To add to her suffering, her wound constantly throbbed and the strange tingling sensation in her head had yet to go away. Then, sometime over the last day, a creeping emptiness had begun to spread within her, as if her very essence was being consumed, leaving her a withered husk of the woman she once was.

The trek along the river had sapped her of what little strength she had left. Though, the same could be said for all of them. The men looked weary, and she'd seen Wrynric occasionally remove his chainmail and reach around to rub his back, as if it pained him.

A few minutes later, they arrived at the settlement's tavern and sat at a table near the fire. Kara found the warmth welcoming. Their journey along the river had been wet, cold and dark, with only a torch to warm their hands.

Compared to the Golden Keg, the Bellhole Tavern was plain. There were no pretty courtesans working the floor, no laughter from drunken guests and no bouncer at the door. She'd thought entering a tavern might make her homesick and bring back bad memories, but this tavern felt so different from her old home it failed to elicit such feelings. In fact, she felt nothing. It was hard to care about anything anymore.

The knives might not have killed her back at the temple, but she sure felt dead inside all the same.

A plump, young, freckle-faced barmaid waddled up to them. First she winced at the hand-shaped bruise on Aemon's face, and then she began admiring Minard's muscular arms that he had resting on the table. When the monk looked up, she jumped. "Sor-sorry, m'lord." She glanced at his staff then back at his face. "Are you from the temple?"

Minard gave her a lopsided grin. "Who else dresses as well as those who serve Ibilirith?"

She let out a confused little laugh. "I don't know, m'lord."

Kara rolled her eyes. A giggly girl with nothing but rocks in her head.

"Why did you want to know where I came from?" Minard laughed.

The barmaid gave him a toothy grin, revealing crooked front teeth. “Oh, you’re funny, m’lord. Anyways, I was about to say that a group of monks passed through here—oh, I don’t know, an hour ago? One of them, a tall, bearded fella he was, said no one would lower the bridge for em so they couldn’t get into the temple.”

Minard leaned back in his chair, losing his mirth. “Indeed, when we left, it was under attack.”

The barmaid put a hand over her mouth. “M’lord, who would dare such a thing? Was it the beasts that attacked Deep Cave? I took the talk of what happened there as rumor, I did, but now I’m not so certain.” She glanced toward the barman. “I should tell my pa we need to leave, what with all the refugees and soldiers of late. My old ma is gone, divines bless her soul, and my pa won’t want to leave but—”

Minard spoke over her babbling. “We don’t know who attacked the temple yet, but you can rest easy, my anserine lady—that Ibilirith will have her revenge. For now, we’re tired and hungry so get us some soup and four mugs of shroom tea.”

The plump woman scratched her head. “What did you call me? Answering—umm, what was that word again?”

“Get us our tea, girl,” Wrynnic snapped irritably, scowling at Minard.

She bit her lip and looked like she wanted to blurt out more questions, but the old man’s expression made her think the better of it. The barmaid hastily left them and disappeared into the kitchen.

The rotund innkeeper glanced over at them curiously but returned to wiping down the bar when Kara made eye contact with him. She studied the three other patrons in the tavern. One was a man smoking a long metal pipe, another an old woman asleep in the corner and the last, a surly one-legged drunk sitting near the bar. None of them seemed interested in her, which suited her just fine.

Kara turned to stare into the fire and let the flames soothe her. It didn’t work. Her thoughts whirled around her head like water down a sinkhole. Almost as bad as the pain, the annoying tingling feeling and emptiness was the growing paranoia she’d been feeling the last few days. She’d felt like she was walking on slippery stone, where one misstep could send her plummeting into a bottomless shaft.

How could she tell the others about this? Minard might very well kill her if he thought she was losing it. Aemon would stress more than he already was and he’d already chewed his nails down to the quick. Who knew how Wrynnic would react? He’d probably tell her the feelings were a normal part of being a scion.

No, wait, I almost forgot. Of being a half-blood scion.

She studied the old man out of the corner of her eye as he spoke of the journey ahead. “From here, we head to Celestial Rest, then make our way to the hidden refuge of my covenant called Safehold. I took the survivors from the massacre at Sunholm there, for only a select few of our scouts know of its location.” A flicker of warmth came to his eyes. “One of the survivors hiding in Safehold is a woman named Erinie. She was one of Sunholm’s librarians and will guide us to the Dead City.”

Minard gestured toward Aemon. “We need warriors, not another quill pusher like him.”

Aemon bared his teeth. “I killed two knives back at the temple. How many did you kill?”

“More than—”

Wrynic pounded his mailed fist on the table. “Do you think I’d bring her if she couldn’t handle herself? Unlike you *civilized* people in Stelemia, we from the Nether must learn to fight from the moment we can walk.”

The old warrior glanced at the overweight innkeeper, who was licking a plate of food clean. “Life is hard out there, and even librarians need to learn how to defend themselves. You here in Stelemia can afford to lower your guard and get fat. Unlike you, we never had an army to defend us.” He touched his sword. “We defend ourselves.”

“So how does Erinie fight?” Minard asked. “The librarians I know have their noses pressed against computer monitors or buried in books.” He drummed his fingers on his staff. “They may know the theory of fighting but not the practice.”

Wrynic’s sigh sounded like two rocks grinding together. “Erinie is an alchemist, a healer and an expert with daggers. What her concoctions don’t kill, her blade will.”

Minard rested his chin in his hands and gave the old man a goading grin. “So tell me, my armored *friend*. When do you plan on killing me? Are you going to slit my throat while I sleep or are you going to knife me in the back?”

Kara stiffened. *Did he really just ask that?*

Wrynic stared at the monk in silence, while Aemon watched them both with eyes as sharp as stalagmites.

“Come now, old man,” Minard said. “I see the way you look at me. I’ve not seen someone look at me that way since the last time I saw my father. He’d just killed my mother and was coming to kill me.” The monk’s grin seemed forced. “I don’t think he liked me.”

So, that is what he is hiding, Kara thought. He projects strength, but is nothing more than a hurt little boy inside.

Wrynic’s hands encircled the hilt of his sword and the muscles in his neck bulged. “If I wanted you dead, *monk*, I’d have killed you by now. In truth, I need you.” He inclined his head toward Aemon. “He has a good heart and shows promise when it comes to fighting but there are creatures out there in the dark born of the old world.” His lip quivered. “The few warriors who survived the attack on Sunholm need to protect the last of my people. That means I need your help to get the half-blood to the Dead City.”

“I can fight,” Aemon growled. “Back under the temple, I killed two knives. Why do you treat me as if I am a shriveled boy?”

“Easy, son,” Wrynic said with a look like he wanted to break a chair over Minard’s head. “Be proud. You did well. But even still, we need his help.”

Aemon’s face screwed up like he’d swallowed a stone. Then he nodded and asked, “How far away is Safehold?”

“It’s four days journey from here. Once we’re through Celestial Rest sometime tomorrow we’ll head beyond the sacred lights and enter the Nether.” The old warrior glowered at Minard. “It’s going to be a dangerous journey to Safehold, but what comes after that will be more so.”

Aemon leaned closer to the old man. “You started discussing the monsters living in the Great Dark at the temple. Why would the ancients create such things? Is it true what Lucien said? That they wanted to remake living things into their own image?”

“They did it because they could,” Kara said.

All three men looked at her and she shrugged. “If there’s one thing I learned about human nature while working the tavern floor, it’s that power corrupts. The rich and powerful men were often the cruelest. They paid well, but we courtesans did our best to avoid them, for they enjoyed hurting us.” She could almost feel drunken hands groping her. Once, that had been normal, but now it felt as far removed from her as the father she’d never known. “The powerful knew they could get away with anything, because of a family name or gold. A poor man, on the other hand, couldn’t pay as well, but knew if he hurt us, he’d pay for his crimes in blood.”

Minard shifted his feet, looking uncomfortable about listening to her talk of her past profession. Aemon nodded. “I think you are right. There are a lot of greedy and corrupt nobles in the Priest King’s spire, and many grovel at his feet but speak ill of him behind his back. Power indeed corrupts.”

At least Aemon had accepted her past. Wrynic didn’t seem to care what she used to do. To him, she was the half-blood scion, savior, and daughter of his beloved Arden.

She’d had enough of Minard’s baiting of Aemon and his revulsion of her past. “Monk, does it upset you that your harbinger of doom used to be a harlot?” She let out a bitter laugh. “Imagine that. A woman like me, being the Scion from the prophecy, come to kill you all!”

“Keep your voice down, girl,” Wrynic snapped under his breath, glancing around to see if any of the other patrons had heard.

Minard wilted under her gaze, like a lit candle wick burning with no tallow. He tried to say something, but Kara cut him off. “Not all of us were born into wealth or felt the call to serve the divines. Maybe you’d feel better if you knew I worked in a classy establishment, unlike the poor wretches who work Blind Fish Wharf for a single copper. Or maybe you’re so high and mighty you—”

Minard raised his hands in surrender. “Enough, please. Your past is your past and it cannot be undone.”

She continued to glare at him, waiting for him to say more. Finally he said, “Scion, I’m sorry if my reaction offends you but such things are not discussed in the temple. Not because it is forbidden, mind you, but because most of my brethren are dusty old people, long past their prime.”

He reached over to run a hand up his staff. “That’s why I became a warrior monk. Sitting around reading old books and tinkering with lights and cables holds no appeal to me. Put a staff in my hand and give me an enemy and I’m content.” He flexed an arm to show her his impressive muscle girth. “My body is but a tool for Ibilirith. An impressive, strong and handsome one, mind you, but a tool nonetheless.”

The barmaid returned carrying a tray of food and cups of shroom tea and put it on the table in front of them. “Will there be anything—” She gasped. “Your eyes...”

“Leave us, girl,” Wrynic snapped and shoved a handful of coppers into her hand.

“Sorry, m’lord. Her eyes startled me is all. Is she blind?”

“Yes, she is, now leave us.”

The plump woman made a hasty retreat back to the bar, her eyes still on Kara. An odd thought came unbidden to Kara's mind. *Could the barmaid be spying for Kahan?*

Kara grimaced. She hated feeling paranoid of strangers but three times now Kahan had almost had her and he'd even known she'd survived the poison. It was as if he was everywhere.

As bad as Kahan was, Herald frightened Kara more. Aemon had said Herald had been the one who threw the javelin that nearly took Kara's life. Kara didn't remember that, but she did recall Herald tossing people off the bridge at the Rift Gate and slaughtering the caravaners at the Limestone Caves. Herald was like a rabid dog, unlike her master, who seemed measured and controlled in comparison.

Back at the hidden exit under the temple, Kara had heard Herald cry out "sister" before the falling stone had cut off her voice. What did it mean? Had she been talking to Kara?

Who was she?

Rage poured out of Kara unexpectedly and she squeezed the mug of tea so hard it risked spilling over the table. Not only did she have to deal with the changes wrought on her body, she also had to deal with a self-righteous monk, the light forsaken passkey, dangerous visiondreams and companions who insisted on calling her *scion* or *half-blood* instead of her own name.

And on top of all that, a group of black-clad maniacs that would stop at nothing to kill her! It was too much.

Someone had to pay for what had been done to her. She searched the faces in the tavern and finally stopped at the barmaid. *That dumb, flushed-faced ox would be a good place to start. I should teach her not to butt her nose into other people's affairs.* When the barmaid returned to take away the dirty dishes, a hot cup of shroom tea to the face should put an end to her nosiness.

No... wait. What am I thinking?

Kara managed to ease up on the mug and gazed down at her hand, as if it were not her own. It seemed like something had taken hold of her for a moment and taken control of her hand. But her hand felt normal now. Perhaps it was only fatigue making her go crazy. *Yes, that has to be it. I'm tired, in pain and afraid.*

That was more than enough for anyone.

Still, the idea that she would hurt the barmaid troubled her. It reminded her of the rage she'd been overcome with back in Jalarfed, or when she'd struck Aemon outside the Tomb of Ibilirith. What was causing it? What if she killed someone?

Aemon was studying her, his teeth hunting for a bit of fingernail to chew, bruised cheek dark purple in the bright light. *He bears my curse too, and still finds room in his heart to love me.* She forced herself to smile one of those toothy smiles men found so endearing. "I'm fine, Aemon. I'm just tired and looking forward to this all being over."

She took a sip of tea and savored the taste. To take her mind off everything, she reached for his hand, looking for comfort in his touch. To her surprise, he snatched it away and glanced at Wrynric who was busy drinking his soup.

"Aemon..."

He refused to make eye contact. "I am sorry, Kara, I cannot."

“Hurry up and finishing eating,” the old warrior said, wiping soup from his beard with a rag. “We must leave in a few minutes.”

Kara felt hurt and confused. Why wouldn't Aemon let her touch him? Was he mad at her about something? He knew she'd never meant to hit him. What else could it be?

She recalled the journey along the river the previous two days. Aemon had been a little distant but he'd still allowed her to touch him. Now that she thought of it, he hadn't touched her like he used to. She'd put it down to him having killed two women, but perhaps there was more to it than that.

Maybe he knows something is wrong with me. Her heart shriveled. *And he's afraid of me.*

She held out her hand still, hoping he'd reach for it. *Please, Aemon, I need you, for my wound throbs and shadows prowl at the edges of my mind.* But he didn't move, nor did he look at her.

For the first time since he'd pulled her from the river back in the Limestone Caves, she felt he wasn't there for her. “Aemon...”

Finally, he looked at Kara. She leaned back and covered her mouth, heart fluttering. There was great pain in his eyes, great pain. But also rage.

He is angry at me. Why else would he look at me this way? The passkey grew heavy, like it wanted to crush her under its weight. *How nice it would be to curl up somewhere, go to sleep and never wake up.*

Five minutes later, they left and Wrynric led them through the dimly lit Twisting Highway toward Celestial Rest. When they were too tired to go any farther, they stopped for the night in a small wayfarer's inn built inside a sacred-light-lit grotto.

The following day, they set out early and near twelfth hour encountered a group of refugees fleeing Celestial Rest who spoke of dire news. “Roryur save us, the metal beasts from Deep Cave have returned and her sacred city will soon be under siege,” a distraught peasant woman moaned. “A week ago, a patrol of twenty soldiers disappeared near the edge of the Great Dark, they did. One of them, horribly burned he was, aye, made it back to the city and spoke of metal beasts that breathed fire.”

The peasant woman hunched her shoulders and looked from side to side, as if she were about to tell them a conspiratorial secret. “It's said he died an hour later, still screaming of metal beasts.”

“Has the Priest King sent armed reinforcements to bolster the city?” Wrynric asked.

“Aye, I've heard he sent envoys to treat with them but none've returned, or so the rumors go.”

“I don't care about envoys. Has he sent martial reinforcements or not?”

The woman shrank from him. “I don't know, m'lord. The town is awash with soldiers and I'm but a humble baker. One man-at-arms looks much like another to my eyes.”

Wrynric dismissed her and the refugees shuffled off again, pushing metal handcarts filled with their belongings. The old warrior shook his head. “I hope the city holds out long enough for us to get through.”

The fleeing refugees left Kara's stomach unsettled. It reminded her of what happened at the Limestone Caves before the stampede that had driven them into

Deep Cave. She glanced over her shoulder to see if Kahan was behind them but it was hard to tell people apart in the dim light. Some of the refugees carried torches but the light swayed back and forth as they walked and made it hard to make out their faces.

As the four companions drew closer to Celestial Rest, the crowds fleeing the town grew thick. In the end, they had to fight their way through the torrent of bodies and hold one another so they were not swept away. Eventually, the tide of refugees became a trickle and they made it to the vast chamber where the city stood.

Kara stopped so suddenly, Aemon walked into her and nearly knocked her off her feet. The sight of what lay ahead left her speechless.

“Welcome to Celestial Rest,” Wrynric said and stepped out of the way so they could get a better look. “The Sacred City of the Divine Healer, Roryur.”

Chapter 18

Aemon.

None of Aemon’s books did Roryur’s city justice. The descriptions written in them were flat and boring. Celestial Rest was anything but flat and boring.

The golden monolith of the capital he had spent so many hours staring at longingly from his office window was as interesting as cleaning the bank vault in comparison. Celestial Rest was so majestic, he struggled to take it all in.

Three colossal mushrooms stood nearly half a mile high, their massive caps golden brown and pitted with glass windows shining with yellow light. The towering fungus bathed in the phosphorescent glow of the bacterial colonies living on the jagged cavern roof.

Clustered around the base of the living towers, like supplicants praying at the feet of the divines, were buildings and towers ringed by a formidable thirty-foot-high stone palisade. The city stood on an ancient, shallow lake bed, allowing the roots of the three mushrooms to run deep.

In the distance among a mushroom forest like the one at Deep Cave, a great fire consumed all in its path. The mysterious metal army of the enemy burned its way through the forest toward the city. In the distance, thick smoke blanketed the air and slowly obscured the bacterial lights.

Like the peasant woman had said, Celestial Rest would soon be under siege. Water dripped into Aemon’s hair and ran down his face, making his cheek itch. The fabled rain called Roryur’s Tears dripped from the stalactites high above, as if the cavern itself wept for what was to come.

“That is the same enemy we saw at Deep Cave,” Aemon said, heart thudding in his ears. “When they get to the city, they will destroy it.”

Minard got to one knee. “Ibirlith, oh great Machine Mother, protect Roryur’s people and your sacred lights. For darkness gathers at the edge of light and seeks to extinguish us all.”

Wrynnic lowered his face, his expression grim. “There’s nothing we can do for the city but be thankful most of the common folk have fled already. If the soldiers defending it had any sense, they’d flee too.”

Aemon stared at the distant fire, its flames illuminating the distant darkness with a savage, fell glow. As he visualized seeing a second city fall to ruins, he closed his eyes and sobbed. “Then what do we do? We should at least tell them to run or do something to try and help.”

“No,” Wrynnic growled. “We must get the half-blood to Safehold and then take her to the Dead City. The sooner we get her there, the sooner she can enlist the Metal Man’s help to fight the enemy and stop this madness.”

“Then there’s no time to waste,” Minard said. “We must hurry, because that forest won’t slow them long.”

The old warrior led them deeper into the cavern, following the carved road toward the city. When they passed an abandoned guard tower, Wrynnic walked backward to address them. “Celestial Rest is made up of two parts, Upper and Lower City. We must enter Lower City and go to the Telmed Gate. From there, we head to the edge of the cavern and enter the Nether.” He gestured toward the enemy in the distance. “I’d avoid leading you into the city if I could, but the only other entrance to the Nether around here is on the other side of them. That path is easier to traverse than the one we must now take, but obviously, it’s closed to us.”

Soon they passed under the edge of the great mushroom caps. The living roof sheltered them from Roryur’s Tears and blocked the greenish light from the bacteria. Though the rain had made Aemon’s hair and clothes damp, it had refreshed him.

As they neared Lower City, they witnessed controlled chaos everywhere. Soldiers hastily erected metal sheets over large cracks in the wall while officers shouted orders over the cacophony of hammers, raised voices and booted feet. Large parts of the defenses had lapsed into disrepair. Cracks and missing chunks of stone were all over the place, and some of the towers were little more than mounds of rubble. Clearly, Celestial Rest’s leaders had not given the defense of their city much attention for many years.

Aemon bet they regretted that decision now.

I suppose I cannot blame them. This part of Stelemia has been at peace for many years. According to the banking intelligence reports, the only threat Celestial Rest faced was the odd incursion of a beast or the occasional raid by pale-skinned brigands who made their home in the Great Dark.

Still, the state of the defenses was yet another sign Stelemian society had become complacent over time. For too long, its leaders had been focused inward on selfish short-term goals like enriching themselves or fighting petty factional conflicts like the houses at Deep Cave had done.

Now Aemon’s people were threatened like they had never been before. Did Stelemia have the strength to brush off the rust and decay of centuries of stagnation to fight for its very existence?

I hope, for all our sakes, it does.

Aemon put his arm through Kara’s. “Hold onto me. I do not want to lose you like I did back at the River of the Gods.”

She stared down at his arm as if she was not sure what it was. Then her eyes searched his. He bit the inside of his cheek. *She is probably thinking why am I holding her now, when I would not back at the Bellhole Tavern. I wanted to, Kara, I really wanted to, but—*

A giant bell tolled from somewhere in Upper City, drowning out all other sound. Aemon knew of the bell. He had read it only tolled once a year, during the Den' Vozrozhdeniya Celebration.

That special day signified the rebirth of a new year; now it signaled the final hours of Roryur's city.

The bell drew Kara's attention away from him. When it stopped ringing, she said, "These people. They need to flee."

"They are soldiers. If they run, they would be branded as deserters and executed."

She wiped water from her forehead. "You saw what the enemy did at Deep Cave. What chance have they got?"

Before he could come up with an answer, they reached the gate and were met by an iron spear point held by a guard who looked eager to find any excuse to kill them.

"Who are you?" the guard demanded.

Wrynic stepped forward. "Travelers. We need to get through the city before the enemy arrives."

The guard looked each of them over. "Old man, you look like you could handle yourself in a fight." He nodded toward Minard. "And a monk of Ibilirith is always welcome here, especially one who wields a staff."

Next he focused on Kara. "You, blind woman, you can help the healers. They'll need all the helping hands they can get when the enemy arrives." He gestured at Aemon with the sharp point of his spear. "And that runt of a boy can carry buckets of water to douse fires."

Aemon's hackles rose. *Runt. How dare you!*

Wrynic spoke before Aemon could tell the guard to drown himself in Crystal Lake. "We're not here to fight. We have pressing business elsewhere. The sooner you let us through, the sooner you can go back to defending the wall."

"Eh, what business is that? There's little beyond Roryur's city except the approaching enemy and the Great Dark. No one would be foolish enough to come here while..."

The guard stroked the gray-shot stubble on his chin. "Has the Priest King sent you? You know what happened to the last lot of fools he sent out here to treat with the enemy, right?"

"No, we were not sent by the Priest King," Wrynic replied. "We're here on personal business. I don't have time to argue. We *must* be allowed to enter the city and pass through the Telmed Gate. Time is running out."

The two men glared at one another for a long moment, then the guard lowered his spear. "Bah, what do I care if some moronic fools want to go to their deaths?" He stepped out of the way and narrowed his eyes. "If I find out you're here to aid the enemy, I'll see that you're handed over to the resident Inquisitor. You can't imagine what she'll do to you."

Wrynsic motioned the others to follow, then led them through the gate. They found the city filled with soldiers, squashed in almost shoulder to shoulder, their iron armor reflecting golden-bulbed sacred lights illuminating the streets. Officers bellowed orders to their subordinates while messenger boys, squires and gray-robed healers tended to their duties.

A knight in full-plate armor knelt before a ten-foot-high statue of Divine Roryur, who looked down upon him with a serene, timeless expression. Two more knights sat on a stone bench nearby, letting their squires polish their boots. Each had the crossed dagger insignia of House Filo emblazoned on their shields.

House Filo stood among the wealthiest and most powerful noble houses in Stelemia and Aemon suspected they might be one of the secret owners of the Royal Stelemian Bank. They certainly had the wealth, influence and political acumen for it.

At least they had taken the threat to Celestial Rest seriously enough to send some of their knights to defend it. No, that was being too generous to a greedy, corrupt and murderous house like Filo. They were there to protect their business interests. The house owned farmland, a construction business and several warehouses in Celestial Rest. If the city fell, they would lose it all.

Wrynsic led them down the main thoroughfare, seemingly oblivious to anything but his end goal. They rounded a corner and almost ran into a company of men-at-arms pushing their way through the crowds of soldiers and messenger boys filling the street. Aemon dragged Kara against the wall of an abandoned jeweler to let them pass. Wrynsic and Minard joined them, and watched as the armored men approached.

The men-at-arms were led by a man in gleaming silver armor who wore an intricately forged helm made to resemble a savage cat's head. The only visible part of him was the glint of eyes through the narrow eye slits of the helm.

In one hand he carried a great warhammer and in the other, a huge metal shield connected to wires running down his arm from somewhere inside his armor. Emblazoned on his breastplate was a silver shield with a yellow nimbus around it.

Aemon gasped. "That is Lord Laython, Chosen of Lydan, and the right hand of the Priest King himself." He studied the man closely. "That shield he carries is the one Lydan wielded against the Ancient Enemy during the War in Heaven and is said to be made of solid steel. It is one of only a handful of forged steel items left in existence."

Perhaps the city stood a chance after all.

Kara watched Lord Laython pass. "I've seen him once before, back at the capital during a Den Sveta celebration. Many a woman's legs would turn to shallow water mush if he so much as glanced their way."

"If he's here, things must be dire indeed," Minard shouted over the thud of marching feet.

"Things are worse than you know," Wrynsic replied. "If Celestial Rest falls, there will be no major garrison left between here and the Lydan and Flowstone gates."

Aemon knew what that would mean. If one of those gates fell to the enemy, the main cavern of Stelemia would be imperiled. Not only did the main cavern boast a large population, it also produced much of the food eaten in the caverns. If Gravel

Bank Bridge, Crystal Cove or the capital came under siege or fell, food production would be in jeopardy and people would need to turn to the granaries for food—a situation that would inevitably end in mass starvation.

Another vital place the enemy could attack would be the Serdtse Power Station. The loss of that would result in large swathes of Stelemia being plunged into eternal darkness.

The thought was terrifying.

“Where’s the enemy coming from and how can they move around without being seen?” Minard asked. “Last we heard, they were at Deep Cave and Ebon Shelf.”

Wrynric stroked his beard. “My guess is they’re moving through the Nether. The world beyond Stelemia is filled with tunnels and chambers, many unexplored or rarely visited.”

The old man paused as a trumpet blared. When the sound died away, he continued, “There are entrances to the Nether all throughout Stelemia, some little more than holes a child would struggle to fit through; others are large enough to march an army. This means the enemy can appear anywhere they choose, provided they can fit.”

Kara shook Aemon's arm. “I know some of those men-at-arms and they’re looking this way.”

It took him a moment to work out who she was talking about. Three of the soldiers were staring at her as they marched by. They wore chain armor and had leather doublets with yellow mushrooms emblazoned on them. He had seen the insignia before but could not name the house. “Who are they?”

“They were regulars at the tavern I worked at. They know me... I used to sit with them and roll their dice and serve them drinks. They were there the night Kahan attacked.”

The men slowed their pace, and Aemon grimaced. “What will they do if they find out it is you?”

Before she could reply, a sergeant barked at the three men to get back in line. They gave one last look at Kara and then hurried away, their eyes remaining on her until they disappeared around a corner. Aemon thanked Lydan that they had not been able to stop and confront her.

Kahan might have survived his assault on the temple and be tracking them at this very moment. The last thing they needed was for some armored fools to single Kara out and tell their compatriots about what she used to be. If they did, she could have dozens of rowdy men propositioning her.

“I am surprised they recognized you,” Aemon said. “You look different now.”

“I’m not so surprised. I was always their favorite courtesan and they’ve spent many hours admiring my face and bust.” Her lips spread into a small smile. “They used to call me...” She frowned.

Aemon swallowed. “What is it?”

Kara half closed her eyes. “I don’t remember.” Her voice was little more than a whisper. “Why don’t I remember?”

He touched her hair. “Are you all right?”

She only nodded and turned away.

When the column of men had gone by, the companions were able to return to the street and resume their journey to the Telmed gate. Many of the buildings

shadowing the road were fronted with colorful tapestries. Some were covered in patterns, while a large, intricately decorated one hanging in front of an apothecary depicted Roryur surrounded by a halo of greenish gold. Her left hand rested on the head of a crippled old woman while her right hand held a red cross, the meaning of which eluded Aemon.

The majesty of the tapestries lining the streets paled in comparison to the colossal trio of mushrooms sheltering them from Roryur's Tears. Aemon stared up at the towering stems and marveled at the hundreds of windows and balconies carved into them. Hanging from the underside of the caps were huge clusters of multi-colored sacred lights with ladders leading down to them to allow members of the Order of Ibilirith to conduct maintenance or repair broken bulbs.

What a job that must be. Standing on a narrow platform, repairing broken lights and wires nearly half a mile off the ground!

Aemon sighed wistfully. What an amazing place to live. If only things were different and there was not an enemy army approaching. He could spend years exploring Celestial Rest, soaking up its culture and observing the comings and goings of its people. Authors had truly failed to do Radashan Crevice justice with their descriptions, and again, they had failed here.

The companions stopped to drink from a white marble fountain, its surface polished to gleaming perfection. If the city's leaders had put half the time and effort into their defenses as they had making the city appear beautiful, they might not have had to rush around at the last moment to try and fix them.

Beauty was fleeting and it could be snuffed out in moments when the enemy arrived.

Moving off, Aemon pointed out a lovely gold statue of Roryur in front of a public bath to Kara. She forced a smile but that was all. She barely looked at anything but the faces around her. Did she not see the beauty all around them? This might be the last time anyone got to admire it.

Kara had become withdrawn since leaving the temple. Her back had become stooped and her eyes had bags under them. Was it the passkey's doing or her wound?

He gnawed at the inside of his cheek. Why had he pulled away from Kara back at the Bellhole Tavern? He should have ignored Wrynnic and held her hand and told her everything would be all right. Now, more than ever, she needed someone to comfort her.

The night before, at the wayfarer's inn, had been a long one for Aemon. He had spent hours tossing and turning in bed, feeling guilty for what he had done.

Curse you, Wrynnic, for making me keep my distance from Kara. So what if I love her? She wanted me to comfort her and now I have spurned her.

According to a book Aemon had read, love could conquer all. Even whole cities in the old tales had been torn apart and put back together because of it. Love had even made a mortal man turn himself into metal so that he may live forever and await the return of his beloved Lady Ibilirith.

But spurning Kara had not been the only thing that had kept Aemon awake. Since the battle under the temple, every time he closed his eyes to sleep, he saw the face of the woman he had killed. She had been the first person he had ever slain and part of him regretted it, and felt there could have been another way. The

other part knew there was not. The woman would have murdered Kara had he not stopped her. He felt less for the second knife he had felled. Her mask had never come off, and he had never seen her face. It was easier to see that knife as a faceless monster. Not a real woman, with a name, a mother and father. Just a monster.

Easier to think of our enemies that way.

Distant booms erupted from somewhere in the distance. Seconds later, glass and mushroom flesh exploded outward from halfway up one of the towering stems. More booms followed, and glass and fungal flesh plummeted down into the city, crushing all beneath it.

It was Deep Cave all over again. Except this time they were in the city, not watching it from the outside.

Wrynic grabbed Kara and Aemon and shoved them toward a doorway. He kicked in the door and pushed them bodily inside, just as debris crashed to the street outside. Something big landed on the roof and bits of broken tile and twisted metal fell around them.

Aemon threw himself on top of Kara and they fell to the ground. He covered her as best he could from the falling debris. The old man stumbled over and held his shield over them, grunting as something struck him on the head.

Then the rain of debris stopped. Aemon climbed off Kara and quickly checked her over for injury.

"I'm fine," she said. "Thank you."

Wrynic helped her to her feet. "Are you sure?" Kara nodded and he turned to Aemon. "Quick thinking, son."

Aemon did not know what to say to the other man's praise so he only nodded like Kara had.

Minard brushed dust from his robes. "Ibilitirith is merciful. I didn't even get a scratch."

The cries of the wounded and dying flooded in from outside but were drowned out by a long series of distant booms as more projectiles hurtled toward the city. "Not merciful enough, it seems," Wrynic muttered as he went back to the door and stuck his head outside. "It's chaos out there, but we must press on. This is only the beginning of what is to come. To stay here any longer is suicide."

They followed him back out into the street. Dead and dying soldiers lay around them, crushed by fallen debris. *And there is nothing we can do to help them.* Aemon hated that. These soldiers all had names and loved ones somewhere out there. Hopefully, the healers would get to them soon. But with all the destruction and growing number of casualties, the healers would be overwhelmed... or dead.

He screwed his eyes shut and tried not to think about the soldiers being left here to die a slow and painful death

Something exploded high above their heads. Aemon opened his eyes and saw smoke billowing from gaping holes in the great mushroom stems. More explosions erupted outward from the stem as the houses and shops inside caught fire and jars of flammable liquids were caught in the inferno.

Aemon mouthed a prayer to Lydan that no one remained up there and for the defenders to come to their senses and flee before it was too late. For if one of the great mushrooms fell... The whole city would be crushed under it.

As they passed onto an arched metal bridge spanning a water-filled canal, rounds of projectiles roared overhead. This time the projectiles smashed into the inner side of the walls on the opposite side of the city from the enemy. Men, metal and stone were blasted outward. Eight more projectiles followed, each tearing ragged chunks through the defenses.

All at once, hundreds of soldiers began to flee the walls and down into the streets. Never in his life had Aemon seen such terror in so many. Even though he was more than four hundred feet away, he could feel the hysterical fear from the routing soldiers wash over him.

The numbing terror he had experienced when confronted by Kahan at the bridge returned. They were going to die. He wanted to be anywhere but here. He put his arm though Kara's again and fought to control his fear. *I am a warrior now. I cannot allow myself to be afraid.*

When they reached the highest point of the arched bridge, Aemon got a good look at the damage to the defenses. Parts of the wall had collapsed on every side of Celestial Rest.

The city lay open.

Trumpets blared and a hundred drums beat as officers tried to regain control over the routing defenders. For all their shouting and cursing, few soldiers returned to their posts; most were too busy fleeing toward the gates.

A catapult atop a turret along part of the wall flung burning pitch at the enemy. Before the fiery liquid had splattered over its mark, the engineers had already begun reloading the engine. Suddenly, the tower exploded, as the metal beasts focused fire on it. Jars of pitch rained down into the city's streets and burst into flame. The distant screams of those caught in the inferno drifted over the rooftops.

Aemon shuddered. At least he could not see the people burning. The sound was horrible enough.

Minard raised his staff in the air. "This battle is lost already. If Roryur's city can fall so quickly, then—"

"Shut up, and keep moving," Wrynric snapped. "The half-blood is the key to our salvation."

Kara looked troubled by the old man's words and Aemon could not blame her. The weight of the world had been thrust upon her shoulders. Perhaps that was why her back was so stooped.

If he were Kara, he would have been broken by the weight of it by now. *I hope you are strong enough to bear this burden, Kara. I wish I could do more to help you.*

When they reached the end of the bridge, a group of soldiers raced down the street toward them from the direction of Telmed Gate. Minard waved them down. "Why are you fleeing the wall?"

"Get out of our way, monk," the female sergeant leading them screamed. She looked half mad with terror, as did those under her command who hurried after her.

"What's happening?" Minard insisted, but stepped out of the way so not to be trampled by the sergeant.

She slowed, the other soldiers pushing past, her breaths ragged. "Our commander fled when the walls came under fire. Dozens of us died... and he left me to pick up the pieces." She grunted as a man with a bloody face shoved past

her. "But I'm not staying on the wall to die when our noble officers have already abandoned their posts, so I ordered a retreat." She moved off again.

"Are there enemies on this side of the city?" Minard called after her, but no answer came. The sergeant ran on.

Once the soldiers had gone, the four companions rushed down the street. Soon the Telmed Gate came into view and they slowed their pace. The gate appeared to be deserted, the wall around it a blasted, smoking ruin.

Broken bodies were strewn carelessly about, some blackened by fire and still smoldering. Aemon felt nauseated as he got a whiff of the aroma of cooking meat.

A barrage of projectiles exploded somewhere above them. Wrynic glanced up at embers and mushroom flesh rained down nearby. "If that keeps up, it won't be long before Upper City comes crashing down on top of us."

Kara rubbed her hand over where the passkey was hidden under her robe. "Why isn't everyone leaving, then? Look over there at that guard tower in the distance. There are people up there setting up a catapult." She shook her head slowly. "Can't they see what's happening? They should be running."

She was right. There were soldiers loading catapults in the guard towers on the wall facing the enemy horde. Deep Cave had tried to kill the metal beasts with pitch and it had not worked. Had no one told them that?

"You speak like the commanders here know what they're doing," Wrynic snapped. "Anyone with a brain would have fled the city hours ago. They could have left in an orderly column, but now they'll flee in a ragged rout and scores of people will be crushed against walls or trampled underfoot."

Minard kicked a fallen chunk of mushroom flesh. "Most are already fleeing, old man. Had they stood together and called upon the divines to protect them—"

Wrynic roared with laughter. "Your divines can't save them."

Minard's face darkened.

"Lord Laython is an expert fighter and has led soldiers into battle half a dozen times," Aemon said incredulously. "Surely he knows what he is doing."

The old man slapped his mailed hand against the front of a two-story stone house. "Laython is a fool. This city is lost."

Minard frowned. "Shut up, you cynical old ox. We have to make a stand somewhere. No one is better suited to leading the defenses than Lord Laython."

Wrynic laughed a second time. This time so loud that a looter coming out of a nearby house dropped a sack full of her ill-gotten treasure to stare at him. "The high and mighty Lord Laython has come here to die, as have those who follow him," the old man said. "The Priest King was an empty-headed husk for sending him here."

Aemon glared at the old warrior, then turned away to watch the looter flee down the street. Wrynic was probably right and they all knew it.

Moving off again, they cautiously approached the gate. Aemon let go of Kara so he had better access to his weapon. If any enemies were out there, he needed room to swing his mace.

They leaned against the wall beside the gate. Wrynic turned to Minard. "Go outside and tell me what you see. There should be farms and scattered houses but more importantly, a small fort. If the fort has fallen, we're in trouble. The path leading to the Nether passes by it."

Without questioning why he was the one being sent, Minard made his way through the gate and disappeared around the outer edge of the wall. While they waited for him to return, Aemon began to chew on the inside of his cheek. With no fingernails left, he had to make do with what he had.

Debris rained over the city as projectiles continued to pound into the mushroom stems high above. Some of the projectiles hit the defenses, but most were directed at Upper City. Perhaps the enemies were trying to topple one of the colossal mushrooms to crush Lower City under it.

If their goal was the complete destruction of Celestial Rest, they were well on their way to achieving it. Fires burned all over the underside of the mushroom caps and up their stems and the air had become choked by falling ash. It would not be long before one of the stems weakened enough to collapse.

Roryur's sacred city had become a death trap.

Then it truly hit Aemon. They were leaving the war behind. Once they left the city they would be making their way into the Great Dark—the place that haunted the imagination of all those who lived under the sacred lights. He had gotten a small taste of true darkness back in the Limestone Caves and it had terrified him. Now he was close to heading into a place that had never known light. A place of lurking horrors and ancient mystery, of heretics and madmen.

Maybe the Great Dark was not all bad though. Aemon had never heard of Sunholm or the Covenant of the Lost Sun. Perhaps some small glimmer of civilization existed out there in the endless night.

His stomach felt as if it were twisting itself into knots. Glancing at Kara, he admired her moist lips and flowing white hair. He could not let fear take control. He had made an oath to her and no matter where it took him, he had to be brave. His heart ached to put his arms around her and hold her tight, but Wrynic would notice and confront him.

Minard returned and gave them the all clear. Aemon swallowed the bubbling fear at the back of his throat. It was time to leave Stelemia.

Would he return one day or die in the Great Dark, far from home and the sacred lights?

They left the city and a few minutes later emerged from under the shelter of the great mushroom caps. Roryur's Tears rained down on them from the roiling cloud of acrid smoke that slowly smothered the entire chamber.

Nearby, a stone fort sat on a rise overlooking the city. Wrynic led them toward it. When they neared the fort, they found the gates open and weapons haphazardly dumped on the ground around it, as if the soldiers stationed there had thrown down their arms and ran. There were no signs the enemy had been there, nor any indication they had fired their projectiles at it.

The closest ranks of the metal beasts were about half a mile away, so the four companions kept low to the ground as they made their way up the rise. From the top, they got a good view of the chaos spreading throughout the cavern. Much of the mushroom forest harboring the enemy was a smoldering waste, painting their bodies bright orange as their armor reflected the flames.

A great banner out in the lake between the city and the burning forest drew Aemon's attention. The banner bore the silver shield sigil of Lydan. Beneath it marched Lord Laython, leading his host of armed soldiers through the knee-deep

water toward the enemy. The metal beasts did not react to his approach but continued to fire their projectiles at the city from the edge of the flames.

Laython looked like a hero of old, leading his oath-sworn warriors to glory in the face of great adversity. The odds were against him, but he was the chosen Shield of Lydan and right hand of the Priest King. His bravery would live forever in the great tales of Stelemia, alongside those of Jorgen the Sunderer of the Abyss, Radashan the Holy Founder and Lucitiel—Igniter of the First Flame.

“That vain fool,” Wrynic spat. “He throws his life away as I knew he would. He should have fallen back—”

The old man’s words caught in his throat as a dozen human-shaped figures shoved their way to the front of the gleaming mass of enemies. They looked like enormously fat men with small, stumpy legs and arms, but still managed to stand about twice the height of a human. They were too far away for Aemon to make out their features, but it appeared as if they were dressed head to toe in plate-metal armor, with large cylinders attached to their backs.

A volley of crossbow bolts shot forth from the Stelemian host, but the iron-tipped projectiles bounced harmlessly off the enemy. Aemon’s heart sank. If crossbows could not pierce their armor, what chance would spears, pikes or swords have?

Lord Laython, the Silver Champion, let out a great, bellowing war cry that drifted up to Aemon from the battlefield. “For Lydan, for the Priest King and the Golden City!”

The enemy was not intimidated and instead raised their arms and pointed long metal rods toward the approaching lines of soldiers. Liquid fire erupted from the tips of the rods and engulfed Lord Laython and the front ranks of his host in flame. His banner caught alight and the silver shield it bore withered to ash.

The ensuing screams coming from below were things of nightmares. Aemon spun around and retched. What good were swords and shields against that?

Kara covered her ears and wailed. Minard dropped his staff and bags and fell to his knees, raised his arms in the air and cried out to Ibilirith. Wrynic gazed on the carnage with a solemn, knowing expression.

Aemon felt rage like none he had ever known before. The old warrior knew. He knew it would happen. Why did he not do something to try to stop it?

Wrynic looked at him, as if reading his thoughts. “There was nothing we could have done,” he said over the screams. “I have lived long enough with those who can see the future to know that some things are inevitable. Our paths are set on foundations as hard as the stone beneath our feet.” He tapped his boot on the ground. “The path can be broken, but the strength required is great. Alas, at the moment, we lacked the strength to stop this. But one day, when we return, we will be mighty and be able to bring an end to the horror.”

Aemon wiped vomit from his mouth. “We could have warned him.”

The old man bared his teeth. “Do you think he’d have listened, boy? Laython had glory and maidens hearts to win.” Wrynic took a deep breath. “Besides, Arden was not completely clear on what city would fall nor when, so it’s not like I knew this was coming before we got here.” He watched the distant slaughter. “Mark my words, all of you—many will die in the coming days. Arden foresaw it. He also foresaw a way we can win—and we have her here with us now.”

Kara fell to her knees and sobbed uncontrollably. “How do you expect me to stop them? If Lord Laython and all the soldiers of Deep Cave and Celestial Rest couldn’t so much as hurt them, how do you expect me to be able to fight them?”

Wrynric raised his head and let Roryur’s Tears fall onto his weathered face. “I believe in Arden’s vision. You and the Metal Man will find a way to stop this.”

Stop this! Aemon raged inside. *No one can stop this.* The horrible screams fell silent. *No one...*

After a moment of silence, the old warrior dragged Kara to her feet and led them off the rise and toward the entrance to the Great Dark. They followed him numbly along a worn path that ran between small homesteads lit by sacred lights. Through his tears, Aemon could see row upon row of healing herbs and flowers growing in the fertile dirt around them. The crops would have one day been harvested for the healers of Celestial Rest or for merchants to sell in markets of distant cities.

Now they would all burn or be trampled under the forged metal boots of the enemy.

When they got to the edge of the cultivated land, they made their way toward a dark crevice in the cavern wall. The very edge of Stelemia.

A few minutes later, they arrived and stopped beside an abandoned guard tower. They stared back at Celestial Rest. A great inferno had turned one of the colossal mushrooms into a living torch. Smoke blanketed much of the city and parts of the surrounding lake and would soon drown the whole chamber in toxic fumes, killing anyone who remained alive.

Smoldering mounds of blackened bodies lay out in the lake, where Lord Laython had unsuccessfully tried to assault the metal beasts. How would the Priest King react when he learned of Laython’s fate? What of the families of those who had died? Who would help them now that their loved ones were gone?

All this death and destruction conducted in the span of hours. An ancient city in ruins, its people scattered to distant chambers, its defenders dead or fleeing in terror. The beauty and wonder it contained lost to darkness and flame.

Kara stared at the city unblinking, her wet bangs glued to her forehead. She looked small, overwhelmed and defeated.

Wrynric was wrong. No one could stop the enemy—not Kara, not the Priest King, nor ten thousand soldiers.

Stelemia was doomed.

Finally, they turned away and entered the crevice, the sounds of the dying city echoing around them as Roryur wept.

Chapter 19

Kara.

Darkness engulfed Kara as she entered the crevice. Wrynric lit a torch and the four companions used the dim light to pick their way through a steep,

narrow, winding path between wagon-sized boulders. It was tiring work, and she started to feel lightheaded.

The darkness, the raging battle behind them, the weight of her destiny and knowledge of where they were heading triggered Kara to withdraw deep inside herself. How could she stop the metal beasts when whole armies burned to ash before them?

Wrynric and Arden were wrong. The task was beyond her. She would die out here in the Great Dark.

Part of her wanted to die, to end the pain, to end the suffering, and hoped it would happen soon. *I am no savior. I am nothing!*

She struggled to stay focused on where she put her feet, for the ground was treacherous and it would be easy to stumble and break an ankle. If she could focus on that long enough, she might forget about everything for a time. And she needed that.

The pain from her wound, the pain in her soul and the ceaseless tingling in her brain had been grinding her down, bit by bit. *My life withers away like old, uneaten mushroom bread. How can I go on like this?*

A rock gave way under her feet and she fell to her knees, bruising them on the hard ground. Minard lifted her and held her until he was sure she had her footing. His brown eyes searched hers, but she only stared back at him. There was nothing she could say or do to make all the pain go away.

He gently touched her face with his calloused fingers. "Do you need me to carry you, Scion?"

"There's no point," Wrynric said. "We're at the end of the crevice."

Minard turned away. "So where to now then, Old Man?"

"See that over there?" Wrynric pointed at a rope hanging down the crevice wall. "We need to climb it."

Kara used her dark-vision to follow the rope upward but couldn't see where it ended.

"How far up do we have to go?" Minard asked.

Wrynric tugged the rope. "About sixty feet."

A sudden bout of headspins made Kara stagger against the wall. How could she make it up the rope like this? "I don't think I can climb," she said. "I'm weak and feel lightheaded."

"I can carry you up on my back," Minard said.

I don't want to go up. I don't want to go on anymore. I want this to be over.

Those words were there in the back of her mind, but she could not bring herself to say them out loud, for to do so would make them real. *But I want them to be real. I want to leap off a great height and dash my broken body on the jagged rocks.*

Then she remembered Aemon's touch. The love in his eyes, the feel of his arms around her.

She saw double of Aemon through the headspins. He hung back, his gaze fixed on the rope. He'd surprised her back in Celestial Rest. She'd thought he'd never want to touch her again after what happened at the Bellhole Tavern. Yet he had held her in the chaotic streets of Celestial Rest and thrown himself on top of her to protect her from falling debris. The relief she'd felt at his touch...

You lost everything because of me, Aemon. If I give in, it will have all been for nothing. Berda, Nyla, Mihiri, Mensig and all the others who died at the Golden Keg, their deaths will have been for nothing too. A little strength returned to Kara. My loyal friend, you're my light in the smothering darkness, the only reason I will press on and not give in.

"Aemon," she said, her focus slowly coming back. "Can you make it up the rope?"

He blinked. "Yes," he said, a little too quickly.

Minard chuckled, "Don't fall, little lord."

"Shut your mouth, monk," Wrynric snapped. "We've a lot of climbing ahead of us, so conserve your strength for that." He handed the torch to Aemon, then walked to a mound of rocks and started shoving them aside. "My people have hidden equipment here that will help us."

They watched as he dragged a sack out from under the rocks. He upended it and an assortment of items spilled out. Metal loops and hooks, corded harnesses, belts, leather gloves and two strange vests with holders sewn onto their backs. "These items will supplement the equipment we took from the temple. It should be enough to get us to Safehold."

The old man picked up a rounded, metallic object. "And this is a timekeeping device." He held it up to the torch and turned a dial on the side, then nodded in satisfaction.

Minard gaped at the device. "Where did you get that? We have one at the temple and believed it to be the only one left in existence."

Wrynric shrugged. "We had dozens of them at Sunholm. There are no sacred lights out here to tell the time from, so these little things are the only way we can keep track of the hours."

"Well, if we survive this, perhaps my order can trade you for some." Minard gestured at the supplies. "What are those vests for?"

Wrynric donned one of the strange vests and turned his back to Aemon. "Place the torch in the holder."

Aemon did as instructed and stepped away. The torch burned four feet over Wrynric's head, bathing him and the rock around him in orange light. "It's impossible to climb while holding a torch, so my covenant made these. As you can probably tell, they're not the safest things to use, but without them, we'd have to climb blind."

"Well, in that case, the quill pusher is going to have to use the other vest," Minard said. "I'm carrying the Scion."

"Do not call me that," Aemon snarled, then went and picked up the other vest and slipped it on. Wrynric lit a second torch and placed it in Aemon's holder. "Alright, let's get ready to move out," the old man said.

Each of them put on a pair of gloves and one of the belts. Next, they fastened the metal rings to the belts and Wrynric fed the end of the rope through them. Aemon helped the old warrior put Kara into a harness and tie her to Minard's back. She wrapped her legs around the monk's waist and rested her chin on top of his bald head.

Minard flexed his shoulders and twisted back and forth at the hip. “As much as I love carrying beautiful women around on my back, it’s a little hard to breathe. Can’t the Scion just hold onto me while I climb?”

Wrynric shook his head. “Do you want her to fall? Some of these ropes will take hours to ascend. No one can hold on that long.”

Aemon stared upward and sucked in his lower lip. He appeared to be having second thoughts.

“You can do this, Aemon,” Kara whispered to him.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “I will try.”

The climb wasn’t as bad as Kara feared. At first it had been terrifying, and she’d clutched onto Minard so tight he’d quickly asked her to ease off before she crushed his ribs. Reluctantly, she had, and placed her trust in him and the harness she was strapped in.

Minard carried her up the rope almost effortlessly, it seemed. Wrynric and Aemon, bogged down with the group’s food supplies and equipment, had little trouble either.

From the top of the ledge the lights of Celestial Rest were no longer visible, but the clamor of battle still echoed along the crevice. Some of the booms were so loud they dislodged bits of grit from the ceiling, and it rained down on top of them.

Wrynric cut the rope. “If Kahan is behind us, he’s going to have to find his own way up.” He took a long drink of water. “There’ll be another rope at the next climb but after that, we’ll need to make do with the ones we took from the temple.”

Aemon moaned. “How many more cliffs are there?”

“Too many,” Wrynric replied. “No one carved roads or built bridges out here, so don’t expect an easy journey. The best you can hope for is that someone has traveled the same path as you and left ropes or markers behind so you know where you’re going.”

“How well do you know this area?”

Wrynric shrugged. “Well enough. These caves are tame compared to what we’ll traverse on our journey to the Dead City, so make the most of them while you can. That said—keep your wits about you; there’s plenty of danger here and one misstep could cost you your life.”

The next rope was longer than the first by a good fifteen feet and the rock was wet and slippery. Wrynric, Kara and Minard made it to the top unscathed and waited for Aemon. The rope creaked as he made his way up, moving from side to side.

Then it went still.

Kara waited thirty seconds and it still hadn’t moved. *Aemon...* Her heart leapt into her throat as she started crawling over to the edge to look down and see what was wrong.

Wrynric dragged her back. “Stay here, girl. One slip and you’re done for.”

“But something might’ve happened to him. What if—”

The rope started moving again. Her heart pounded as she waited for the light from Aemon’s torch to appear. Then it did and she felt such relief she almost burst into tears.

When his face appeared at the edge, she struggled not to crawl over and kiss him on the lips. *I have nothing left to live for without you. Don't scare me like that again!*

She helped him to his feet. "What happened?"

Aemon removed the torch from the holder. "What do you mean?"

"The rope stopped moving. I thought..." She squeezed his hand.

"My arms got tired and I needed to stop on one of the footholds for a few minutes and rest." He saw something over her shoulder and snatched his hand away. "I am all right."

Why had he pulled away? Kara spun around to find Wrynic glowering at him. The old man glanced at her, then turned and started gathering up the rope. Aemon moved away to drink from one of the water skins.

So, Wrynic was behind Aemon not wanting to touch her. But why would he care?

Angry that the old man would do this to Aemon, Kara went to confront him but saw something out of the corner of her eye. A chill ran through her. A huge head stared down at them from a ledge above their heads. She fell back and screamed, "Look out."

Minard and Aemon reached for their weapons while Wrynic started waving his arms around. "Don't panic. There's no threat." The old warrior held up his torch so that the light fell on the head.

Kara blinked. It wasn't a creature at all. It was large skull, with empty eye sockets and a broken horn on its nose.

"He's called the Watcher," Wrynic said. "He's been sitting up there so long, no one knows how or when he got there." The old warrior gestured at a mound of what appeared to be refuse on the ground beneath the skull. "Those are offerings left by members of my covenant who pass this way. The Watcher marks the edge of the Nether, or as you lot call it, the Great Dark."

Taking a silver coin from inside a pouch hidden in his armor, Wrynic tossed it among the offerings.

Kara gasped, "What are you doing?" She'd held silver once in her life—the one he gave her—and here he was dropping another onto the ground as if it were nothing more than a tarnished copper piece.

"We offer things of value to him, so he watches over us in the dark."

"I didn't think you were superstitious old man," Minard chuckled. "You upset many of my brethren back at the temple with your skepticism of our order and its ways."

Wrynic mouthed a silent prayer to the Watcher, then said, "Many people have lost their lives out here, for danger lurks everywhere. Either you find it or it finds you. For that reason, we take what luck we can."

The next climb Wrynic had to make without a rope. When he got to the top he lowered one down so the rest of them could follow. At one point, Minard lost his grip and he and Kara dangled out in space. Kara used what little strength she had left to hold the rope long enough for the monk to regain a firm grip. "Hurry up and grab it," she screamed. He flailed around, headbutting her in the chin. "Gah, are you trying to get us killed?"

Finally, Minard managed to wrap his clumsy hands around the rope. “Phew, that was close,” he said, breathing fast. “I owe my Lady Ibilirith my life.”

Kara narrowed her eyes. “I didn’t know my name was Ibilirith.”

The monk grunted. “I’d probably laugh at that if my arms didn’t feel like they were being torn from their sockets.”

When they had all gotten to the top, they untied the rope and gathered it up, then made their way to the next rock face. By the fifth climb, Kara began to wonder if they were near reaching Heaven to be with the divines.

According to Wrynric’s timekeeping device, it was twenty-third hour when they made it to the top of their last climb. The men looked as exhausted as Kara did, Aemon most of all. When they were settled for the night, they ate a cold meal, listening to the distant sounds of battle in silence.

After dinner, Wrynric doused the torches, plunging them into darkness. “We shall sleep with no light to draw less attention to ourselves and to conserve the torches. Now rest, all of you. I’ll stand guard.”

Kara got as comfortable as she could on the hard, icy, uneven rock. The last thing she heard before sleep took her was Minard offering to take the second watch.

KARA’S WORLD WAS AN incandescent white haze, allowing her to see without a torch. She ran through a twisting labyrinth of caves, then waded through an icy river, following the directions of the voice in her head. After what seemed like hours, she entered an ancient, abandoned city, its walls cracked and gray.

In her heart, she knew it to be Annbar.

The voice guided her through endless silent halls and dark, empty corridors. At the edge of a large antechamber, an imposing steel door barred her way. Kara instinctively used the passkey on a console beside it and the door began to rise.

A foul odor engulfed her, almost making her gag. The air, undisturbed for millennia, was poison.

Walk on and fear not the air you breathe. You are safe here, deep underground while you dream. The voice was that of a woman but she sounded different than the one in the visiondreams of the surface.

This woman felt like part of Kara.

“Who are you?”

I am you and you are me. We are one and the same.

Why did the women speaking to Kara in her visiondreams always have to be so vague with their answers?

“Where are we going?”

To meet an old friend.

Kara waited as another metal door rose from the floor. “Who’s down here? Who can breathe this poison air?”

Not who. What.

“What do you mean?”

You will see. A great war is coming and the power to end it lies within this ruin. I must— The voice stopped mid-sentence and let out a panicked cry. *Danger. You must wake!*

KARA OPENED HER EYES to a world of darkness. They quickly adjusted and she saw Minard sitting two feet in front of her, keeping watch. The monk stared straight at Kara but couldn't see her, for with no light, he was blind. Cold sweat beaded on her forehead and her heart raced.

Something was coming, and it was close.

She sat up and used her dark-vision to scan the area. "Are you awake?" Minard whispered.

"Shush," she replied. "We're in danger."

He grabbed his staff and got to his feet. When he kicked Wrynic, the old warrior came to swiftly and made almost no sound as he drew his sword. He had been woken like this before and knew what to do. Whatever was out there would not get him without a fight.

Kara put a hand over Aemon's mouth before she woke him. "Stay silent, there's something out there."

Aemon grabbed his mace and got to his feet, eyes heavy with fatigue.

They listened for a long time but heard only the distant clamor from Celestial Rest, which had become noticeably more sporadic. Kara continued to search for what had woken her, but nothing appeared out of place. Had the voice in the visiondream been wrong?

Then it occurred to her to look up.

A set of dinner-plate sized eyes peered down at her from a ledge thirty feet above their heads. The eyes narrowed to slits. Whatever it was, it knew she'd seen it.

The creature slid off its perch and used sickle-like claws to scale down the rock. It was twenty feet above them when Kara found her voice. "We need light, it's above us."

Sparks flashed as Wrynic struck flint to tinder and the saucer eyes closed. Wrynic struck the tinder again and the torch burst to light. The thing mewed and spat, then leapt off the wall at Kara.

She screamed and fell onto her back and watched it plummet toward her. At the last moment, Minard rammed his shoulder into it and the creature landed face first into the rock two feet from her.

It got to its feet instantly then swung its reptilian head to face Kara, spraying green ichor over her face, its yellow, saliva-drenched fangs bared. When Wrynic and Minard charged it, it hissed and leapt deftly out of their reach. Like a slinking cat, it circled around the two men looking for an opening, its eyes never leaving hers.

Could it sense something different about Kara or could it smell the wound on her chest? Either way, the thought was chilling.

The beast was twenty feet long, with a long, whip-like tail and sharp spines running along its back. It stood no taller than her waist, but its legs were corded with muscle, its hide pitted with scars.

Perhaps this was one of the monsters born of the old world, as the ancients had tried to shape life in their own image.

Wrynic charged it again. "Protect the half-blood. This monster is a jamalgana, and its venom is deadly."

Aemon moved to stand between Kara and the beast. Still, its saucer eyes were on her. Minard and Wrynnic ran headlong toward the jamalgana, but it backed away, careful to stay a foot beyond the edge of the torchlight. It ducked behind a fallen boulder and went out of view.

Minard scanned the gloom. "Where'd it go?"

Kara climbed to her feet and drew her sword. "It's behind the boulder about twenty feet in front of you."

Aemon clumsily lit another torch, his hands shaking with fear. Wrynnic ran toward the jamalgana but it slinked away and circled around him.

Kara raised her sword. "It's to your left. Hurry and kill it; it's trying to get me."

Wrynnic charged blindly toward it but the jamalgana was too cunning to be caught off guard and leapt away before he could reach it. Minard gave up the chase, hurried over to Kara, and protected her with his staff.

The jamalgana reared back on its hind legs and cocked its head to the side, as if listening. Wrynnic was almost on it when it got back onto all fours and scuttled away. Kara couldn't see it any longer. She looked everywhere, but it was gone.

Suddenly, the ground shook violently and they were knocked off guard. Wrynnic shouted something as he fought to keep his balance, but his words were lost as a deafening roar swept over them. Wind raced through the crevice below them like through a pressure tube and struck them full-force. All four were knocked off their feet, their torches extinguished.

Particles of dust, dirt, and stone pummeled Kara and made it hard to breathe or see. When the shockwave passed, she lay stunned for several minutes.

Then she heard something.

Dazed, Kara sat up and opened her eyes but could see little through the murk. Her heart slipped a beat as she heard claws scampering across the rock.

The jamalgana leapt from the dust cloud and sunk its fangs into her left arm. She screamed in agony and terror as the ancient horror dragged her away in its jaws, its deadly poison entering her bloodstream.

Chapter 20

Aemon.

Aemon coughed and sneezed at the same time. His nostrils and mouth were filled with particles of grit thrown up from the shockwave. The grit got into his eyes, making them burn, so he snapped them shut.

The cave shook again, though the tremor was not as powerful as the last. Somewhere out in the darkness a boulder shattered as it hit the ground, showering him with fragments of stone.

Was the whole cave going to collapse? What could have caused this?

His heart fluttered. Celestial Rest. The enemies must have brought down one of the giant mushrooms. If the shockwave had struck him and his companions with such force this far from the city, who knew how much damage it could have caused back in Stelemia.

If the shockwave destroyed the Flowstone Gates, the main cavern would be opened to the enemy and nothing could stop them from invading the heart of Stelemia.

Panic struck him like a kick in the gut. Where was Kara?

Aemon sat up and tried to call out to her but nothing came out except a choked garble. Spitting, he worked saliva into his mouth and tried again. "Ka... Ahem... Kara? Where are you?" His voice was hoarse and each time he breathed more grit entered his mouth. "Wrynic, Minard, where is she?"

Now that he thought back on it, something had brushed past him during the worst of the shockwave and a moment later, he thought he had heard Kara scream. It was difficult to be sure what had happened. The torch had gone out and he had covered his face with his hands to protect it from the pelting grit shooting up through the crevice.

He listened. *What was that sound? There it is again.* The jamalgana was out there somewhere; but where?

Fear finally made him open his eyes. Grit swirled through the air, almost blinding him, but Aemon ignored the pain and forced himself to peer into the darkness.

Lydan, help him. It was no good; he could not see anything. The jamalgana roared somewhere in the distance. It sounded like it was fighting... His stomach lurched. Or feeding.

Aemon staggered to his feet as he heard a scream.

He felt around for a light, then his fingers touched something hot and he cried out. The smoldering tip of a torch. Lucky he had not landed on top of it and burned himself. He searched his bag, found the spare flint and tinder and used it to re-light the torch.

A murky world of gray, brown and black greeted him. With visibility reduced to no more than ten feet, it made it hard for him to get his bearings. The grit slowly settling to the ground and made his torch splutter and spark.

Kara let out a long wail of agony that seemed to go on forever.

Aemon narrowed down the direction of the sound and started toward it. He had only taken a few steps when he stumbled over Minard. The monk lay sprawled on his stomach, covered in silt, blood oozing from a gash on his forehead.

Was he dead?

An enraged hiss from the jamalgana made Aemon forgo checking if the monk had a pulse and continue into the murk, torch in one hand, mace in the other, blood pounding in his forehead. Both Wrynic and Minard were dead for all he knew, so it was up to him to save Kara.

Filled with adrenaline, he cried, "Where are you, Kara? Keep making noise so I can find you."

A snarl from the jamalgana was his only answer.

Aemon tried not to think about stumbling off a cliff in the low visibility, and ran. The torchlight revealed what could be a blood trail, but it was difficult to be certain, as dust had already settled over it. He followed the trail up a steep, water-slick incline. "Hold on Kara, I am coming."

Halfway up, his feet came out from under him and he fell onto his backside, jolting his spine. Winded, he tried to get back to his feet but slipped and landed on his knees. *Curse it all. I cannot get up; the ground is too slippery!*

Aemon attached his mace back to his belt. Then, holding the torch in one hand, he used the other to dig his fingers into the uneven surface of the rock and drag himself up the slope. His arm muscles burned with fatigue, but he pressed on.

Nothing would stop him from saving Kara.

A scraping sound, like claw on rock, came from somewhere above him. The jamalgana was close.

Finally, Aemon reached the top of the incline, got to his feet and drew his mace. Walking forward, his heart almost stopped when he saw the jamalgana thrashing around on top of Kara, who sat on the ground with her back pressed against the cave wall.

Kara's sword was wedged between the beast's jaws, the tip protruding from the back of its neck. The jamalgana's poison-drenched fangs were close to burying themselves into her head. Her face covered in green ichor, her teeth bared, Kara desperately held it back.

All the fear Aemon carried with him dissolved. He charged the jamalgana and smashed the mace down onto its back. The weapon bounced off its scaly hide, but the beast jerked and growled deep in its throat. Striking it again and again, Aemon began to lose hope, for his blows were not driving it away from Kara. He searched for a weak spot, but the creature's tough hide was armored with thick scales the size of a human hand.

If only he had a sword or spear, he could plunge the sharp—

Suddenly, the jamalgana whipped its tail across Aemon's legs and knocked them out from under him. Crying out in pain and surprise, he cowered on the ground as the tail swiped at him again. This time it missed, giving him time to crawl out of its reach.

By Lydan, his legs hurt. What if one of them was broken?

Rolling onto his side, he looked back at the jamalgana. *No...* His torch had fallen to the ground and rolled under the creature's belly.

Aemon squinted, doing his best to ignore the irritation from the grit blowing into his eyes. How was he going to retrieve the torch? What if it went out?

The creature hissed in pain. The torch flame was scorching its armored hide, and the beast could not move away from it without breaking Kara's grip on the sword or dragging her away with it.

Excitement flooded through him. *Fire. I can use fire to drive the beast away.*

Aemon lunged for the torch. The tail swiped at him just as he landed on the ground, but it only grazed the back of his legs. He snatched up the light and crawled to the creature's head.

The jamalgana's eye reflected the flame as he drove the torch into it. "Get off her, you vile monster!"

A rank stench of scorched flesh filled the air as the jamalgana hissed in agony. It writhed as it tried to dislodge itself from Kara's sword. The creature's snout came uncomfortably close to her face and seemed to be getting closer with every twist of its head. With barely a thought to what he was doing, Aemon waited for the right moment, then rammed the torch down its throat.

The jamalgana went wild.

Smoke billowing from its mouth, the beast snapped its jaws shut, breaking Kara's sword and almost biting off Aemon's hands, coming within inches of Kara's face. As the ledge plunged into darkness, Aemon backed away a few feet and drove the mace into where he had last seen its jaw.

He delighted in the satisfying crunch of teeth and bone and the feel of warm liquid gushing over his arms. "Take that, you wretched thing!"

Kara screamed hysterically, snuffing out his moment of exaltation. Aemon could not see what was happening to her. Maybe he should not have sacrificed the torch. His heart pounded, hands gripping the mace tight. Was it killing her?

Light appeared behind him as Wrynric staggered to the top of the rise. Aemon used the newfound light to drive the mace into the creature's scorched eye. The milk-white membrane ruptured, sending gobs of jelly-like mucus spraying over him.

"Move out of the way," Wrynric roared as he rushed up to them.

"I can kill it myse—"

He shoved Aemon aside, then drove his sword through the ruptured eye, burying it into the jamalgana's brain. The beast stiffened for a moment and then, with a ragged gasp, it went still.

AFTER SEVERAL MINUTES to catch their breath, Wrynric picked up Kara. Aemon limped after him as the old man made his way back to camp. When they arrived, they gathered their equipment quickly, the old man passing Kara to Aemon. Minard was dead or unconscious, so Wrynric threw him over his shoulder and had Aemon help him carry as much of the equipment as he could.

When they were well away from the dead jamalgana and the small, vicious, rat-like scavengers converging on it to feed, they stopped to gather themselves. Kara, now wrapped in a blanket, was too distraught to speak. Minard lay unmoving beside her, half-buried in silt.

Kara vomited all over herself. Grimacing, Aemon knelt beside her, his legs savagely bruised from where the tail had struck him. *My wound is as light as a page of parchment. Kara's wounds are a weighty tome that threatens to crush us all.*

She had been in a bad way before, but looked worse now. Kara was covered head to toe in dust, green ichor and vomit, making it hard for him or Wrynric to discern the extent of her injuries.

Minard was in trouble too. A rock must have hit him on the head during the shockwave. The only way they knew he was still alive was because he had moaned when Wrynric had thrown him over his shoulder.

The old man waited for Kara to stop vomiting, then used his blanket to wipe it from her robe. When he was done, he set aside the blanket and turned to Aemon. "You did well back there, son. I only hope it wasn't for naught."

Aemon said nothing; he was busy agonizing over Kara. A fit of dry retching overcame her. "Kara, I am here for you," Aemon sobbed. "Please do not die. I need you."

The retching stopped and she was left gasping for air. When she recovered, she brought her knees up to her chin and shivered. "Lower your legs, girl," Wrynric

said. "I need to look at your shoulder." The old man reached for her, but she pulled away. "Come on, please; I need to look at your wound."

Kara ignored him.

Sighing, Wrynic wrapped a clean blanket around her, then kissed her gently on the hair. When he stood, he scrunched up his face and backed away, then rammed his mailed fist into a stalagmite, shattering it to pieces. "This was not meant to happen," he roared. "It wasn't meant to end this way. Arden said... He said..." The warrior's words trailed off into an unintelligible moan.

Kara stared out into the darkness, panting. She had said nothing since they had pulled her from under the jamalgana, and they had been unable to pry the broken sword hilt from her grip. The passkey hung outside her robe, bathing her face in blood-red light, but it was dimming.

Aemon wiped his nose on his sleeve. "Will she live?"

Wrynic looked back at Kara. Perhaps it was a trick of the guttering torchlight, or fatigue, but Wrynic appeared older than Aemon remembered. His beard seemed grayer and his face had deep lines running through it that Aemon did not recall seeing before.

"I... I don't know," Wrynic said, his voice as taut as a bowstring. "She should be dead by now."

"Why?"

It took the old warrior long seconds to answer. "The jamalgana's bite is deadly. I've seen people, including scions, die from the poison within minutes of being bitten. Yet, still she clings onto life."

Aemon nodded toward the passkey. "Could it be neutralizing the poison somehow? She did survive the poison from the javelin wound back at the temple."

Wrynic ran his mailed hand over the broken stalagmite stump absently. "I have no idea."

Kara shivered under her blankets, sweat pouring down her face. Aemon brushed her forehead with the back of his hand. "She is burning up. We need to cool her down."

They tried to take the blanket off Kara, but she latched onto it with her teeth and refused to let go. Aemon tried something else. He wet a piece of cloth and wiped it over her face to clean it of sweat, blood and dirt. As he reached into the blanket to clean around her neck, he prayed loud enough for her to hear. "Oh Lydan, Shield of Heaven, protector of the weak and holy, please let her live. She has come so far and needs your help... We all need her. *I need her.*" *I love her.*

For several minutes, Aemon held the damp cloth to Kara's forehead, listening to the snapping teeth and the crunch of jamalgana bones in the darkness behind them. Eventually he turned to Wrynic, who stood watch over them. "I could have killed the beast myself, you know? I had it under control."

The old man furrowed his brow. "I know you did, and I understand why you might feel I stole your glory."

"Glory is not what I was after. I just—"

"Feel like you need to prove yourself to the rest of us?" Aemon tried to deny it, but Wrynic cut him off. "I was young once too, you know. Now look, if I didn't think you were up to the task of coming out here and protecting Kara, I never would have let you come."

Aemon frowned. "You needed allies and I was all there was."

"True, but I still wouldn't have brought an untested man out here if I didn't think they were up to the task of surviving. To do so would endanger us all. You listen, you learn quickly, you're smart and are driven to improve yourself. Those are rare qualities and few men can claim to possess them all."

Thinking over the other man's words, Aemon decided to forgive Wrynric for what he had done. The old warrior had only been trying to protect Kara. There was no malice in his action.

"What is a jamalgana anyway? I have never heard that name before."

"They are one of the many monsters born of old-world genetics," Wrynric replied. "The ancients wove together the blood of many different beasts to form the first jamalgana." The old man broke off a piece of the shattered stalagmite and rolled it between his fingers. "We were fortunate the one we encountered was young for his kind. The older males can grow near twice as large, and the females can grow even larger."

"Do they live around here?"

"No, I've never encountered one this close to Stelemia before. We're only at the edge of the Nether, so it's likely he was driven here by his stronger brothers who live deeper in. Maybe he lost a fight during one of their pairing rituals and, facing death if he stayed, decided to head here to live out his days."

"What is the chance we will encounter another?"

Wrynric shrugged. "Hard to say." He tossed the piece of stalagmite away. "Be wary, son. As dangerous as a jamalgana is, there are worse things out here in the neverending dark."

The thought that there could be worse things out here than a jamalgana made Aemon regret he had come. He had read about the mysteries of the Great Dark and always dreamed of going there himself. Now that he was here, he realized how foolish his boyhood fancies had been.

To think people were exiled into the Great Dark because they said something ill of the divines, or were in the wrong place at the wrong time. He had never given exiles much thought, but now he could see why their punishment was one to be truly feared.

It was one thing to send a vile murderer out here, but a simple peasant who had unknowingly broken some law she had never known or agreed to obey was different. How many thousands of innocents were forced to walk the Path of Exile to end their days in the belly of a jamalgana or some other vicious beast lurking in the dark?

Too many.

Kara squirmed as another bout of retching overcame her. He stroked her hair and waited for it to be over.

There was no time for regret. Not now. Lucitiel, the Igniter of the First Flame that lit Stelemia, never regretted her decision to head out into the Great Dark in search of her lost lover. She endured great hardship and peril out here, but never found him. Old Artorius Forgmon journeyed here too and lived to write of the strange and wondrous things he had discovered. He had no regrets either, for he had made a fortune from his book.

If they could survive the Great Dark, Aemon could too. He had to go on, no matter what he came up against. He had faced down a jamalgana, faced down the Knives of Dwaycar and faced down his own fear.

Aemon forged his resolve into metal. No matter what foul beast they encountered, no matter how dark their path became, he would endure it all!

There was no turning back, even if Kara...

Aemon tried to swallow the grit stuck to the back of his throat, but failed. Grabbing a water skin, he gargled a mouthful then spat it out. Kara would live. She had to.

"Tell me, old man. Why would anyone create monsters like the jamalgana? What purpose could it serve?"

"I think the half-blood..." Wrynic looked down at Kara. "I think Kara had it right. The ancients had the power to create such beasts, so they used it."

Power corrupts. Was it really that simple?

"The bank I worked for was powerful, but it always had a thirst to control everything. This drove the bankers to do evil things, like funding both sides in the conflict at Deep Cave and paying the Inquisitors to condemn debtors who defaulted on their loans to death for heresy."

"Power indeed corrupts," Wrynic said, then closed his eyes and rocked back and forth on his heels. "I didn't want to tell anyone this back at the temple, for it would have made things worse. The scions were created from the same genetic tampering as monsters like the jamalgana."

Aemon stood to confront him, gritting his teeth against the pain in his legs. "What are you saying? That Kara is a monster too?"

The old man sighed wearily. "In truth, I don't know what she is."

WRYNIC HALTED THEM at the edge of a small chamber that stank of smoke. Kara collapsed against the side of the tunnel, lowered her head and seemed to slip off to sleep.

When Wrynic was certain she was all right, he turned to Aemon. "Inside this chamber there will be a narrow gap between two boulders. The gap looks ordinary, but it's actually an entrance to a hidden door."

"Safehold?" Aemon asked.

"Yes, Erinie and the other survivors from Sunholm should be inside. They'll be a little jumpy, so I'll go in and make sure everything is alright, and tell them we've arrived. Give me five minutes, then make your way in."

Aemon watched him leave, then studied the other two in the torchlight. It had been a long, hard two days since the jamalgana attack and they were all at the edge of their endurance.

It had taken hours for Minard to regain consciousness and several more hours for his vertigo to ease enough for him to be able to walk. He had hit his head hard, and the monk had said it was Ibilirith's divine favor that he had survived at all. Though his head must hurt, Minard never once complained about the pain, so Aemon never mentioned the deep bruising on his legs. He could never allow the other two men to think less of him.

Kara had not recovered from her ordeal and had barely spoken to any of them. Her bite wound had become inflamed and the night before, Minard and Aemon

had needed to hold her down so Wrynnic could check over her wounds and clean them out. It had felt like torture listening to her screams as he worked, but Aemon could not think of a way to lessen her pain.

Worse was Kara's fever. At times when Aemon touched her forehead, it felt like it was on fire, and at others, it felt as cold as the stone under his feet. Even covered in all their blankets, she still shivered.

It took a day to pry the broken sword from her hands. After it was gone, she clutched the passkey, and they would have needed to break her fingers to loosen her grip on it.

Wrynnic, though clearly suffering back pain and refusing to sleep, had insisted on carrying Kara, for she slipped in and out on consciousness and could not walk on her own. When he had carried her, Aemon had thought she looked little more than a child in the old man's arms.

At one point, Kara had woken briefly and told them she had a vision of a steel door and that the Metal Man had spoken to her through it. A moment later, she had slipped back into a restless sleep. The way Minard had watched her sleep made Aemon wonder if the monk was thinking of killing her. Wrynnic must have seen the monk's look too, as Aemon noticed the old man's hand resting on his sword hilt. Aemon had kept his his weapon close too, in case the monk tried to hurt her.

A few hours before they had arrived at Safehold, Kara had woken again and asked to be put down to walk on her own. She had walked slowly, but Wrynnic had seemed so happy to see her up and about, he had not complained about the pace.

Aemon had studied Kara as they walked. Something had changed radically in her since the jamalgana attack, or perhaps it had started earlier and it had taken him this long to see it. It was almost as if she was no longer the same person. She was withdrawn, brooding and seemed to look upon the three of them distrustfully at times. The monk might betray her, but Wrynnic and Aemon certainly would not. She knew that.

Aemon stretched his aching legs. "Wrynnic has been gone for almost five minutes. We will give it a bit longer, then head in."

Minard gingerly touched his bandaged forehead. "I hope they've got some soft pillows in there. My head feels like it's been rung like the gongs at the temple."

When a minute had passed, they entered the chamber and found the gap between the two boulders. Aemon went first, followed by Kara and Minard. After they squeezed through the gap, they found themselves at a black curtain. Aemon pulled it aside, revealing a well-lit room. He glanced at the other two, then entered, squinting in the bright light.

A dozen desperate-looking people stared at him as he stopped just inside the doorway. Most were dressed in plain cloaks, though a few wore armor and had weapons hanging from their belts.

Kara stopped beside him and the people's eyes went to her. They began whispering to one another, their voices too low for Aemon to understand what they were saying. A dark-haired young woman with brown, slanted eyes stood at the center of the group. She had a dozen pouches and a dagger hanging from her waist. When she raised her hand for silence, the people quickly obeyed and watched her walk up to Aemon.

He did not know how to react when she put her arms around him and kissed him lightly on the cheek. She let go and did the same to Minard, then turned to Kara. The two women studied one another, the dark-haired woman with reverence, Kara with a tired, blank expression.

“My name is Erinie,” the woman said. “Like you, I’m among the last of my kind. I am a Librarian, a keeper of the past.”

Kara reached into her robe, withdrew the passkey and let the red bulb shine over everyone in the room. For days the bulb had been dim, but now, to Aemon’s amazement, the light was almost as bright as it had been at the Tomb of Ibilirith.

The people stared at it, their mouths open in awe. One by one, they lowered their faces and fell to their knees.

“So it is as Arden foresaw,” Erinie said. She went to one knee, took Kara’s hands in hers and kissed them. “You’ve woken the device—something no other scion was able to do.” She raised her face to gaze up at Kara. “Let me help you, Scion. Let me be your guide and I’ll take you to the ancient Dead City so you may follow the path that will lead us back to the blessed light of the Lost Sun.”

Other than the haunted look in Kara’s eyes, her hollow, sunken cheeks and the blood covering her plain brown robe, she looked regal, like she belonged in heaven among the divines. Kara stood tall, proud and perfect.

Aemon wanted to fall to his knees with the others and worship her. At that moment, she was their scion, their noble queen, their hope—his love.

Kara turned her strange eyes on him, as if she sensed his thoughts. Something in them smothered his heart in ice. It was not Kara staring at him—it was a stranger.

The dazed look had been replaced by one of disdain. No, not disdain. Pure hatred. And no one else seemed to see it.

Minard was watching the kneeling people, Wrynric was speaking heatedly with a woman at the far end of the room and Erinie and her people had their heads bowed.

A tremor passed through Kara’s body and she started to fall. Aemon caught her as her knees gave out and held her in his arms.

Her eyes closed and she slipped away.

Chapter 21

Kara.

Wake now. There is much we must do, and time is running out.

Kara opened her eyes and squinted. A mushroom-stem torch burned on the cave wall above her head, filling the air with the acrid smell of smoke. She was on a bed and had a woolen blanket draped over her.

“Scion, you’re awake,” a young woman sitting beside the bed said. “How do you feel?”

Sudden fear made Kara frantically feel for the passkey. Her hand wrapped around it. Thank the divines, it was still there.

Turning to the woman, Kara worked saliva into her mouth. "I'm in a lot of pain, and—"

You must leave, the presence inside Kara said. *He waits for you.*

But the pain and emptiness was too much to bear. How could she go on? She had barely the energy to lift her head off the pillow, yet the voice urged her on regardless.

Kara wanted to cry, but no tears would come. "My head. Why does it feel so empty?"

"You've been unconscious, so I'm not surprised you feel out of sorts," the woman beside the bed said. "Wrynric told me what happened to you." She touched the healing poultice wrapped around Kara's wounded shoulder. "By all rights you should be dead, yet here you lie."

Kara tried to recall what had happened. The last thing she remembered was teeth and green blood but after that, only darkness. She studied the woman, who had dark hair and slanted eyes and wore a homespun brown woolen cloak. "Who are you?"

"You don't remember?" The woman gave her a faint smile. "My name is Erinie. I'm a Librarian, or I should say I used to be. Since the repository at Sunholm burned, I'm only a healer and alchemist now."

Kara looked around the room. It was nothing more than a small natural chamber with a curtain for a door and a rickety metal stand covered in what appeared to be jars of liquids and herbs. "Where am I?"

"You're in a place we of the Covenant of the Lost Sun call Safehold. You were brought here two days ago by Wrynric."

Fog clouded Kara's mind and pain assailed her from every side, making it hard to focus. Her vision was blurry, the torch too bright. "Where's Aemon?"

"He's resting, Scion. He's been by your side since you arrived but I sent him away because he hadn't slept since he got here."

Urgency hit Kara like a cascade of falling rocks, making her catch her breath. *We have no time for this*, the voice inside raged. *Get out of bed and get moving.*

While the presence seemed incapable of hurting Kara, or forcing her to do something she didn't want to do, it could project its feelings in a way that made her feel them too. The voice was that of a woman—the same one that had guided her to the Metal Man. How could it speak to her now? She wasn't in a visiondream.

Kara tried to sit up. "I must leave. The enemy is on the move and they'll attack another city."

Erinie placed a hand on her chest and eased her back onto the bed. "Rest, and regain your strength. You'll need it in the days ahead."

With each passing moment, the urgency and frustration coming from the presence grew hotter. "We must not linger here," Kara said. "I must go to him."

"Him?"

"The Metal Man. He knows I'm coming."

Erinie leaned forward. "How does he know?"

"I spoke to him in a visiondream. He told me he would help me defeat the enemy. I couldn't understand his language at first, but then somehow I could. He

spoke one of the languages of our ancestors, those that lived under the Sun, long ago.”

“So Wrynric was right when he said you’d seen the Sun.” Erinie shook her head wistfully. “I wish my brethren were alive to see you.”

Kara struggled to sit up again. “I need to leave. Please, help me up.”

“No, Scion, you need rest. It’s a long and treacherous journey to the Dead City and it’ll be hard enough for those of us who’re uninjured, but for you... Give it a few days and we’ll see if you’re up to it then.”

Kara tried to push herself up but found her muscles would not obey her. Sucking in a pained breath, she fell back and moaned as urgency pulled her one way and her feeble body another. It felt like she was being torn apart.

“You see, Scion?” Erinie shook her head. “You won’t be going anywhere just yet. Rest, get your strength back.”

All Kara could do was give a weak nod.

“Wrynric told me you hear voices in your visiondreams,” Erinie said. “Who was it that spoke to you of Imogen, Mother of Steel Children?”

It wasn’t just in visiondreams that voices came to Kara anymore. *Hurry, you must hurry. Get up. Get out of bed and go.*

What if Minard found out about the new voice? Would he kill her? What if it was a sign she was the scion of the prophecy?

Kara swallowed. But if he did kill her, at least her torment would be over...

If you die, the world will die with you, the presence said. You are important. Together, we will save the human race.

Kara wanted to scoff at that. So many contradictions. Both Kahan and the patriarch claimed they wanted to save humanity by killing her. Yet, Arden and the presence claimed she would be the savior of the human race.

Who was right?

Erinie touched Kara on the arm. “Scion? Who told you of these metal children and of Imogen?”

Kara sighed. “I don’t know her name. She looked like a ghost from the stories people tell to frighten one another. The ghost woman only comes to me when I’m on a place called the surface.”

“The surface?”

“I think the surface is the place our ancestors came from.” Kara rubbed her fingers over the bulb on the passkey. “There are two women in my visiondreams now. The one on the surface and another, more recent one who guided me through the Dead City to the Metal Man.”

“Do you know who the second woman is?”

Kara had her suspicions but felt hesitant to share them. “I don’t know her name. My memories are vague, but I think I heard her at the temple. She wanted me to do something there but I can’t recall what.”

Erinie pursed her lips. “Wrynric said the ghost woman in your visiondreams told you to seek a library in a place called Annbar. Do you know if the Dead City and Annbar are one and the same?” She gripped the side of Kara’s bed, eyes alight with hunger. “Did you see the library?”

Kara had forgotten about the library. What was happening? Where were all her memories?

“I think they’re the same place, but I didn’t see a library.”

Erinie’s shoulders drooped. “I hope we find it, for we lost many of our books and records when the Knives of Dwaycar burned Sunholm.” She brightened a little. “Perhaps one day, I’ll be able to return to Sunholm and search the ruined library for books or computer files that might have survived.”

“I hope you can.” Kara lifted the passkey. “So much has been lost because of this.”

“Much can be saved because of it too.”

Saved? Kara thought. *Not likely.*

Erinie brushed Kara’s bangs behind her ears. “You really are an odd one. If only I had the time to study you, I could find out why your visiondreams are different. No other scion heard voices in theirs, nor could they interact with them. They never saw the surface or our Lost Sun.”

She started stroking Kara’s cheek. “I wish I could see the surface and discover if it’s really the place we were exiled from.”

“The surface belongs to the dead now. Perhaps it is best it stayed that way.”

“Maybe, but things can change,” Erinie said. “The living can seek to reclaim it.”

Why bother? They were all doomed anyway. The enemy would kill them all.

Fingers brushed against the edge of Kara’s mind. *There is hope. It lies in Annbar. You must go there now.*

How? Kara grimaced. *My wounds hurt, my body is weak and I’ve lost everything, even my memories.*

The fingers withdrew. *Your plight is inconsequential to my plans. This time, I will save us all.*

But I can’t. I can’t go on. I’m so tired. I want to stay here and rest.

After a long beat, the voice said, *You have three days to recover, and no more.*

Erinie continued to stroke Kara’s cheek. “Rest, Scion. You are safe here. I will take care of you.”

Holding the passkey, Kara tried to draw comfort from Erinie’s touch. Her anxiety and paranoia were dormant but with the loss of her memories, the empty feeling inside had grown ever deeper. “Tell me why I’m losing my memories. I see fleeting images of places and people, but I no longer remember their names.” Kara widened her eyes. “Are my memories gone forever?”

“I don’t know, Scion. The poison of the jamalgana might have caused your memory loss. You’re the first person I know of that has survived it. Or it could be—”

“The passkey.”

“The passkey.” Erinie kissed Kara’s forehead. “Don’t give up, they might return.” She drew back her lips. “Tell me. What do you remember?”

Kara took a moment to collect her thoughts. “I remember being given the passkey, the massacre at the tavern, then fleeing the capital and meeting Aemon. I recall only bits and pieces after that. I know Aemon took me to the Temple of Sacred Lights, that I was wounded there. I remember my visiondreams and know that the patriarch wanted to hand me over to the Inquisitors.”

Erinie chuckled. “He’d love to do that to all of us born out here in the Nether. We have never made our home under the sacred lights and pay little heed to the

divines. They were never our gods.” She glanced at the passkey. “What do you remember before Wrynric gave it to you? Anything?”

Kara searched her memories but found when she caught sight of one, it melted like candle wax before she could work out what it was. “I remember almost nothing.” She sobbed, “My mother, Kristia, I don’t remember what she looked like. I don’t remember. I don’t...”

“I never met your mother when I went to Stelemia with Arden and Wrynric.” Erinie smiled warmly. “But I do know she must have been beautiful. Arden betrayed his binding oath to be with her.”

Feeling drained, Kara closed her eyes and tried to find peace with the emptiness inside and come to terms with the torment of her throbbing wounds. Erinie continued to stroke Kara’s cheek, her touch gentle and reassuring.

After a few minutes Kara opened her eyes. “You knew my father. Tell me of him.”

Erinie slowly leaned back. “Much like his father, Arden was a great man and the leader of Sunholm. To some, he was a god among men, and to others a solid foundation our community built itself upon.”

Her eyes moistened. “Arden was loved by everyone. He made peace with heretics and fought back monsters born of ancient nightmare. Once, when Sunholm was threatened by a clan of marauding bone people, your father led an ingenious surprise attack on their camp and routed them. He was outnumbered ten to one. After his victory, Sunholm was never threatened by that clan again.”

Kara shook her head in wonder. “He sounds like a hero you hear about in the old stories.”

“Some of us might not want to admit it, but Arden, like all men, had his flaws. His falling in love with your mother while bound to another scion broke our sacred oath. He never spoke of you or your mother, but everyone knew what had happened, though few blamed him for his misdeed. His wife is... an unlikable woman, to say the least.”

Finally, Kara felt a pang of sorrow for Arden. He had started becoming more than just a name to her. He had been a real person—a man one could look up to.

“What else do you know of him?”

“I know much, for he was like a father to me. Many of us owe him our lives. Though always busy, he made time for anyone who needed him.” Erinie let out a sad laugh. “I remember one time I startled him when I was a little girl. I hid behind a flowstone and waited for him to return from a scouting mission. When he walked by me, I leapt out of hiding and tugged on his beard.” She sniffed, tears running unchecked down her cheeks. “You should have seen his face. He looked like he wanted to throw me into the Mergen Sump to swim with the blind fish.”

Kara tried to laugh, but all she managed to get out was a single humph. “Wrynric said my father saw me wearing the passkey in a visiondream.”

“Indeed. He saw you take it to the Metal Man and later lead an army against the ancient enemy.” Erinie paused to wipe tears away. “He might have seen more, but the Knives of Dwaycar came... and took him from us.”

Kara let Erinie cry. She’d felt the same way when Berda and the others back at the Golden Keg had been slaughtered. So much death. So much grief. Would it ever end?

“What do you know of my sister, Semira?” Kara asked, when Erinie seemed up to talking again.

Erinie drew back, as if Kara had tried to bite her. Kara waited for an answer but it didn't come. “I'm sorry I brought her up, but I—”

“Semira was... a troubled woman. Unlike the other scions, she didn't have visiondreams.” Erinie grimaced, her face glistening with fresh tears. “I think she felt she had no place in Sunholm. The other scions tormented her, called her names or just ignored her. Arden and Wrynric loved her and tried to keep her a part of our community, but I think that made things worse. Perhaps she thought they did it out of pity.”

“That's terrible.”

“It gets worse. Her mother, Meridia, disowned Semira when she was a little girl. Your sister had it tough, she really did, but she didn't make it easy for anyone to like her.” Erinie let out a faint sigh, “Not even me.”

Poor Semira. What had she done to deserve such scorn? It was not her fault she was born different. “What happened to her when Sunholm was destroyed? Did she die?”

“I don't know.” Erinie's voice had become a pained murmur. “Please. Can we change the subject?”

“But I just want to know more about my sister.”

“Maybe later we can speak more on her, but for now I want you to let it go. There are too many painful memories for me to dredge up and I'm not yet ready to deal with them. So please...”

At least you still have your memories, Kara thought bitterly. Reluctantly, she decided to let the topic of her sister go. She would bring it up some other time. “Can I see Aemon if he's awake?”

Erinie seemed relieved. “I'll get him, but don't talk too long. You need to get some rest. Wrynric will want to leave as soon as you're up to it.”

Kara watched her go. Why were Wrynric and Erinie so reluctant to talk about Semira? What had she done?

A few minutes later, Aemon entered and hurried to Kara's side. “Thank Lydan, you are awake.”

Though relieved to see him, she had to force herself to smile. “Aemon.”

He burst into tears. “I am here. I did not want to leave your side but they made me.”

Kara gingerly brushed away his tears, noticing as she did so that the bruise she'd given him outside the Tomb of Ibilirith was fading. “Don't weep for me. I'm still here.”

“Kara...”

“I'll rest for now, but we need to leave in three days' time. The Metal Man waits for me.”

“Erinie said your memories—”

“Most of them are gone.” Kara let her smile fade. “I feel empty.”

Her tears finally came and she spread her arms to let him embrace her. He hesitated, glancing at the door.

Would he spurn her like he had back at Rylore Bellholes?

“What is it, Aemon?”

He turned back to her sheepishly. “Nothing.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Before you passed out, you looked at me with such loathing. You were not yourself, were you?”

A painful lump sprang up in Kara’s throat. “No, Aemon. Please hug me. I need you to hold me and never let go.”

Finally, he bent down and hugged her. They held one another for a long time, and eventually she slipped into painless sleep.

Chapter 22

Aemon.

Aemon woke to the sound of raised voices. He looked around his small room, eyes half open. Light from the passage outside filtered in through the curtain passing for a door.

Where was Minard? His staff still leaned against the side of his bed, but the monk was gone.

“Shhh, quiet, she might hear you.”

It was Wrynic, but who was he talking to?

“You think I care?” came a woman’s voice.

“Stop speaking so loud,” Wrynic snapped.

Aemon climbed out of bed and crept over to the curtain to listen. He heard a slapping sound. “Get your hands off me, you old fool,” the woman said.

In a harsh whisper, Wrynic snapped something back. The woman lowered her voice and Aemon could no longer hear what she said.

Their voices were coming from somewhere down the passage. Curious, Aemon pulled aside the curtain and checked to see if anyone was about. The dimly lit passage outside his room looked deserted.

He ducked out the doorway and took cover behind a metal barrel with a candle burning on top. He waited to make sure no one had seen him, then snuck up to the curtain leading to Wrynic’s room. Aemon carefully pried it open just wide enough for him to see inside.

The old warrior sat on the edge of a metal table, his posture rigid and mouth set. The woman stood just out of Aemon’s view, and he dared not risk pulling the curtain aside any further to see who she was. He had to strain his ears to listen as the woman spoke again.

“I’ve seen her in my visions three times since you left. You believed in Ard—Ard—” She sobbed, stumbling on the name. “You believed in his visiondreams. Why not mine?”

The old man scowled. “I can understand why you don’t like the half-blood. Not only is she a reminder of what Arden did, but she also looks like—”

“I told you to never speak that name again.”

“She’s your firstborn, whether you like it or not. We don’t know what happened or if she was even involved.”

“She was involved. I know it in my heart. She always skulked alone at the edge of town, talking to her invisible friend. We should have thrown her out when we learned she couldn’t share in our visiondreams.”

Wrynric let out a deep sigh. “So now you project your hatred of your firstborn onto Arden’s half-blood daughter. If you’d seen what I saw at Celestial Rest and Deep Cave, you’d know—”

The old warrior grunted as the woman slapped him across the face. “Why must you constantly remind me of his sin? She’s not his daughter! *My* husband said he disowned her after I made him beg on his knees for my forgiveness for what he did. She is *nothing* to him.”

“Yes, she is. You cannot change that.”

Her voice became a strained hiss. “I’m over arguing with you. Now listen to me. I’ve had several visiondreams of a woman with white hair and gray eyes leading an army of metal monsters with the hearts of men. I saw them attack an army of soldiers and decimate them. After the battle, the soldiers’ bodies were harvested by eight-legged metal creatures who took ragged chunks of flesh and organs and placed them into jars on their backs.” She paused, her breathing little more than a shallow hiss. “I saw the Priest King fall when that filthy husk of a *half-blood* ordered her machine beasts to tear him apart. When he was in pieces, the beasts placed his still-beating heart into—”

“Enough, Meridia.”

Meridia... Aemon had heard that name before, but where?

Then he had it. Wrynric had mentioned her at the temple. It was Kara’s stepmother. But what was she saying? Kara would never do those things.

“Ibirlth’s prophecy is true,” Meridia wailed. “Why won’t you listen to me? It was her I saw. It was her!”

Wrynric slammed his fist on the table, his armor jingling. “Before Arden made us flee Sunholm, he told me the Final Battle nears. He said his half-blood daughter would carry what we now call the passkey to the Metal Man, and that he would help her raise a great host. She will lead that host against the ancient enemy and save us all.”

Meridia laughed bitterly, “You stupid old fool. Have you forgotten our oath? Let me remind you: *We who are chosen to carry the lineage of the scions through the ages of the future untold must keep the bloodline pure...*” She raised her voice. “A *half-blood* is not pure, which means that vile whore is *not* a scion.”

The old man began to pace. “We put the passkey around the neck of every scion in Sunholm and nothing happened. I forced it onto the half-blood and it came to life. Now she has visiondreams of something called the surface, and has seen the Lost Sun.”

Meridia stepped into Aemon’s view, her face flushed with anger. “It doesn’t matter. She isn’t a scion.”

Wrynric spun to face her. “No, she might be something more.”

“More? She’ll become a killer, just like her sister.”

“I thought you didn’t want to bring her up.” Wrynric sat back on the edge of the table. “Like I said before, we don’t know if she was involved.”

Meridia bared her teeth like a vicious dog. “You still care for her, don’t you? Like you’ve come to care for the half-blood whore.”

After a long silence, Wrynric said something so quietly, Aemon could not catch what he said. Meridia's reply was an angry snarl. "If you don't have it in you to do what must be done, then let me do it. I'll go into the half-blood's room and slit her throat while she sleeps. It's the only way we can be sure she won't go to the Dead City and come back and kill us all."

Wrynric flew back to his feet and reached for his sword. "If you lay a hand on her..."

"What? You'd kill me? Arden's wife, whom he loved dearly?" She waved a finger at him. "You wouldn't dare."

"I would dare. Try to hurt her and you'll see what I'm capable of."

Meridia stared at him, her face a feral rictus. He watched her, his hand still on his sword. Long seconds passed, neither moving. Then Meridia spoke. "You'll live to regret this. I hope you die out there."

She spun toward the curtain where Aemon was hiding. He quickly ducked back and hid behind the barrel. It was not a good hiding spot, but it was all he had. She threw open the curtain and stormed past him and down the hallway, so intent on her own thoughts she did not notice him.

Aemon was about to start breathing again when he heard laughter from further down the passage. Suddenly, Minard drew back the curtain of a room several doors down. "You'll make a godless man of me if you keep that up," the monk said over his shoulder. "You must've concocted some sort of magical brew to make me feel the way I do." A woman giggled and threw a pillow at him. He picked it up and threw it back. "You'll be needing that."

With a wide grin, the monk walked down the passage toward him. Aemon's heart raced. He looked around for somewhere to hide but already it was too late. Wrynric drew back the curtain of his room just as Minard saw Aemon crouched behind the barrel.

The monk stopped. "What in Ibilirth's holy name are you doing?"

Wrynric saw Aemon and sneered. "Did you hear us, boy?"

Aemon's cheeks felt like they were on fire. "I... ah, hmmm."

Great, how am I going to explain my way out of this one?

The old warrior swore under his breath. "Don't tell the half-blood what she said. Meridia is... She's still hurting from Arden's betrayal and seeing Kara has thrown salt into old wounds."

Minard helped Aemon to his feet. "Didn't your mother tell you it's rude to eavesdrop on other people's conversations?"

Aemon tried to bite a nail but remembered he had chewed them all down already. "I am sorry. I heard raised voices and..." He struggled to swallow. "I wanted to stop listening; really, I did. Kara is kind and gentle and would never—"

Wrynric grabbed him around the throat. "Shut your mouth, boy." He turned to Minard. "Go to bed, monk. I need to have words with this one."

Grinning, Minard said, "Go easy on him; he hurts easily."

The old warrior dragged Aemon down the passage by the hood of his cloak. They passed the door Minard had come from. Erinie stood just inside the doorway, with a blanket wrapped around her.

Wrynric stopped dead in his tracks. "What were you doing with him, girl?"

Erinie seemed taken aback by the old man's tone. "Just talking. It's not often I get to meet new people."

"Why aren't you dressed?" He glanced around her room. "You don't need to take your clothes off *just* to talk."

Her face darkened, her eyes becoming slits. "Don't bother giving me another one of your lectures. I thought after what happened, we would be over this sort of thing."

"Nothing has changed since Sunholm. You're like a daughter to me, and there's much you don't know. I only want to protect you."

"And you're like a father to me, but that doesn't mean you have the right to speak to me like this. I'm a woman grown, and I don't need you protecting me anymore. If I want to share my time with Minard—you can't stop me."

The old warrior slammed his mailed fist against the wall, sending chips of stone flying into Aemon's face. "He isn't your friend. His order would hunt us down as heretics and purge us all. They are, and always will be, *our* enemy."

Erinie looked down her nose at him. "Minard isn't like that."

"Open your eyes, girl—"

"Never call me girl again."

Wrynic's teeth ground together. Aemon had never seen him so angry. Where was the old man taking him and what did he intend to do when he got there?

The old warrior's voice almost broke. "I've looked out for you since you were born. You can't do this to me. Not now."

"And I thank you for that."

Some of the life went out of him. "Then at least tell me why. What do you see in him?"

"He's handsome and strong, and I like men like that. My life has provided few opportunities for pleasure of late, so I'm seizing it when I can." Erinie waved dismissively. "Now go away. I want to forget this conversation ever took place."

Before she slid the curtain shut in the old warrior's face, her eyes met Aemon's. "Is he going to lecture you too?"

Wrynic growled under his breath and dragged Aemon away. In the main chamber, they passed two men guarding the entrance to Safehold. The guards looked at them with raised eyebrows but said nothing. One pulled aside the curtain leading outside. Wrynic snatched a torch from the wall and dragged Aemon between the two boulders at the entrance.

When they were some distance from Safehold he stopped, shoved Aemon against the cave wall and pinned him there with a clenched fist. Wrynic stared into the darkness, his breathing labored, teeth still grinding together.

After several minutes he turned to Aemon, his face lined with worry and fatigue. "You almost blurted it all out in front of the monk, you fool. Don't you remember the vow he took back at the temple? He will kill Kara if he thinks she's a threat."

"I remember, but I was not thinking. I am sorry."

"Then start thinking, boy. We have a dangerous journey ahead of us and we can't afford to let our guard down. Kara *must* get to the Metal Man, no matter what." He closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths. "I don't know if what Meridia said is true. She's long been bitter and angry, and I wouldn't put it past her to lie about what she saw in her visiondreams."

“Kara would never do—” Aemon remembered the look Kara had given him the day they arrived at Safehold, and he also remembered when she had slapped him at the Tomb of Ibilirith.

No, he could not allow himself to believe it was truly Kara who had done those things.

“Seeing Arden’s daughter born of another woman—a courtesan at that—has hurt Meridia deeply and she’s just lashing out.” Wrynic sighed. “It doesn’t help Kara looks like Semira.” He stared back into the darkness, as if he did not want Aemon to see his face. “I trust Arden and his vision. Kara will save us all.”

It frightened Aemon to hear the uncertainty in the old man’s voice. Though it was hard to imagine Kara leading an army, it was easier imagining that than her turning her machine beasts on the Priest King and butchering him. She was a good person. Like the old warrior said, Meridia was just bitter and hateful, and probably making it all up.

Aemon put his hand on Wrynic’s shoulder, hoping the old man would not notice it shaking. The older man’s behavior had frightened him. “Meridia is wrong, as is Ibilirith’s prophecy,” Aemon said, trying to sound reassuring, as much for Wrynic as for himself. “Kara will save us. I know she will.”

Wrynic slowly nodded, then handed Aemon the torch without looking at him. “Go back inside. I need time to myself.” Aemon hesitated, uncertain what to do. “Leave, before I break your neck.”

Aemon walked back toward Safehold. When he rounded a corner, he heard Wrynic collapse. Aemon paused, and listened to make certain the old man was all right.

“Arden, Liana, my dear, sweet Semira,” Wrynic sobbed. “I’m sorry. So sorry. I wish I could...”

The seemingly invulnerable Wrynic was close to breaking. Like Kara, he had lost so much. Aemon had lost too, but his loss paled in comparison to what had been taken from them. Both must be tough as stone to go through what they had and continue on.

But even stone could shatter under pressure.

Aemon would need to keep a close eye on Meridia. She wanted Kara dead, but would she be foolish enough to try something after Wrynic’s threat? The sooner Kara got better, the sooner they could leave Meridia and her foul lies behind.

Not wanting to intrude any further on Wrynic’s sorrow, Aemon made his way back to Safehold, more uncertain than ever.

Chapter 23

Kara.

The surviving members of the Covenant of the Lost Sun gathered around the entrance to Safehold to bid Kara and her companions farewell. Kara had rested for three days, and now she had to move on.

Time was running out.

Wrynic, Minard and Aemon shouldered ropes and supplies while Erinie consulted with the man who'd take over her role of leading the refugees. Kara leaned on her walking staff and watched them.

Then, one by one, the refugees hugged Kara and gave her their best wishes. A young girl who looked no more than six years old approached Kara, eyes filled with awe. Behind her stood a boy and a girl, so similar in appearance they had to be triplets.

Kara smiled down at her. "Hello, little one. What's your name?"

The girl glanced at her two siblings, then up at Kara. "My name is Shyra. I have something for you." She held up a black band with a round silver display on it. "It belonged to Mommy, but she... sleeps under the light of the Lost Sun."

Shyra held it out for Kara to take it. Kara hesitated. How could she take something of such value to the little girl? "Please, we want you to take it," Shyra insisted. "Let me help you put it on. You wear it around your wrist."

Kara reluctantly let the girl wrap the gift around her wrist. After the girl clasped it on, she looked up at Kara expectantly.

Kara made a show of admiring the gift. Her breath caught in her throat.

She knew what it was.

"Do you like it?" the girl asked eagerly.

Kara blinked. "Yes, little one, I do. Do you know what it is?"

The girl glanced at her twin brother and sister, as if uncertain what to say. The other two children nervously came forward and held each other's hands. The young boy spoke now. "Mommy said it was given to her by her mommy, who got it from her mommy. They all swore to the Lost Sun they'd protect it."

"And they didn't know what it was?"

All three shook their heads.

Kara forced a little grin. "It's a watch. People used to wear them to tell the time and store information on. This one has no power anymore, so the display is blank."

The triplets gasped. "How do you know that?" Shyra asked. "Did you see one in a visiondream?"

Kara had no idea how she knew what a watch was, but she had to say something. "Yes, I saw someone wearing a watch in one of my visiondreams." Kara started to take it off. "But I can't take it. You should keep it to remember your mother by."

Shyra stopped her. "No. It's yours now." Her eyes reddened. "We have visiondreams too, and they showed us that we must give mommy's watch to you and that it will be of great importance for you one day."

Kara brushed back her bangs. "You're scions?" They shifted uncomfortably, not making eye contact anymore. Kara gingerly dropped to her knees and put her arms around them, ignoring the ache in her wounded shoulder. "It's alright. Think of me as... an older sister."

They hugged her back now, all four just holding one another. "Take care, little ones," Kara said. "I'll make sure I keep your watch safe. Maybe when you're all grown up, I can give it back to you."

When they had separated, a dark look came over Shyra. “The adults here think we don’t know what happened to Mommy. But we know. We know what the failed scion did to her.”

Who was she talking about? Semira? Wrynric and Erinie had both tried to avoid talking about her. What were they hiding?

A look of such hate came over the three children's faces that Kara recoiled. “Shyra, that’s enough of that,” a man scolded as he came up to them. “You forget who you’re speaking to.”

Shyra put her hands on her hips. “The failed scion killed Mommy.” She pointed at Kara. “She can kill the failed scion for us and mommy can come back.” Her bottom lip quivered as her brother and sister began to cry. “We miss her so much.”

Kara’s heart broke to see the grief on their little faces. They were too young to have suffered such loss, and to harbor dark thoughts of revenge. “I’m sorry, little ones.” Kara struggled with words. “Your mommy is at peace now, like my mommy. One day, you’ll all see her again. I promise.”

“Thank you, Scion,” the man said, then lifted Shyra and put her on his shoulders. He turned back to Kara. “May the Lost Sun watch over you.” With that, he took the other two children’s hands and reentered the crowd.

The last to bid Kara farewell was a middle-aged woman with a gray streak running through her black hair. Oddly, the woman’s eyebrows were painted on with dark-blue coloring.

Wrynric came to stand beside Kara, his posture unusually tense. Was he expecting a fight? Kara smiled at the woman as she bowed her head.

“Say what you’re going to say, Meridia, then begone,” Wrynric said, eyes blazing. Meridia.

Where had Kara heard that name before? She sifted through her memories but found most of them fragmented. She tried to put the pieces together to see what they were, but they broke apart like shattering glass.

“Hello. I’ve heard your name before, but can’t recall where,” Kara said, trying to ease the tension.

Meridia graced Kara with a warm smile, though her eyes betrayed the hidden hostility behind it. “I’m Arden’s beloved wife.”

Kara swallowed. That explained the hostility.

Not knowing what else to do, Kara hugged her stepmother, who felt as rigid as stone. “I wish we’d gotten to know one another. I never met Arden, but from what I hear, he was a great man.”

Her stepmother suddenly wrapped her arms around Kara and put her lips to her ear. “You *disgusting* harlot. I know what you are and what you plan to do. I’ve seen you in my visiondreams.” She tightened her embrace. “You’re not here to save us. You mean to kill us all.”

Kara gritted her teeth as her stepmother’s long nails dug through her robes and into her skin. “That thing you clutch around your neck like platinum jewelry has taken everything from me.” Kara shuddered as Meridia licked her neck, leaving behind a trail of wet saliva. “Know this, you *wretched husk*,” her stepmother hissed. “If we *ever* meet again, I’ll slit your throat and drink your blood.”

She gently pushed Kara away and smiled. It was as if they’d only shared a friendly hug. “Good bye, *half-blood*.”

Wrynic shoved Meridia back. "Go away, woman, and leave us be."

She spat in the old man's face, then stormed off.

Kara wiped the saliva from her neck, then clutched the passkey and watched her stepmother disappear behind a curtain.

You're a horrible woman. But your threat doesn't scare me. Not after what I've been through.

The threat might mean little, but Meridia had given voice to Kara's own fears. What if she got to the Dead City and found out that she was the Scion of the Prophecy? The harbinger of doom?

What if Arden had lied about what he'd seen in his visiondream, or misinterpreted it?

"Hey, are you all right?" Aemon asked.

Kara leaned heavily on her walking staff. They hadn't even left Safehold yet and she already felt weary, her pain hammering at her from all sides and her mind a maelstrom of turmoil.

Death would be a welcome escape, yet so far it had eluded her.

Kara forced the pain to the back of her mind. "I'll be alright," she said. "Walk with me, for I could do with a friend beside me."

Aemon stared at the curtain Meridia had disappeared through and seemed to want to say something. "What is it?" Kara asked.

He winced. "Nothing; do not worry about it."

She put an arm through his and together they left Safehold and entered the Great Dark.

IT WAS NEAR EIGHTH hour on the fourth day since leaving Safehold when Wrynic stopped them near the edge of a deep chasm. Kara leaned on her walking staff while she waited to see what the old man would say.

"I know little beyond this point," Wrynic said. "It's up to you now, Erinie. You helped us find the Dead City once; now you must find it again."

Erinie removed a flat, fist-sized object from her bag and held it up to the torch. She pressed a button on the side and the object began to glow a dull blue. A moment later, an incandescent image materialized in the air above their heads.

Minard backed away quickly. "What sorcery is this?"

"It's not sorcery, sweetheart, it's a map," Erinie said as she peered up at it.

The monk's face hardened. "Don't call me that in front of... Well, you know."

Aemon looked like he was struggling not to laugh. Kara couldn't blame him, either. Even she'd enjoyed seeing Minard made fun of. Finally, the monk was getting a taste of his own brew.

"Aw, did I embarrass you in front of the other men?" Erinie poked her tongue out at Minard. "You didn't complain about me calling you sweetheart the other night. If anything, you—"

"I don't want to hear anymore," Wrynic growled. "Tell him what the device is so we can get moving."

Erinie cleared her throat. "Our ancestors made these map devices to help them navigate. I managed to rescue this one from the repository in Sunholm before it was destroyed." She pointed to a flashing red circle on the map. "That dot represents us and that blue dot way over there represents the Dead City."

“Amazing,” Aemon said, his eyes reflecting the glow of the map. “How old is the device?”

“It’s old enough to not be entirely accurate,” Erinie replied. “Cave-ins and water erosion change the layout of the caves all the time, so they look far different to when the map was made. Also, there are endless mazes of cramped, twisting tunnels that make it hard to know where one passage ends and another begins, even when zoomed right in.” She shrugged. “Sometimes choosing the right path is guesswork.”

“At least you’re honest,” Minard said.

She snorted. “It saves everyone getting angry at me if we get lost.”

Wrynric drew his sword. “Quiet, I heard something again.”

The men moved as one to form a circle around Kara. They’d been hearing noises behind them the last three hours, an occasional thump or falling pebble. The sounds would’ve been easy to miss in the inhabited parts of the caverns, but so deep into the Great Dark it was eerily silent. Beyond the eternal drip of water or the odd, distant cry of some primordial horror, the only sound was their own breathing.

Erinie shut the device down and the map dissipated. Minard handed Kara the torch and told her to stay behind him.

You must hurry; the enemy is on the move again. They will not stop until life is extinguished.

With the voice coming to Kara so often now, her paranoia and anxiety had grown until they felt like a physical entity gestating inside her ribs. The Great Dark terrified her, and the growing fear of what was happening inside her was near to breaking her resolve.

The closer they got to the Dead City, the stronger the negative feelings became. More frightening was that twice now, for more than a minute, Kara felt like she’d lost control of her own body. The sensation made her feel like one of the puppets from a show she’d watched during a Den Sveta celebration. Her arms and legs moving, without her saying so, controlled by an invisible puppeteer. So far, the invisible puppeteer had done nothing untoward, but what if that changed? What if it did something bad, like make her attack one of her companions? She’d lost control before and struck Aemon. Next time she might kill him.

She suddenly started to feel paranoid again, like she had back at the Bellhole Tavern. With the paranoia came a rising tide of anger seething in her guts. *Please, let this end*, Kara cried to herself, struggling to keep the rage at bay. *I don’t think I can take much more of this.*

If Minard learned of what was happening to her, he’d make good on his oath. An oath she’d made him swear.

To kill her if she became a threat.

Minard was probably the only one in the group to have the fortitude to do it. For all Wrynric’s stalwartness, he’d rather see the world burn at Kara’s hand than lay a hand on Arden’s *precious* half-blood daughter. Kara snarled. Servile old wretch.

Aemon was weak too. No doubt, he’d fair no better than Wrynric. She’d wager Aemon had lied to her face about being willing to kill her if she became a threat. She could make him do anything she wanted, for he was servile just like the old man—except for this one thing.

Kill her.

He wouldn't do it, even if she begged him. *Pitiful boy, playing at being a man.*

If what Kara feared was happening to her was true, someone would have to put an end to her—whether they wanted to or not.

Kara caught herself. Was the anger she felt toward Aemon and Wrynnic hers, or did it belong to the presence inside? It was hard to tell anymore. She bit her lip. If she could hold it together a little longer, they would get to the Dead City and find the Metal Man. He would help her.

In her visiondreams, the Metal Man had called her Imogen, just as the voice on the surface had done. He said he knew Imogen and that he waits for her return. What would he do if Kara wasn't who he thought she was?

Hurry. You must hurry.

Kara stiffened as urgency overwhelmed her. When she could breathe, she said, "We need to keep moving."

Wrynnic glanced at her over his shoulder. "We wait a few minutes. If we don't hear anything again, we'll move on."

They listened, but heard nothing except their own breathing and the trickle of water. Reluctantly, Wrynnic motioned them forward. Minard took the rear, while Erinie and the old warrior walked vanguard.

Aemon hovered near Kara, like he'd done since leaving Safehold. Twice she'd stumbled and twice he'd caught her. It gladdened her to have him so close, for without his calming presence, the raging torrent of emotions would've swept her away.

When they got to the edge of the chasm, Wrynnic said, "Tread carefully, all of you. Aemon, if Kara looks like she's going to fall, do whatever you can to stop her."

Aemon stepped so close to Kara that she feared if one of them fell, the other would go with them.

They walked along a narrow ledge, keeping as far from the edge of the chasm as they could. To their left was a wall of stone and to the right, a fathomless black void that seemed to feed on torchlight.

After a short distance, the ledge narrowed and the ground became increasingly uneven and slick with moisture. It wasn't long before they had to walk so close to the edge that one misstep could cost them their life. Kara grew so tired she could barely keep her eyes open, nor stand without leaning heavily on her staff.

An hour later, Erinie stopped them. "Not far from here, we'll have to jump across the chasm." Erinie smiled at Kara. "This is where things start to get hard, scion. If you feel you need help, don't hesitate to ask."

Aemon groaned deep in his throat. "I thought things were already hard."

Erinie chuckled. "Wait until you see some of the cliffs we have to climb. You'll look back over the last few days with fondness."

"How far is it to the Dead City from here?" Minard asked.

"It depends on how fast you can climb, sweetheart," Erinie said with a huge, toothy grin. "We've a lot of climbing ahead of us and need to keep our pace slow for the scion, so it's going to take at least another three or four days to get there."

"Most of our journey from here is going to be heading upwards," Wrynnic said. "It'll be long, grueling and dangerous. We'll be lucky if we don't encounter some of the monsters living out here, so keep your weapons close and eyes open."

Aemon muttered something under his breath that Kara couldn't make out. She ran her fingers through her wet, matted hair. Why did he care about what lay ahead? Nothing mattered anymore.

The chasm twisted and turned, the path uneven. Rounding another corner, Erinie and Wrynric came to an abrupt halt.

"Alright, that's where we have to jump." Wrynric pointed at a flat ledge some eight feet away, on the far side of the chasm. "I'll go first, then Erinie. Monk, I want you to throw Kara over to me and come last."

Kara didn't argue with being thrown over by Minard, for she didn't have the strength to make it on her own. Aemon went rigid, his eyes wide. He saw her watching him and stood as tall as he could. "Do not worry about me; I can handle this."

Minard slapped him on the back. "Of course you can. All you have to do is jump."

Aemon stumbled forward. When he righted himself, he spun to face the monk. "I could have fallen, you..."

The monk grinned. "You what?"

"Shut up, both of you," Wrynric snapped. "Aemon, guard the rear until you're ready to leap across."

Aemon took position as Wrynric and Erinie tossed over their equipment. The clangs and thuds their equipment made as it landed echoed along the chasm.

Kara gazed back the way they'd come. Did they have to make so much noise? What if something heard?

When the last item was across, they fell silent and listened until the echo of their labors faded to nothing. Kara breathed again. Perhaps nothing was out there, and her fear had been for nothing.

You must hurry!

Wrynric leapt over the chasm and landed deftly on his feet, chain armor jangling. Minard tossed over the torch and the old warrior caught it and waited for Erinie to jump. She leapt over, and he caught her and pulled her away from the edge.

"Your turn, scion," Minard said.

First, the monk threw over Kara's staff, then picked her up. After the count of three, he hurled her into the waiting arms of Wrynric. The old warrior held her until he was certain she could stand on her own. "Stay close while we wait for the others," he told her and motioned her to go stand next to Erinie.

Kara watched Aemon walk to the edge and peer into the darkness below him. "Don't look down," Wrynric said. "Back up a bit, then run and jump."

When Aemon didn't move, Minard dragged him back. Aemon fought free of the monk's grip. Then without warning, he raced toward the chasm and leapt into the air. Wrynric lunged forward and grabbed him as he landed. "Give me a bit of warning next time, boy," the old man snarled.

Aemon went and stood next to Kara, his legs shaking so violently she offered him her staff. He waved it away. "I never want to do that again."

She gave him a distracted half-grin, then watched Minard make the jump. When the monk was safely across, Erinie took out the map device to plot the next step of

their journey. When she was done searching the map, they gathered up everything and moved off.

After what seemed like half a lifetime on their hands and knees in cramped orange-brown tunnels, they arrived at a cavernous chamber. They moved some distance in, then stopped to stretch tight muscles and rub sore knees. While she stretched, Kara used her dark-vision to scan ahead. Her eyes were drawn to several large, circular mounds about sixty feet away, near the center of the chamber.

They didn't look part of the cave. She crept to the edge of the torchlight to get a better look. "Scion, don't wander off," Erinie said.

Kara ignored the librarian's warning and kept moving toward the mounds. She heard the jingle of Wrynic's armor as he moved to stop her. It no longer mattered; she knew what the mounds were and could see what had made them.

"Shhh, stay quiet," she whispered. "I can see seven bone mounds with huge, spiny creatures sitting on top of them."

One of the creatures stood and turned toward the torchlight. It was twenty feet long, with sharp spines running along its back, its face ending in a long, toothless beak that reminded her of the birds at the zoo in the capital. She backed away. "I think one of them has seen us."

Wrynic dragged Kara back to the others. "Erinie, find where we came in. I think we've run into an aurtark nest."

Two of the aurtarks began making hooting sounds, and suddenly the once-silent chamber rang with the hoots of dozens more. The strange calls came from all around them, the sound near deafening. More of the creatures emerged from holes bored out of the rock and joined in on the chorus.

The five companions ran back the way they'd come, weapons in hand. Compared to the smaller, more agile aurtarks, the larger ones moved ponderously slow. Kara quickly lost count of how many there were. Beyond the torchlight, all around them, baleful eyes shone white in her dark-vision.

Minard shouted over his shoulder, "I see the exit, just ahead."

A small aurtark leapt at Kara, but she ducked and it harmlessly flew over her head. Another went for Wrynic, but he sent it flying backwards with a swift kick to its face.

Gibbering, another leapt from the darkness and landed on Aemon's back, sending him onto his belly. He screamed and tried to crawl away as the creature attempted to take a bite out of his arm but instead got its jaws caught on a bag strap. Minard brought his staff down on its head and crushed its skull. After a second blow to make sure it was dead, he kicked it off Aemon's back and helped him back to his feet.

Erinie was busy mixing powder in a bowl as she ran and didn't seem to notice she was running head-long at another aurtark. Kara screamed a warning and Erinie veered left, a moment before the creature leapt for her. It flew past her and slammed into one of its kin coming up behind Kara, sending them both crashing to the ground.

They arrived at the exit and Wrynic shoved Kara in. She crawled as fast as she could behind Aemon, who led the way, hoping the other three would be right behind her.

Suddenly, a wave of heat struck her from behind, launching her forward onto her stomach. The tunnel shook as a violent, earsplitting roar echoed along it. The sound hammered back and forth along the tunnel, and all Kara could do was cover her ears and pray it would be over quickly.

The sound died and she shakily got to her knees. She couldn't hear anything beyond the ringing in her ears. What happened? Had the tunnel collapsed?

Aemon sat up, eyes glazed. Light shone from somewhere behind her. She turned and saw Wrynric racing along the tunnel toward them.

Reality set in. Regardless of what had just happened, they had to get moving.

Kara shoved Aemon forward until he started to move. Minutes later, they burst from the tunnel into a small chamber, with barely enough room to stand. There they stopped to catch their breaths. The ringing in her ears had eased, but it left her with a headache.

Aemon leaned against the side of the chamber, still dazed from the ordeal. Kara joined him and watched as Wrynric, Minard and then Erinie crawled out of the tunnel. Minard hunched against the wall, teeth gritted, hands covering his ears. The librarian quickly checked on Kara. Seeing Kara was alright, she went to check on the old man.

Wrynric waved her away. "I'm alright; my back's been worse."

"I could give you something for the pain."

"No, I can deal with it. I can't afford to be groggy."

Minard shook his head. "What in the blessed lights was that explosion? I think I've lost half my bloody hearing."

Wrynric knelt stiffly beside the passage they'd emerged from, his sword ready to plunge down on any aurtark still following them. Without turning around, he said, "I told you back at Rylore Bellholes that Erinie could handle herself."

The librarian jiggled the fingers on her right hand. "I used my magic, sweetheart—so you better drag me back to Stelemia to face trial for heresy."

Minard rested his staff across his shoulders and stretched out his spine. "They'd probably just banish you to the Great Dark, but you already live out here so it wouldn't be much of a punishment, now would it?"

"Or they might throw me into the Well of Remorse," Erinie added. "Or drown me in Crystal Lake."

Minard held the stretch. "Or that." He lowered his staff. "Now are you going to stop making fun of me and tell me what you really did?"

Wrynric sheathed his sword. "It was alchemy. Erinie just saved our lives."

"I blew up the entrance to the tunnel using an explosive concoction I made, so the beasts couldn't follow us in. Even still, we should get a move on before they find another way to reach us."

"Was the nest there the last time you were here, or did you take us the wrong way?" Minard asked.

"I told you the map device is not always accurate. You better get used to me taking wrong turns and leading you to dead ends."

The monk chuckled. "Well, next time you make us go the wrong way, see that you don't lead us into another nest of hungry beasts."

She gave him a playful slap on the cheek, then gestured toward a small opening in the wall. "Get back on your knees, boy, for you've got crawling to do."

Minard groaned, then got on all fours and followed her into the tunnel.

FOUR HOURS LATER, AFTER a strenuous journey through tight, rib-squeezing passages, they arrived in another chamber. Near where they entered, a limestone flowstone had naturally formed into an arch, its surface bathed in a sickly green luminescence.

Erinie looked up as she walked toward the arch. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Why does it glow like that?" Aemon asked.

She grinned. "You'll find out when we get there."

Kara leaned on her staff as she followed the others toward the glowing arch. As they approached it, her curiosity was piqued when the light became so bright it nullified her dark-vision. All she could see was the arch and a wall of impenetrable darkness beyond. It looked like a doorway to a void of infinite black.

Finally, she saw what was creating the glow. Growing over the flowstone were colonies of phosphorescent bacteria, but the light they emitted was different to the ones in Stelemia. It was weaker and more diffuse. Kara had never seen the bacteria up close and was surprised to find that it was little more than a thin, translucent film. The film coated the entirety of the arch but not the rock around it.

Aemon tentatively touched the glowing rock and the bacteria made his fingertip glow. "Why does it only grow here?"

Erinie shrugged. "That's one of the many mysteries of the Nether that'll never be solved."

They passed under the arch and left it behind, and were once again bathed only in torchlight. Soon they reached the edge of the chamber and stopped.

"We have to climb here," Erinie said, then took the torch from Wrynric and held it over her head, and revealed a rope hanging from the wall.

Wrynric tugged on the rope. "We left it behind when we were out here." He started unpacking their climbing equipment. "Don't worry, it's not a long climb. Once we're at the top, we'll make camp."

After the old man handed out the equipment, he helped Kara attach herself to Minard's back. Minard started up the rope, the old warrior following close behind.

The ascent was no more than fifty feet, and they all got to the top without issue. They made camp a dozen feet from the edge, on the only part of the ground that bore any semblance to being flat.

Aemon helped Kara off Minard's back, then fussed over her until she was comfortably seated. "Thank you," she said.

He nodded. "How are you holding up?"

She forced a smile. "I'm tired, sore and I could do with a wash. What more is there to say?"

A lot really, but how could she tell him how she really felt without the others hearing?

"You would tell me if you thought something was wrong with you, right?" He studied her closely. "I worry about you."

"I know you do. With each passing hour, we get closer to the Metal Man. It won't be long and all this will be over." She shook her head. "Well, except the long walk back and facing down the enemy in Stelemia."

“Yes, and fighting the Final Battle to end our exile.”

They both grinned. “It still sounds so absurd,” Kara said. “Much like some of the stories drunks used to tell me at the Golden Keg.”

“I do not even think there was a story more fanciful in my books.” He shook his head. “Who knows, if we survive this, perhaps I should write a book called—*Kara, the Heroic Savior of Stelemia!*”

“As long as the story includes her loyal knight, Aemon, who steadfastly stood by her side.”

His smile brought a little warmth to her heart and for a few brief moments, held the roiling turmoil inside her at bay.

Wrynric passed around food and water. After they’d eaten their cold bowls of salted mutton and mushroom stew, they extinguished the torch and set the order of watch. The old warrior would go first, then Minard, both taking four-hour shifts, as per usual. So far, Aemon hadn’t complained about not being given an opportunity to take watch. Deep down, he might’ve been thankful, as never before had he been put through such physical hardship as traveling through the Great Dark. If he felt anything like Kara, he was probably more tired than he’d ever been.

Still, she hoped he didn’t see it as an affront to his sense of manhood. Men cared about what other men thought of them, and hated to appear weak in front of one another. The fact he had yet to be called upon to stand watch suggested Wrynric didn’t think him up to the task.

Kara got comfortable and was asleep in moments. Then the dream came to her. A dream of twisting, poisoned passages, metal doors and ageless voices. When she jolted awake, she didn’t need the voice to warn her of danger, for a creeping sense of dread settled over her, smothering her soul in cold terror.

Something was coming.

She looked around with her dark-vision and caught sight of Minard, who sat near the edge, staring out into the darkness. He drummed his fingers up and down his staff, likely his technique for staying awake during his watch.

He looked relaxed. How could he not sense the approaching dread?

Kara crawled over to him and tapped him on the shoulder. He jumped. “What the—”

“Shh,” she whispered. “Something’s down there.”

“Below us?”

“Yes. I can feel it.” She used her unnatural vision to scan the jagged paths below them. The bacteria glowed in the distance, but the rest of the chamber floor was bathed in a dark so deep, even her eyes had trouble seeing through it.

After a minute of searching, she’d seen nothing. Had her instincts been wrong? Or was it just paranoia playing tricks on her? The voice hadn’t warned of danger like it had with the jamalgana.

The growing dread made her insides feel like lead. There had to be something out there. Though tired beyond all reason and in great pain, she had to wake the others, for they needed to flee before whatever was down there caught up to them.

Minard helped Kara wake the others and two minutes later, they stood ready to leave. Kara had saved the men once from the jamalgana, and they clearly trusted her enough not to question her now.

Though they were all tired, they climbed up a moisture-slick wall using dozens of natural foot-holds. Once they reached the top, another climb awaited them. After making that climb, they climbed another, then another, each more treacherous than the last.

Still, the dread lingered.

They were about to collapse from fatigue when the silence was broken by a ghastly moan. Wrynric shoved Kara behind him, drew his sword and raised his shield as the other two men hefted their weapons. Erinie held the torch high, her free hand digging into a pouch.

Kara's dread manifested before her as three figures clambered over the edge of the cliff and slowly rose to their feet.

As the figures drew closer, the torchlight reflected off their eyes, giving them a fel, unnatural gleam. Three naked, human-like creatures, reeking of decay, shambled toward them. Kara had never seen anything so vile.

They looked like walking corpses, given life.

These are Children of Ryhana, the voice cried. You must flee!

Wrynric bared his teeth. "The Lost Sun protect us. They're rotmen. Aim for their heads, for that's the only way to kill them."

The first of the rotmen lunged forward, its dead eyes on Kara. She gripped the passkey as the presence inside her screamed.

Chapter 24

Aemon.

Aemon raised his mace and watched as the rotmen moved side by side, toward them. They looked human, but their bodies were twisted, sinewy masses of muscle and protruding bone under pale, almost-translucent skin. Their large, pale eyes were sunken into their man-like faces and viscous liquid the color of bile dripped from inch-long fangs jutting out of their puckered mouths. Wafting around them came the putrid smell of festering death.

The rotmen were things born of dark, inscrutable nightmares, and they had come to feast on human flesh. All three were transfixed on Kara and did not react as Minard and Wrynric charged them.

Aemon positioned himself between the monsters and Kara. "Stay behind me," Aemon ordered, without taking his eyes off the nearest enemy.

Minard drove his staff into the face of one of the rotmen, and it let out a pained moan as dark blood spurting from its nose. The blow would have killed a human, yet the rotman recovered in an instant and swiped at the monk with its serrated claws. As Minard backed away, he swung his staff in a great arc and struck the monster on the right arm, rupturing pallid flesh and crunching bone.

The rotman let out another moan, then raked the air with its claws in a frenzied attack that would have disemboweled Minard had he not backed off. The rotman lurched after him, and he barely managed to stay out of its reach. Their battle

began to take them some distance from the group, and perilously close to the edge of the cliff.

Wrynic engaged another, using his shield to smash it in the head. Its face a broken, putrid mess, the rotman still managed to take hold of the old warrior's shield. The monster snapped at him over the top of it, splattering the old warrior with thick, copper-colored ichor. Wrynic struggled to hold it back, his feet slipping on the wet rock.

Erinie mixed powders from her pouches into a small metal bowl while trying to stay out of the melee. Her focus was on the two monsters attacking the men and she did not seem to notice the third rotman, who circled around the fighting and came for Kara.

Aemon prepared himself for the coming fight. The monster would need to get through him before it could reach Kara.

But did he have the courage to face it?

Aemon froze, the familiar fear and indecision paralyzing him. He watched in slow motion as drool ran down the rotman's chin, black tongue protruding from pale lips, its vacant eyes on Kara. The rotman shambled closer and closer, and all he could think of was how painful it would be when those teeth sank into his flesh.

Something snapped within him, jolting him back to his senses. This was no time for cowards. It was time to be like his hero, Rexus of Acid Lake.

A hero of the ages.

Raising the mace over his head, Aemon charged the rotman and gave it a crushing blow to the side of its skull. Blood and gore splattered over him as he struck again and again, crushing limbs, breaking bones, shattering teeth and jaw. Its broken arms flailing about, it fell back with a long, drawn-out moan.

Aemon raced after the rotman and rammed his mace into its guts. The weapon exploded through the slimy, pale skin and sent pungent, purple intestines spilling over Aemon's feet.

The rotman made a noise that might have been laughter, but its mouth was too mangled to be certain. It reached for him with one of its shattered limbs. Aemon backed off, but the rotman went after him, leaving a ragged trail of viscera in its wake. Chunks of brain ran down the side of its face, its left eye ruptured and hanging near its mouth by a bloody retina. The ghastly sight made Aemon's stomach churn.

It truly was a walking corpse.

"Look out," Kara cried, as the rotman Minard faced knocked him aside and raced toward her. Aemon instinctively imposed himself between it and Kara.

At that point, Aemon knew he was doomed. How could he fight two monsters at the same time? Wrynic was still engaging the other rotman and by the time Minard got back to his feet and reached him, it would be over and Aemon and Kara would be dead.

Roaring in defiance, Aemon held his mace high, waiting to bring it down onto whichever rotman reached him first. *Time to make good on my vow. I made an oath to protect Kara with my life, and now that time has come.*

Aemon readied himself to make his final stand.

His life flashed before his eyes. His mother's cold embrace, his father's apathy for life, Morgon's head resting on a pillow of coins, his teacher Tallis's kindly face, and the meow of a stray kitten he once saved. Last came an image of himself sitting beside the office window at the bank, looking longingly at the Capital Spire, thinking of home.

He had been a boy then. Now he was a man.

Aemon charged the nearest rotman and drove his mace into its neck. The mangled remnants of its face vomited brown ichor over him, almost blinding him when it splattered into his eyes. Spitting and cursing, knowing he had little time to spare, he spun around in a circle to gather strength, then arced his mace into the side of the rotman's leg.

The shattered leg bone tore through the rotman's sinewy flesh and the monster collapsed into a heap. Without thinking, Aemon brought the mace down onto the remains of its head, snuffing out its unnatural life forever in an explosion of brain and skull.

It had all happened in seconds, yet in those brief moments, he felt stronger than ever before. His heart pumped power through every vein and artery, bringing it to every extremity, pumping, pumping until it made him feel invincible.

Covered head to toe in putrid gore and vile excretions, his vanquished enemy broken at his feet, he let out a roar of triumph. This time, the glory was all his. In that moment, he stood as tall as Rexus of Acid Lake!

The roar died almost as quickly as it had begun. The other rotman lunged for him. In his exaltation, he had forgotten the second monster. He backed away and stumbled on a protruding rock, catching a glimpse of Minard still racing up behind it, staff held high, but too far away to help...

The rotman let out a guttural, throaty laugh, its long, purple tongue dripping bile. "Boooy, I am empty," it moaned and reached for him.

They could talk?

Eyes wide with horror, Aemon looked to Kara for aid, but she watched on impassively.

"Kara!"

The rotman was six feet from him when its back erupted into flames. As heat washed over him and singed his hair, Aemon crawled away before the flames could engulf him.

Still the rotman came.

Erinie hurled white powder at the burning rotman and the flames roared with renewed intensity. The monster let out a long, repulsive moan as its flesh was consumed. The air filled with intense heat and smoke. Aemon kept crawling until he bumped into Kara. She stared at the oncoming inferno with an odd, distant look, the flames dancing in her eyes.

Aemon staggered to his feet. Kara did not move, so he dragged her away before the rotman could reach her. Suddenly, she raked his arm with her nails, tearing into his skin. He cried out in pain but kept dragging her until the monster collapsed in a fiery heap.

With two of the rotmen dead, Minard hurried over to Wrynric and helped lay the finishing blows to the final enemy. When it collapsed, they used staff and shield to

pummel it until nothing remained but a bloody, pulverized mush of dark blood, shattered bone and ragged gore.

When their grisly business was done, the only sound was crackling meat and their harsh breathing, the smell of roasting flesh sickly-sweat in the air.

Blood ran through Aemon's fingers from the deep scratches in his arm. His heart shriveled. Kara had inflicted them, his blood dripping from her hand.

What was happening to her? Why had she not tried to help him?

He clenched his jaw, angry at her for the first time since they had met. She stared at the flames, but her face was blank. The adrenaline started leaving his system and an intense weariness overcame him.

Aemon jumped as something grabbed his shoulder. "You should have seen the look on your face when that thing was almost on you."

Minard!

Aemon shoved the grinning monk away. "Leave me alone."

Minard steadied himself. "Don't be like that. I only wanted to say you fought like a Chosen of Ibilirith."

Aemon narrowed his eyes. "Is that some sort of jape?"

The insolent monk feigned innocence. "No joke. I mean it. You fought well."

"You did, son," Wrynic said. "They're few things more terrifying than a rotman. Even seasoned warriors are known to cower before them."

Were they playing with him or being serious? They seemed sincere, but he was used to other men belittling him. Veladan had done it, his older brothers had too and so had Minard. Why would now be any different? The monk probably wanted Aemon to get his hopes up so he could crush them.

Wrynic patted Aemon on the shoulder. "Once again, Kara is alive because of your bravery. She couldn't have a better guardian than you."

The old man's eyes told the truth. He was not making fun of Aemon, nor was Minard.

Aemon did not know to react to their praise. He attached his bloody mace back to his belt. "If it was not for Erinie, I would be dead. She deserves the praise, not me."

Erinie washed her hands in a puddle of water to remove the flammable powder from them. When they were clean, she said, "We all did well. We're alive and the monsters are dead."

"Why don't you prepare more of that fire-powder?" Minard asked.

Erinie dried her hands on her robes. "Because it's too unstable to carry around in prepared form. I, for one, don't want to be blown up."

"We need to leave," Kara said. "There's something out there, and if we don't hurry it will find us."

Wrynic scanned the darkness beyond the glow of the burning rotman. "Kara is right. The smell of blood will attract scavengers."

Kara went and stood beside the old warrior. "There are beasts watching us already, but there's something else too. Something familiar. Something..." She stopped and glanced around like she did not know where she was.

Erinie touched her on the shoulder. "Something familiar? What is it you sense out there?"

"I... don't know what I was saying, but I know we need to hurry and find the Metal Man." Kara strode over to the rock wall and started to climb.

Wrynric plucked her off. "Slow down, girl. There's a rope not far from here."

Aemon sighed. Kara's mind seemed all over the place. Was she going mad?

They quickly wiped off the blood and gore, then Erinie tended to their injuries. She layered a brown paste over Aemon's scratches. The paste made him grit his teeth as burning pain shot up his arm, but he refused to cry out, for it would be a sign of weakness and might attract more enemies.

She wrapped a dressing over the wound. "Now you don't have to worry about the scratches becoming infected. You can thank me later."

They gathered their equipment and followed the old warrior to the rope. After a long and arduous climb, they hauled up the rope and hid it. Kara would not let them rest, so they moved off again.

The next set of passages were easygoing in comparison to all the rope climbs, and it felt like they were making decent progress. The last passage ended at a large sump. According to Kara, it was roughly four hundred feet wide. Three waterfalls cascaded from heights unknown into the sump, forming a murky, black lake.

They made their way around the water's edge through a field of large white-and-gray rocks. Sharp stalactites hung high above them, dripping icy water down the back of their necks. The area smelled of wet stone and something else Aemon could not place.

A splash near the shore made them draw their weapons. Six eyes watched them from the murky water, the pupils reflecting the torchlight.

"Get moving," Kara hissed. "There are strange-looking people watching us."

A cold chill ran down Aemon's spine as he hurried away from the water. Kara kept an eye on the watchers, as the group continued through the boulder field.

"What did they look like?" Erinie asked when they were well away.

"They were much like the rotmen, but scaly and with fish-like eyes," Kara replied. "One of them held a crude bone spear and another a rusted sword."

Erinie glanced back the way they had come. "I have no idea what they were. I don't think they were there when we passed through this chamber all those months ago."

Wrynric grunted. "Yet another monster to add to the long list of ones we've never encountered before. Lucky for us, they weren't hostile."

Several miles away from the sump, they spent the night on a gravel island in the middle of a stream. Aemon's dreams were filled with talking corpses and vile death. He flew awake as cold hands reached for him.

No, it was not hands. It was water. In the hours they had slept, the water level had risen significantly. As he watched, he could see the water still rising.

"This island will soon be underwater," Minard said, as he stood from his watching place beside Erinie. "We need to get moving before the way out is flooded."

It took them an hour to make their way through the half-flooded tunnels and onto higher ground. Higher ground gave them no respite, for they endured an exhausting half-mile belly-crawl through a set of passages that steadily sloped upwards.

Aemon thanked the divines when he emerged from the passage and was able to stand again. Erinie used the map device, then led them to an opening in the floor. They took turns climbing down. Aemon went last and had descended thirty feet when he reached the bottom. Brushing grit off his hands, he caught his breath.

They stood on a road, carved into the rock much like the ones in Stelemia.

“We ran across this ancient highway on our way to find the passkey,” Erinie said. “Who built it or why remains a mystery.”

Aemon ran a finger along the road’s surface and was surprised at how smooth it felt. The workmanship was so fine that even the best stonemason in Stelemia would be put to shame.

“Where does it go?” he asked.

Erinie pointed left. “That way leads toward Stelemia but ends a few miles from here at a huge chasm. There might’ve once been a bridge spanning it, because we saw broken pillars rising up from the depths.”

“Did it collapse?”

“I think it was destroyed with explosives, for there were several craters in the road nearby and lots of shattered stone.”

Aemon gasped. “Explosives?”

“Yes. Strange, isn’t it? I’d love to know why someone felt the need to blow up a bridge.”

Minard gestured to the right. “So... we go that way then?”

“Yes, for about fifteen miles,” Erinie replied. “Sadly, the road ends at a cave-in, so we’ll never get to find out where it leads. My guess is this highway once ran from the Dead City to Stelemia.” She sighed wistfully. “Oh, to have the time and equipment to fully explore this region and learn who built this road and why. The Nether is full of fascinating, unexplained mysteries, and I want to solve them all!”

Finally, Aemon had met a kindred spirit who thirsted for knowledge as much as he did. Perhaps one day, he and the librarian could sit down and share all they had learned with one another.

They walked along the silent, ancient highway and Aemon continued to marvel at the craftsmanship. The walls and roof were as flat as the road, though marred with occasional crevices, holes or cave-ins. For the most part, the highway was clear of debris, though at times they had to skirt around mounds of rubble and boulders or leap over fissures.

That night they stayed in a lone concrete structure beside the road. It was a simple building, with one room and a window overlooking the highway. The building seemed to be a watch post, like the ones built along the road in the Field of Spikes. Who would have been posted there, or why, remained a mystery.

Kara, who had said little throughout the day, was the first to fall asleep. Aemon sat beside her and watched her toss and turn, and wondered if she was having another visiondream.

Wrynric woke him at third hour and ordered him to keep watch. “I trust you enough now to guard us as we sleep. In a short time, you’ve gone from a green boy to a capable warrior. I know you’re more tired than you’ve ever been, but there comes a time when a man must rise above himself and do things he never dreamed he could. You have reached that moment.”

Though Aemon basked in the older man's praise, he did not feel worthy of it. He still felt fear. Wrynric and Minard both charged fearlessly into the chamber under the temple without knowing what they were up against. How could Aemon think himself a warrior like them when he lacked the courage they did? Maybe in time he would be as brave as them, but that day seemed distant.

Wrynric patted him once on the shoulder, then doused the torch and moved to sleep near the entrance. It took several long minutes for the old warrior to fall asleep, as he shuffled around to get comfortable. Ever since the jamalgana attack, Wrynric had really started to show his age, and his back clearly pained him, though he did his best not to show it. He looked near sixty—old by anyone's measure—yet here he was, still fighting monsters and climbing through dank, dark caves.

A sudden premonition came over Aemon, sending a jolt up his spine. The journey to the Dead City would be Wrynric's last. The thought of the old warrior dying was chilling. But then, any one of them could die out here, even him. The thought disturbed Aemon, so he quickly turned his mind to something else.

When Wrynric was asleep, Aemon stared into the darkness, listening to Kara's breathing. He ran his fingers over the binding on his arm. He was losing her. With each passing day, she seemed less herself. Almost like she was not Kara anymore.

Maybe they had made a mistake in bringing her out here. The closer they got to their destination, the worse she seemed to become. She had even stood there and watched the rotman almost kill him, and had not moved to help. The old Kara would have leapt to his defense, like she had when she killed Veladan.

If only Aemon could wake her and make her tell him what was wrong. But it would rouse the others and they would hear everything. He gritted his teeth. To the dark with Minard and his oath to kill Kara! It was all because of him that she could not open up about what was wrong with her. The other two would not hurt her, nor would Aemon.

He felt around for his mace. Perhaps he should sneak over and murder Minard in his sleep, and end his threat to Kara forever.

But could Aemon do it? Did he have it in him?

It took several deep breaths for Aemon to center himself. Once his emotions were under control, he realized how dark his thoughts had become. He could not murder Minard in his sleep; that was the sort of thing a craven would do. Though he hated Minard, the monk still deserved better than that.

Aemon hovered his hand over Kara's unseen face. It started shaking, so he curled his fingers into a fist. By the divines, he wanted to reach down and stroke her face. To tell her she meant everything to him and that he was there for her, forever and always—unlike when he had spurned her back at the tavern in Rylore Bellholes.

For he loved Kara, like Lady Lysha Temhovhn had loved the bald princess in an old tale Tallis used to tell. Aemon could not bear the thought of losing her like Lysha had lost her princess. If Kara turned out to be a threat like Kahan and Lucien believed, he would stay by her side and try to turn her away from the dark and draw her back into the light.

Even if it cost him his life.

AEMON WOKE EVERYONE at sixth hour and after breakfast, Erinie checked over his scratches and redressed them. When she was done, they left the concrete structure and continued their journey down the highway.

Several hours later, Wrynic grabbed hold of a rope leading up to a crack in the roof. “We head up here. The highway continues for another mile but ends at a cave-in.”

Wrynic climbed first, followed by Minard with Kara on his back. Then came Aemon and Erinie. At the top, they slithered on their bellies through a series of tunnels before dropping down a hole into a limestone chamber. The ground was a steep, slippery incline that ended at a drop. They would have to slide along sideways, finding finger holes in the rock to stop them falling over the ledge.

“Careful,” Erinie warned. “If you go over the edge, it’s a long way down.”

Aemon held on to a crack in the rock. “How far is the drop?”

She gave him a wry grin. “That’s one mystery I hope I never solve.”

They cautiously made their way across the chamber, sliding on their stomachs. By the time they were halfway across, Aemon’s fingers ached and his abdominal muscles felt bruised.

Progress was slow and Kara became increasingly agitated with the pace. “Please hurry,” she urged every time they stopped to find better finger holds or catch their breaths.

“Hey, you were the one slowing us down, remember?” Minard laughed.

Kara ignored him.

When they arrived at the next chamber, Aemon found it mercifully flat. “Don’t think you’re getting off this easy,” Wrynic said, leaning against the wall and rubbing his lower back. “We have to make the longest climb yet. Lucky for us, we left a rope here. You’ll find lots of small ledges and handholds on the way up, so use them.”

Erinie nodded. “When we’re at the top, I’ll get the map out again. From memory, there are three entrances to four different sets of tunnels and each of them splits into half a dozen more tunnels, which split into even more. It’s very confusing and we may get lost a few times before I find the right path.”

“Why didn’t you mark the route last time you were here?” Minard asked.

“Two reasons. One, we never thought we’d need to go back to the Dead City. And two, we didn’t want anyone else following our path. If Arden and Liana’s visiondreams were accurate, dangerous and powerful things lie dormant in the Dead City and they mustn’t be allowed to fall into the wrong hands.”

Minard glared at Wrynic. “You never mentioned that back at the temple, old man. You knew my order wouldn’t let the scion come out here if you did.”

Wrynic looked like he wanted to strangle Erinie for opening her big mouth. As the old warrior turned to Minard, Aemon noticed one of his hands moving to his sword. “You’re right, Monk; I kept it from your order for precisely that reason.”

Minard took a step toward him. “I wasn’t sure I believed the prophecy as the patriarch sees it—but now I’m not so sure. If we bring the scion there, she might use one of these ‘dangerous and powerful things’ to kill us all.”

“Look at her,” Erinie said. “She’s weak right now. She couldn’t hurt anyone.”

Wrynic snarled. “Your *prophecy* is nothing more than meaningless words. Arden’s vision of the passkey was real. His vision of Kara is real too. He knew she would activate the passkey and make the journey to the Dead City.”

The monk bristled at the old man’s words. Aemon grabbed his mace and moved to stand in front of Kara. Things could turn violent fast.

Erinie put a restraining hand on Minard’s shoulder as the monk leveled his staff at Wrynic. “Please don’t fight,” she pleaded. “I’m sorry I said anything. We need to stick together.”

Ignoring her plea, Minard said, “What you speak is heresy, old man. Those words are sacred to my order and to the Priest King. Holy Ibilirith’s lights shine all over Stelemia, and each of us serves her by living under them and conducting ourselves in accordance to her divine mandate.”

He shrugged Erinie’s hand off his shoulder. “You people of the Lost Sun never lived under our sacred lights. You plotted out here in the darkness with heretics and criminals. How do I know this isn’t some ploy to fulfill the prophecy so you can reap destruction upon Stelemia?”

Wrynic’s eyes narrowed. “You’re insane, *monk*.”

“Am I now?” Minard took another menacing step toward the old man. “I should’ve trusted in the patriarch’s wisdom and let him place you and the scion under interrogation. I was right in never trusting you, though. The way you look at me.” He took another step closer. “The way you went to your sword just now.”

“Stop, please,” Erinie cried. “We’re not a threat to you or Stelemia.” She made Minard look at her. “We held one another, and I opened my heart to you. Do you really think I’d plot Stelemia’s destruction? I want to save humanity, not destroy it.”

“I told you what he was back at Safehold,” Wrynic growled.

The monk held her at arm’s length. “You might have been led astray by his lies. Evil men often sway the minds of others to their cause.” He glared at Kara. “I should kill the scion now and be done with it.”

Aemon hefted his mace, as Wrynic drew his sword. He had known this day would come, and knew the old man would fight by his side. Minard raised his staff and got into a defensive crouch.

“No,” Erinie sobbed. “Please stop this.”

Kara shoved Aemon aside and strode toward Minard. She no longer leaned on her staff for support but had the gait of someone assured of themselves. When she was five feet from the monk, she stopped. “If you kill me, it will be *you* who extinguishes the human race.” Kara glanced at each of them in turn, looking like she had when they had first arrived at Safehold.

Tall, proud and perfect.

“I have come to save humanity from the darkness. Help me get to Annbar, for the enemy is on the move and nothing Stelemia can do will stop them.” She focused on Minard. “There are dangerous things in Annbar, but we can use them against the enemy.” She slid the passkey from her robes, its bulb shining bright. “Stand with me and when we get there, if you still think I am a threat, I will bow my head and let you hack it off. But know this—in so doing you will bring doom upon this world.”

Everyone seemed as speechless as Aemon. What had come over Kara? Why was she speaking this way? Was it really her?

Minard's hands were clenched around his staff, his shoulders set. He looked ready for a fight.

"Once I get to the Metal Man, all will be made clear," Kara said. "Will you stand with me?"

"What metal man?" The monk glanced at Wrynric. "This is the first I've heard of this."

The old man furrowed his brows. "Arden foresaw that Kara must go to the Metal Man of the old tale and that he would help her raise the great host which she will lead in the Final Battle to end our exile."

"So the library was a lie." Minard shook his head. "One lie after—"

"No, monk," Kara said. "The library is real and I will take you there, but first we must go to the Metal Man." She bowed and held out a hand to him. "Stay with me. I will need your strength and guidance in the days ahead."

A tense minute passed. Then the monk closed his eyes and mouthed what might have been a prayer. His body slowly relaxed and when he opened his eyes again, he seemed at peace. "I'm sorry it came to this," he said. "The old man should have told us the truth, but I guess it doesn't matter now." He lowered his chin to his chest. "I just prayed to Ibilirith for guidance and now I see what I must do. I will help guide you to the Metal Man, though I must keep my wits about me and will not hesitate to strike you down if you prove yourself a threat."

Kara nodded. "Then let us keep moving and put this misunderstanding behind us."

The men slowly lowered their weapons. They had avoided bloodshed, but Aemon was unsure how long it would last.

After donning their climbing equipment, Wrynric led the way up the rope. Minard knelt down so Kara could be tied to his back, but she walked past him and started to climb.

Aemon hurried to stop her. "What are you doing?"

Kara slipped and fell, grunting as she hit the ground. Aemon helped her back to her feet. "Are you all right?" She stared at him with a glazed look. "Kara, talk to me."

Erinie checked her pulse as Minard studied Kara closely. A little too closely for Aemon's comfort.

"Is she alright?" Wrynric asked from twenty feet up the rope.

"She looks fine and her heart rate is normal, but she's not saying anything," Erinie replied.

"Do I need to come down?"

The librarian took Kara from Aemon and shook her. "Scion, speak to us."

Aemon watched Minard out of the corner of his eye. Someone needed to make sure the monk was not going to use Kara's lack of response as a justification for trying to kill her. The monk had said he would help Kara get to the Dead City, but he might go back on his word.

Sighing, Wrynric descended the rope. "What's wrong with her?"

"I don't know," Erinie said. "She looks out of it."

The old warrior gave Minard a sour look, his right hand edging toward his sword. Aemon clasped Kara's head in his hands. "Kara, can you hear me?" Her skin felt cold and lifeless. "Talk to me, please."

She sagged against him. He lowered her gently to the ground and Wrynric covered her in a blanket. "I'm alright," she said, her voice no more than a whisper. "What happened? Did I fall?"

Aemon took her hand. "You tried to climb on your own. What were you thinking?"

She glanced at the rope. "I did? I don't remember."

"She's losing it," Minard said.

"Shut your mouth, monk," Wrynric growled. "She's injured and tired. By all rights, she should be dead with all she's endured, yet she's out here climbing cliffs and fighting monsters."

"We need to hurry," Kara said.

The old man motioned for her to stay still. "We'll give you a few minutes to rest; then you can climb onto my back and I'll take you up."

"I'll take her, like I have for every other climb," Minard said. "Trust me, I won't hurt her."

Wrynric seemed to want to argue but Erinie stopped him. "Let him do it. I'll make sure he keeps his word."

Minard gave her a bemused glare. "I vowed to Ibilirith I'd get her to the Dead City. *You* don't need to watch over me."

Erinie frowned. "I thought we shared something back at Safehold. Then you treated me like *filth*."

He turned away. "I'm sorry. Everything I told you back at Safehold was the truth, as is my pledge." After a pause, he added, "I'm ashamed to admit, but I feel out of my depth so far from the sacred lights. It's so dark out here and I feel isolated." They all stared at him until he turned to face them. "Let's get a move on; I hate all this standing around."

Aemon lit a second torch and slid it into the holder on Erinie's back, then watched Wrynric begin the climb. "You're next, Aemon," the librarian said.

He was not happy about leaving Kara in the hands of the monk, but there was little he could do, for he lacked the strength to carry her up. He grabbed hold of the rope, fed it through the metal safety loop at his waist, and started to ascend, sticking to the edge of Wrynric's torchlight.

To his relief, there were plenty of handholds and ledges he could rest on. When he reached a wide ledge, he stopped to rub his aching muscles and catch his breath. All the climbing, crawling and fighting had taken a toll. His whole body ached, including muscles he never knew he had.

By the time he reached the top, his arms felt like they were going to fall off. Wrynric patted him on the back, then peered over the edge to watch for the others.

It took another twenty minutes for Kara and Minard to make it to the top. When Wrynric had finished untying Kara from the monk's back, Aemon embraced her. To his surprise, she hugged him in return and buried her face in his hair.

Then a ghastly scream filled the air that turned his blood to ice.

Chapter 25

Kara.

Kara let Aemon go as the horrible scream echoed all around them, making it impossible to tell where it had come from.

“That sounds like a woman,” Aemon said.

Kara peered over the edge. “Erinie must hurry.”

Wrynic joined her. “Do you see something?”

“No, but I feel it.”

The old warrior grabbed Kara’s arm. “What do you feel?”

“A presence I’ve not felt since...”

“Since when?”

Kara lost her train of thought. It had become so hard for her to stay focused. “I’m sorry, I don’t know what I was saying. What if it was Erinie?”

Wrynic let go and risked leaning further out over the edge. “It wasn’t Erinie; I can see her torch about sixty feet below us.”

Aemon and Minard joined them at the edge. “She better make it,” Minard said. “She needs to keep me in line.”

Erinie finally made it up and Minard hugged her, but she didn’t hug him back. “I’m alright,” she said as she fought to catch her breath. “I don’t know who screamed. I thought it must’ve been Kara.”

Aemon put a hand on his mace. “Maybe Kahan is out there and something happened to one of his female followers.”

From the glances Wrynic and Erinie gave him, they were thinking the same thing.

“But how could he follow us?” Minard let Erinie go. “Does he have a map device too?”

The librarian shrugged. “Maybe. But even if he did, it’d do him little good unless he knows where the Dead City is already. I marked the location of the ruin on my device, after Arden and Liana led us there using their visiondreams.”

“Could he be using it to track us somehow?” Aemon asked. “They were at Sunholm, and could have stolen one.”

“They only act as maps,” Erinie replied. “They have no other functionality.”

Aemon shuffled his feet. “Then maybe Kara was right when she said Dwaycar could be helping them.”

Kara didn’t remember saying that. She grimaced. Yet another one of her memories lost forever.

Wrynic started hauling up the rope. “Whatever it was, it sounded close. Get the map out and find out where we head next. I want to get into the tunnels as soon as we can.”

When the rope was up, everyone ate a meal as Erinie used the map device. A detailed image of the surrounding tunnels appeared and she zoomed in and out as she planned their route.

After a few minutes, she pointed at the map. “We go that way until we reach a junction, then we head left, then straight for a time, then right, then... well, you

get the picture.” Erinie gave Minard a mischievous grin. “I hope your skull’s as thick as your brains, because you’re going to hit your head constantly. Most of the tunnels are belly crawls.”

The monk rolled his eyes. “Great. As if my head hasn’t been knocked around enough already.” He smirked at Aemon. “Lucky you’re short and scrawny. Your precious brain will be spared.”

They extinguished all but Wrynric’s torch, then got onto their knees and followed him into the tunnel. They traveled single file, the equipment slung over their backs grating against the roof.

Water ran down the walls and pooled in small channels in the rock, numbing Kara’s fingers with cold. The ground was slippery and covered in a foul-smelling orange sludge. Twice her hands slipped from under her and she went face-first into the muck.

Still, she was thankful she wasn’t Minard, for the monk had it worst of all. As much as the monk tried to keep his head low, it seemed to hit every low-hanging rock. Kara winced as there was a particularly loud thud followed by a pained grunt.

After the third such grunt, Aemon whispered back at her, “Is it wrong that I am taking a perverse satisfaction in his suffering?”

She forced a small smile but had nothing to say. Let the monk hit his head. His pain paled in comparison to her own.

They reached a junction and huddled together in the confined space. Four passages led from it, each as dark and uninviting as the rest.

Kara sat her chin on her chest and stared at the fluctuating light coming from the bulb of the passkey. The world around her receded into the distance until it was just her, the light, the urgency to keep moving and the pain.

Then a voice drifted to her, as if from a great distance. “We head up from here.” It was Erinie speaking. “I remember climbing a shaft here last time.”

Wrynric lit a second torch. Erinie took it, then said, “Once we’ve climbed the shaft there will be a long belly crawl, which ends at a small chamber. If it’s dry there, we can make camp for the night as it will be easy to defend.”

You need to keep moving. Tell them they must hurry. There is not much time left.

Kara jolted at the urgency in the voice. “No, we must keep moving.”

Erinie frowned. “We rest five hours and no more. We’re exhausted.”

They need to keep moving. You cannot stop!

Half closing her eyes, Kara tried to ignore the voice and the panic pumping through her like poison. Erinie was right; they needed rest. Kara felt close to breaking, her life draining away, her sense of reality fading.

After a short break, Wrynric rolled onto his back, reached up with one hand and pulled himself into the narrow, chimney-like hole in the roof. When his feet disappeared, Erinie urged Kara to follow him.

Gritting her teeth against the pain in her shoulder, Kara began to make the climb. With plenty of hand holds and ample room to maneuver, she had little trouble ascending the shaft. Halfway up she found an opening leading into a passage and could see Wrynric sliding along it. Kara wriggled around until she managed to squeeze in on her stomach. It was a tight fit, and she briefly wondered

how Minard would go with his muscular frame, heavy robes and the equipment he carried.

Kara followed the old warrior along the passage, her stomach muscles straining. She quickly grew weary and wondered if the belly crawl would ever end. At times the squeeze became so tight, her back brushed against the roof when she breathed. She was surprised Wrynric had made it through the narrow spots in his chain armor. Perhaps the metal had become slick with sludge and easily slid between the rock.

With no way to see behind her, Kara had no idea if Aemon and the other two were still following. She could only assume they were.

The tunnel narrowed again, and she struggled to squeeze through. Claustrophobia began to settle in, drenching her in a cold sweat. The tunnel was too narrow, she couldn't breathe, there was no way out, the rock would close in and crush her!

Calm yourself, the presence soothed. It will be over soon. Spare your energy for the final push to Annbar.

To Kara's surprise, she managed to get hold of her growing panic. The rock around her didn't feel half as threatening as it had moments before. Somehow, the presence had projected calm, much like it had projected urgency.

By the time Kara reached the small chamber at the end of the tunnel, she ached all over and was covered in orange slime. Wrynric dragged her to her feet and held her until her legs stopped shaking. Sitting on a rock, she hugged herself to try to get warm.

The old man grunted. "You look like a bedraggled kitten. Are you alright?"

She only had the energy to nod once. Then she slipped into darkness.

HURRY. YOU MUST HURRY!

Kara's eyes flickered open and she realized she must've fallen asleep. Exhaustion fought to pull her back into the realm of dreams, but she struggled against it. She started to stretch but a sharp pain made her stop. Her wounds throbbled, and her muscles felt like they were stretched to breaking. On top of the pain, she was losing the battle to retain a hold of reality.

Get up, you must go.

The intense anxiety that came with those words made Kara stiffen. The feeling smothered her, causing her chest to tighten and making it hard to breathe. Aemon sat beside her, unaware of her plight, his eyes on the passage they'd climbed out of.

After a few minutes, the feeling eased. Kara tried to stand but her legs gave out from under her. Aemon grabbed her and helped her back onto the rock. "Are you all right?"

"I... I think so." Kara noticed they were alone. "Where are the others? We need to keep going."

"Wrynric went back to find Minard and Erinie, but he left an hour ago and I have not heard anything since."

Kara was uneasy. The presence following them drew closer. Who was back there? On one hand they felt like kin, but on the other, they felt alien and hostile.

She could almost put a name to the presence, but it was like a word she knew she knew, but couldn't think of at the time she wished to speak it.

Hurry!

The voice returned Kara's thoughts to her need to get to the Metal Man. The chamber had three exits. The first was the one they'd come from, the next, a small, dark entrance beneath a sharp stalactite and the other looming high overhead near the edge of the torchlight. It was impossible to tell if the unexplored exits went anywhere without entering them.

Kara grabbed her walking staff. "We need to leave without them and get to the Metal Man. We're running out of time."

Aemon's mouth fell open. "But we do not know where to go. We need Erinie's map."

A drop of water landed in Kara's hair and ran down the back of her neck, giving her goosebumps. Shivering, she reached out for Aemon and he helped her stand. When she was steady on her feet, he held the torch up so she could warm her hands with it.

Aemon studied her, his eyes shadowed. "What if—what if they are not coming back? We might get lost and die out here."

You must go. You must.

"We need to leave. I can feel..." She was certain the familiar presence was a him now. "I can feel him drawing closer."

"Who are you talking about? Kahan?"

"I don't know his name. The voice will not tell me."

He bit his lip. "You mean the ghostly woman in your visiondreams?"

She gave a slight shake of her head. "No, not her. I hear another voice now." She touched the passkey, the light struggling to shine through the coat of orange slime. "The voice belongs to another woman. I can't explain it, but it feels like she's inside me but also far away. I think..." She grimaced, as her thoughts scattered like rats in the Golden Keg's cellar.

Strange images came to mind; then they were gone and replaced by others. One image was a huge glass tower with the Sun rising behind it, the next, two hands typing on a computer and another, long streaks of flame tearing through the sky.

Where were they coming from? Were they memories?

The barrage of images came and went so fast, Kara could no longer see what they were. They became like the river back at the Limestone Caves and she was being swept along with them, to be dragged under like Veladan, kicking and clawing until she drowned.

Aemon stroked her cheek with a cold hand, anchoring her to reality. "Talk to me, Kara. What is happening to you?"

His compassion brought tears to her eyes. She felt overwhelmed, her body racked with pain, her thoughts only half her own, her memories lost forever. Yet Aemon would stand by her, no matter what. If they left now, he'd let her lean on him and protect her with his life.

Aemon's touch helped her regain focus. He was real, tangible, something to latch onto and stop her from being swept away.

"I need you, Aemon, now more than ever. Something is happening to me and I'm losing my tether on reality."

“What can I do to help? I am afraid I will lose you.”

Wrapping her arms around him, Kara brought her lips to his and kissed him. He tensed, then relaxed and kissed her back. His lips were like ice and tasted of muck, but his love for her warmed her heart. After nearly a minute, he pulled away. “Kara...”

“Shhh, don’t talk. I need this.” She pulled him back and he kissed her eagerly, his fingers buried in her hair.

As they kissed, Kara experienced a pang of guilt. She loved Aemon, but she wasn’t sure she was in love with him—though her mind was a mess and she wasn’t certain of anything anymore. Perhaps she’d forgotten about her true feelings for him, along with everything else.

In the end, did it matter? He wanted her and at that moment, she needed him.

That was how Wrynic found them when he emerged feet first from the tunnel. “Hey,” he growled, slimy water dripping from his beard. “You two need to stop that and stay focused. I told you back at the temple, boy—”

Aemon disengaged from Kara’s embrace and glared at the old warrior. “What took you so long?”

Wrynic moved out of the way as Erinie dragged herself from the tunnel. The librarian looked bone weary and had a bloody gash on her forehead.

The old man helped her to her feet. “The monk got stuck at the beginning of the passage.”

“He was too fat to fit through,” Erinie said through gritted teeth.

They heard a deep voice from inside the tunnel. “I heard that.”

Moments later, Minard’s haggard face appeared, drenched in orange slime. He clawed his way out of the hole and used his staff to help himself to his feet. Stumbling backwards, he sank against the wall, chest heaving. “I never want to go through that again. Being stuck like that was the scariest thing I’ve ever experienced.” He spat out slime. “I’d take an army of rotmen over that.”

Kara clutched the passkey as the voice urged her on. This time it gave her a deadline. Kara straightened. “We need to hurry. We must get to the door before nineteenth hour. How much farther is it?”

The monk was incredulous. “Ibilitith, have mercy. Let me get my breath back and settle my bowels before we crawl through another light-forsaken tunnel.”

Erinie moved to stand next to Kara. “Why nineteenth hour?”

“The voice told me.” Kara licked her lips, glancing at Minard. He looked too preoccupied to think too deeply about what she said next. “I hear her speaking to me, even now.”

“Who is she?” Erinie asked.

Kara held back tears. “I don’t know. I feel so lost. It’s a struggle to hold on.” The librarian moved to hug her but Kara held her back. “We need to go. Someone is behind us, and if I don’t make it to the door leading to the Metal Man by nineteenth hour, he’ll catch up to us and kill me.”

Erinie raised an eyebrow. “Who will? Kahan?”

“I don’t know who he is. I just know he wants to kill me.”

Kara’s dire words spurred Wrynic to action. “Use the map and find the exit.” He glowered at Minard. “You have two minutes to get yourself together, *monk*, or we’ll leave without you.”

Minard looked like he wanted to bite the old warrior's head off, but instead nodded and took in several slow, deep breaths.

Erinie switched on the map and studied it. "We're close. A few more passages and we'll arrive at a river. From there, we climb a shoal into a ruined wall leading into the Dead City."

"I remember the river," Wrynric said. "We're closer than I thought."

Erinie shut the map down and gestured toward the hole under the stalactite. "That's our exit." Minard saw the hole and cursed loudly. "Hey, that wasn't very pious of you, monk," she laughed.

He gave her a withering glare. "Ibilitith will forgive me."

Two hours later, after another belly crawl, they finally made it to the river and were able to stand. Kara's back and arms were killing her and she'd become increasingly disoriented. The bite wound to her shoulder ached but the javelin wound to her chest hurt even more, for she'd bashed it on a ripple in the rock while climbing through the tunnels.

If only she could hold Aemon until all her pain melted away—but there was no time. They had to hurry.

The others appeared almost as exhausted as she was, but they were all determined to push on. Even they seemed to feel the urgency.

Lighting another torch, Wrynric tossed the dying one into the river. "Let's move," he said and trudged into the waist-deep water.

Kara followed him and gasped when the icy water touched her warm skin. The other three entered the river, faces drawn, eyes heavy with fatigue. "You'll warm up after a few minutes," Erinie said.

"I hope so." Minard chuckled, grasping at his crutch. "I don't want this thing to freeze off."

While they waded upstream against the strong current, they washed the orange sludge off their skin. Kara drank a few mouthfuls from the river and found it refreshing.

They rounded a corner and the torch suddenly reflected off a dazzling display of colored crystals growing along the walls all around them. The crystals reflected more colors than Kara knew existed. The sight should have awed her, yet she struggled to care. Aemon cared though; he gazed around, mouth wide with wonder.

"This must be part of the River of the Gods," Minard said, eyes bright with crystal light. "A passage on our sacred computer says the waters that flow from heaven 'run through golden channels and past crystal cities of half a thousand hues, then sweep downward into the caverns of men, where he may drink of them and be purified.'"

Erinie smirked. "You think these crystals look like cities?"

The monk shrugged. "From a distance, some of them look like miniature towers and keeps."

"Sounds like pretty words written by someone with nothing better to do with their time," Erinie said.

"Pretty words." Minard rolled his eyes. "What about your Lost Sun? We have proof of our Lady Ibilitith's presence. What evidence do you have this Sun of yours ever existed?"

“Proof of Ibilirith? So a tomb and a bunch of old bones is proof?”

“Even if they were the only proof we have—and they aren’t—it’s still more evidence than you have for your Lost Sun.”

“I’ve seen the Sun in my visiondreams,” Kara said, so softly none of them heard it over the whoosh of the river.

Minard ran his hand over a growth of crystal. “I have *faith* my blessed Ibilirith exists, for I’ve lived under her sacred lights my entire life.”

“So you lived a life of privilege and ease, making you pliable to believe made-up nonsense like the divines,” Erinie said. “Every moment of my people’s existence has been a struggle for survival.”

The monk frowned. “You would not say that if you knew what my father did to my mother and I.”

“Enough with this nonsense,” Wrynric snapped. “We shouldn’t be far from where we have to climb.”

Erinie poked her tongue out at Minard, then hurried to walk beside the old warrior. The monk went back to admiring the crystals with reverence.

They followed the river until they reached a large limestone shoal. “This is it,” Erinie said.

They began the climb, single file. The ascent wouldn’t have been difficult for Kara, except she was engaged in a life-or-death struggle to hold the fabric of her mind together. She lost herself for a moment and when she came to, she was falling.

Slamming into Minard, she knocked him from the rock and they both fell back into the icy river. She landed on top of him, driving him under. Pushing away from her, he resurfaced, gasping for air.

The other three had stopped climbing and watched them. Minard put a hand to his chest. “Damn you, scion. You landed on my ribs.”

“I’m sorry.”

Wincing, the monk staggered to his feet and held his hand out. “You look distracted.” He narrowed his eyes. “Are you alright?”

Fear, colder than the river, coursed through Kara’s heart. She was too close to the Metal Man to let the monk question if he needed to kill her or not. She took his hand and let him pull her to her feet. “I’m just tired and in a lot of pain.” Teeth chattering from the cold, Kara retrieved her walking staff. “I’ll make sure I don’t fall this time.”

Minard took his equipment from his back and carried it under one arm. “Climb on and wrap your legs around my waist, and I’ll carry you up.”

She hopped on without argument. The monk shivered, his robes heavy with water. Wrynric threw a rope down and he and Aemon held onto it as Minard climbed the shoal.

When they reached the top, Kara dropped off the monk’s back and hugged herself. All five of them were drenched, but they didn’t have time to light a fire and dry off. The Metal Man waited.

Our pursuer is in the river. You must run. He will kill you and doom us all.

The terror in the voice made Kara’s heart palpitate. The feeling felt like fingers running down the inner side of her ribs. When the sensation passed, she felt a

moment of dizziness. Then it was gone and she started running down a concrete corridor into Annbar.

The door leading to the Metal Man was close—but the man chasing her was closer.

Kara's companions called after her but their voices were lost to her panic. She'd gone one hundred feet when someone grabbed her from behind. "Scion, slow down. What are you doing?"

It was Minard.

She struggled against him, her voice a panicked shriek. "Let me go; he's here. He's coming to kill me."

The monk held onto her as the others caught up. Wrynric gave her such a look of disapproval she waited for him to slap her across the face. Instead, he clenched his hand around his sword hilt.

Run!

Kara tried to break free. "He's here. Let me go. Let me go!"

Wrynric and Erinie stared into the darkness behind them. "There's nothing back there, scion," the librarian said.

The old man's eyes narrowed. "Perhaps she is right. She warned us of the jamalgana and the rotmen before they could kill us in our sleep."

"Let me go, let me go, let me go," Kara cried.

Wrynric gave Minard a hard look, his eyes glittering in their veil of shadow. "Monk, I know we've had our differences, but..." He sighed. "I must leave Kara in your care. I beg you not to hurt her, for she will end our exile and save the human race."

The monk blinked. "You... what? Is this the only way?"

Wrynric nodded grimly.

Minard stared at him for a few seconds, then pulled Kara closer. "Then I vow I'll get her to where she needs to go. If she proves to be what you think she is, I'll stand by her until the end. That's the best I can offer you."

Wrynric bowed his head. "That will have to do." He faced Kara, his mouth forming into a sad half-smile. "Goodbye, dear Kara. Make good your destiny and save humanity from the darkness."

Kara didn't understand what was happening. The terror building within her made all else a blur. "Come on, please. We need to get to the Metal Man."

Erinie embraced the old man and cried into his shoulder. "Don't leave me. What if... what if she's—"

Wrynric gently pushed her away. "I'll kill her. I must do this to buy you time."

Erinie ran her fingers through his beard, her lips quivering. "May the Lost Sun watch over you, brave warrior. My father, my friend."

Removing a gold coin from inside his doublet, Wrynric kissed it, then passed it to Erinie. "I give my mark to you for safekeeping. If you ever return home, find Arden and Liana's, bring them to the Cauldron and forge them together as one."

Coin in hand, Erinie sank to her knees and held it to her heart, her body racked with sobbing. Wrynric went to Aemon and placed a heavy hand on his shoulder. "I've seen you grow into a man and am proud to have fought by your side. Now, you must take all you've learned and watch over Kara until her task is done."

Aemon murmured something, then lit a torch and handed it to Wrynric. The old warrior gave them all one last look, then turned his back to them. Drawing his sword, hefting his shield, he planted his feet and waited.

What was he doing? They needed to hurry.

Minard slung Kara over his shoulder and they were off. Kara watched Wrynric recede down the tunnel, until the light from his torch disappeared as they rounded a corner.

It was then she came to understand.

Chapter 26

Aemon.

Aemon strained his ears to listen to Erinie's voice over the thumping of their feet. "We'll turn right up here, then we'll be at the door where we heard the Metal Man."

Trailing at the edge of the torchlight, Aemon tripped on a chunk of broken concrete, almost invisible in the dimming light. Cursing at the pace Minard was setting, he got back to his feet and ran on.

The Dead City was a ruin, its concrete passages rubble strewn and dark. As they passed decrepit metal doors and through shattered antechambers pockmarked with craters, Aemon was struck by the utter desolation of the place. A forlorn cornucopia of devastation and primeval mystery.

What had been the instrument that had wrought such destruction? Not time, for its labors were the gentle weathering of a river on stone, the slow degeneration of bone or the eclipse of one age and the ascendance of the next.

Perhaps a battle had raged there, long ago. But if one had, who had fought it and why?

The craters in the floor and ceiling reminded him of the ones left by the enemy projectiles at Deep Cave and Celestial Rest. About the only other thing Aemon knew that might have caused the damage was explosives. He used to believe the Priest King's alchemists were the only ones who knew the secret of making them, but Erinie also possessed the knowledge. That suggested anyone with the right skills and ingredients could make them too.

Perhaps their use had once been commonplace. If that were true, what would people have done with such powerful weapons? Aemon chuckled knowingly. *What they always do. They turn them on one another.*

Kara stared back at him from Minard's shoulder but seemed not so much to look at him—but through him. Whoever was behind them had really spooked her.

Aemon could still feel Kara's lips on his. The taste of her mouth, the feel of her body pressed against his, the softness of her hair. How he longed to feel them again.

She had seemed more her old self then, but it had not lasted long. Now she was more distant and lost than ever before. As he ran, he called upon Lydan, the Shield of Heaven, to make her ordeal near an end.

Up ahead, Erinie cheered, "We're here."

They stopped at a metal door built into the fractured, concrete wall. Nothing set it apart from any of the other ones they had passed. Puffing, he shook his head. *This is it? The fabled door from the story of the Metal Man?*

It looked so ordinary, nothing but a rusted, battered old thing like a hundred others around here. A corrosion-pitted plaque with strange symbols on it was stuck to the wall beside it. No, not symbols. Writing.

But what did it say?

Minard kicked the door, knocking off a layer of rust. "Are you sure this is it?"

Before Erinie could answer, a voice sounded from within. It spoke in a deep monotone, in a language Aemon could not understand. Considering how the words were spoken, he guessed the voice was listing off names or reciting numbers. The syllables were short and said one after another without pause.

Minard put Kara down and made her face the door. "Open it, scion, we're here."

Erinie watched Kara expectantly. Kara stared at the door, but did not make a move to open it. Aemon touched her arm. "Are you all right?"

She must not have heard him or was lost in thought, for she continued to stare unblinking at the door. The voice said something again in its strange language.

Kara took a step backwards. "Location: 51 30 26 North by 0 7 39 West... Target searched."

Erinie arched her eyebrows. "Scion?"

The voice spoke again, and Kara said, "Location: 31 57 8 South by 115 51 32 East... Anomaly detected."

Aemon glanced at the others, as if one of them could explain what was going on. By the expressions on their faces, it was clear they were as confused as he was.

Had Kara lost her mind?

Aemon shook her until she looked at him. "Can you hear me? We are at the door. Open it so you can speak to the Metal Man and make him tell you how to get rid of the passkey."

Kara's eyes widened. "This isn't the door. Don't open it."

The urgency in her voice startled him. "What do you mean? We can hear his voice."

"This is the same voice we heard the last time we were here," Erinie said, stepping toward Kara. "We've come all this way, scion. Please open it."

"No. This isn't the right place." Kara pointed down another passage. "That's the way we need to head. I remember it from my visiondreams."

Erinie glanced at the door. "If this isn't the right one, then who or what is in there?"

"The enemy," Kara replied, her face lit by the passkey.

Minard muttered a prayer to Ibilirith as Aemon asked, "You mean the enemy attacking Stelemia?" Kara nodded. Aemon bit his lip. "Does it know we are here?"

Kara said nothing, her eyes losing focus, as if she were elsewhere again. Aemon turned to Erinie. "What do we do?"

Spinning on her heel, Kara started to walk away but Minard stopped her. "Easy, scion; I'll carry you. I need to make sure you're not up to no good."

Aemon reached for his mace. "If you try to hurt her, expect to have to get through me first."

Minard chuckled, “Easy there, warrior. Remember the oath the scion made me take.” He bent down to let Kara climb onto his back. When she was on, he stood. “I hope if she becomes a threat, you’ll both back me up. It’ll be hard, I know, but remember what’s at stake.”

Aemon hesitated. How could he let the monk kill her, even if the entire human race was at stake? He squeezed the mace handle, glaring at the monk. As much as Aemon hated Minard, he knew the monk was right, which made Aemon hate him all the more.

Kara had made Aemon make the same oath, but he had lied when he had made it. He knew he did not have the heart to kill her.

And that makes me a pitiful coward. His hand shook as it clenched the mace. *How I hate being so unworthy.*

Kara did not seem to be listening to what they were saying. Her eyes were closed, with little lines around them, as if she was concentrating on something. If she learned he had lied to her, would she hate him?

Erinie brushed back Kara’s bangs. “Scion, direct us to the Metal Man. Or if not him, then let’s try to find the library.”

Kara spoke into Minard’s ear and the monk nodded. With a last look at Aemon, Minard sped down the concrete passage. Aemon hurled his anger to the back of his mind and hurried after them, Erinie beside him.

They went left and right, down different passages, some choked with rubble, others knee deep with water and others still inexplicably untouched by time or explosives. Hundreds of closed metal doors went by, along with ancient garden beds and corroded signs covered in indecipherable writing. One room had a colossal rusted machine at its center. The ancient machine was covered in broken light bulbs, buttons and levers. Thick cables half buried under rubble stretched along the floor and disappeared into the back wall of the room.

Minard stopped to admire the metal monstrosity but Kara kicked her legs. “Keep moving. We’re running out of time. It’s sixteenth hour, which means we only have three hours to get to the door leading to the Metal Man.”

One tunnel led into another, then another. It was then Aemon realized just how vast the mysterious city was.

Who had built it? What had happened to them? If a war had been fought in the Dead City, where were the bones or broken weapons, or any other clues to who or what had fought there?

They entered a new passage and raced down it, but soon came to a mound of rubble with no way around it. They had reached a dead end.

“Where to now?” Minard asked.

Kara dropped off his back and stared at the rubble. Her fists were balled and sweat ran down her face, the passkey glowing bright red under her robe. “This should not be here.” She spun to look at Minard accusingly, as if it was his fault. “I did not wait all this time to be stopped by a—”

Suddenly, Kara raced over to the wall and studied it. She walked several paces back down the corridor, her walking staff never touching the ground. Eventually, she stopped at a jagged crack that ran a dozen feet along the wall.

“It is weak here. We need to find a way to break through it.” She dug her fingers into the crack. “There should be a passage on the other side.”

Minard snorted, "How are we supposed to dig through concrete? With our bare hands? I think not."

The monk was right; there was no way they could break through the wall without proper equipment. Plus it would be dangerous, as it could bring the roof down on their heads. On top of that, if they were really being followed, then their pursuers would reach them long before they could complete the task.

"I could blow it up with an explosive," Erinie said. "I have everything I need to make them in my pouches."

Kara seemed relieved. She pointed at the widest part of the crack, near its center. "Plant your explosive there."

"You three, head back up the corridor and take cover around the corner. I'll light the fuse then join you." Erinie blew air out of her mouth, mimicking the sound of an explosion. "The shock wave is going to be immense."

Kara climbed onto Minard's back. They watched Erinie sift through her pouches and take out a handful of black powder from one and pour it into another. Next, she attached a fuse to the top of the pouch, then pulled the strings to close it. She looked up at Kara and nodded once.

The explosive was ready.

"Do it," Kara said.

Erinie jammed the explosive into the crack. "Get to cover. I'll be right behind you."

Heart kicking like an ox, Aemon ran. He stopped once he had rounded the corner and covered his ears. Erinie dove to cover just as a loud boom roared down the tunnel. The shockwave slammed into them, knocking Aemon off his feet.

The echo of the blast rumbled through the silent passages of the Dead City until it faded into the distance. Aemon stood, brushed off concrete dust, and spat out bits of grit. The other three did likewise, then they went to see what the explosive had wrought.

Aemon was surprised at how much damage the explosion had done. Huge cracks ran along the walls and half the roof had caved in. Bits of concrete continued to drop from the ceiling and water from a broken pipe sprayed everywhere.

Ignoring the carnage, Kara kicked Minard's sides and screamed at him to get moving.

They raced to where Erinie had planted the explosive and found it had done its job. The destroyed wall revealed another rubble-strewn concrete tunnel beyond.

"There it is," Kara said. "Get moving."

A large chunk of concrete broke away from the roof and shattered several feet in front of them. Minard glanced back at her. "You sure you want to risk going in there?"

Kara kicked her feet again. "Yes. Now go."

Minard muttered under his breath, then carried her into the other corridor, narrowly avoiding another chunk of falling debris. Aemon and Erinie cautiously followed, and made it through in one piece.

Once they were away from the destruction, Kara directed them down more corridors, lined with metal doors. As she ordered Minard around, her voice became

more certain, more commanding; carrying an air of authority she had never had before. Strangely, her voice also had the tinge of an accent.

If only she had opened up about what was wrong with her back when they had kissed. Aemon had tried to ask her, but she had put her lips to his and silenced him. *What is happening to you, Kara? Please hold on. We are so close.*

This section of the city was in even worse shape than where they had entered. The floor was covered in debris, deep cracks and craters and the walls were blasted ruins with twisted metal pipes sticking out of them, ready to impale any one of them on their sharp ends.

Several of the doors they hurried by were open or had been ripped from their hinges by some powerful force. Many of the rooms beyond were filled with rubble, rusted metal furniture or the odd machine. One had a picture on the wall encased in glass, but the painting had crumbled to dust.

In the hours they had raced through the Dead City, they had still not seen any sign, living or dead, of those that once called it home.

Kara shouted over the sound of their running feet, "At the end of this corridor there will be an antechamber with a door on the opposite end. We need to open it to get to the level above us."

When they arrived at the antechamber, they found it as desolate as the rest of the city. Chunks of concrete were strewn across the floor along with rusted rebar and the shattered remains of a long stone bench. Above their heads, the roof was crisscrossed with a mosaic of cracks, suggesting it could collapse at any moment.

Thirty feet above them was another level, but the torchlight did not carry far enough to reveal what was up there. Two of the four exits leading from the chamber were blocked by metal doors.

Kara squirmed, so Minard put her down and she ran ahead, no longer using her walking staff for support. Aemon and the other two hurried after her as she made her way toward the metal door at the far end of the chamber. She took the passkey from her neck and held it before her. It shone a radiant red that illuminated the entire room.

Aemon stared at the passkey in awe. Never had it been so bright. Perhaps it knew it was home.

Kara got to the door and pounded her fist on a flat panel beside it. The panel slid open, revealing a row of small, colored bulbs and some sort of machine.

Minard stopped beside Kara to get a closer look. "That terminal looks like the control panel for some of our sacred machines back at the temple."

Kara held the passkey up to the machine. "This terminal is an access point to the centralized computer system that controls everything in this city. Annbar is running on minimal power, so the system will take a moment to divert enough electrical resources to power this terminal so it can open the door."

After a brief white flash, the light bulbs beside the terminal began to glow red, then yellow, then green. Erinie leaned in to study Kara's face. "Scion, how do you know so much about this city?"

"Stop, half-blood!" a female voice screamed.

As one, they spun around and watched as a group of black-clad figures sped down the passage on the other end of the chamber. The approaching torches

swayed back and forth, making it hard to tell how many enemies were racing toward them.

Kara backed against the door. "He is here; he has come to stop me."

So Kara had been right. Someone had been following them. As Aemon had suspected, it was Kahan and the other Knives of Dwaycar.

Even though Aemon could not count them, he could tell they were outnumbered. If the door did not hurry up and open—they were doomed.

Minard snatched up his staff and took position to Aemon's left. Aemon hefted his mace and waited.

"Scion, hurry up and open the door," Erinie said as she started mixing reagents.

Kara removed the passkey from the terminal when the bulbs turned blue. The ground shuddered, then a loud grating sound followed and the door started to rise.

The knives were about to enter the chamber when Kara slid under the ascending door. Aemon shouted, "Come on," to Minard and Erinie as he followed her under.

When he was through, he got to his knees. "Wait for the other two, then shut it; the knives are right behind us!"

Kara knocked on the wall, revealing another terminal. She jammed the passkey against it and the light bulbs blinked in the same colors they had outside.

Minard and Erinie slid under the door. "Hurry up and close it; they're halfway across the room," the monk said as he got up off the floor.

To Aemon's relief, the door started to close. As Minard helped Aemon up, a javelin flew past him and clattered against the concrete stairs behind them.

Minard put a hand to his heart. "I knew Ibilirith watched over me."

The door closed with a thud. Seconds later, they heard muffled shouting and thumps on the other side as the Knives of Dwaycar vented their frustrations against it.

"Wrynrlic..." Kara whispered and slowly limped toward the stairs, leaning heavily on her staff. She looked dazed and confused, but she had just saved them. Minard put an arm around Erinie's shoulders as she wiped her eyes with the hem of her cloak. Was she crying?

Then it hit Aemon. Wrynrlic might be dead or captured. The premonition he had at the highway came back to him. Perhaps it had come to pass.

With a heavy heart, he followed the others up the stairs to the second level, overlooking the antechamber. Kara slowed her pace, then came to an abrupt stop. "What is it?" Aemon asked. She stared forward in the direction of another door that seemed to be the only exit, and did not move. "Kara? Open it so we can get out of here."

Her eyelids flickered and sweat poured down her face. There was no sign she had heard him. Aemon glanced at the other two. "What do we do?"

Kara suddenly spoke. "Give... me a moment." Her voice was strained, like she was exerting herself. When he touched her, she shoved his hands away. "Let me focus."

Aemon drew back. *What is happening to her?*

Minard took a step toward Kara, but then they heard angry voices coming from below and he stopped. Aemon considered risking a look over the short wall to see

what was happening down there, but quickly thought the better of it. He would probably end up with a javelin lodged in his brain.

The monk, not as cautious, peered over the edge of the wall. "The knives are splitting up. Most are heading toward one of the other doors, and the four below us look like they're up to something."

He jerked backward as a javelin flew past his face, missing him by inches. With a harsh bark of laughter, he said, "You missed again, fool."

The voice that shot up from below almost made Aemon drop his mace. "Half-blood," it raged. "Look down upon me and see what I've done to your *beloved* friend."

It was Herald, the insane knife who had almost killed Kara at the bridge before the temple and who had slaughtered the caravaners back in the Limestone Caves. Where was Kahan? Had he gone with the other group, or was he dead and another knife now led?

Kara had said a man followed them, but who was he?

Erinie covered her mouth with a trembling hand. "Oh no... No. Why? Why? He loved you like a daughter!"

"Half-blood, come see what I've done."

Kara started walking toward the railing, but Aemon leapt forward and grabbed her. She shoved him away, almost sending him to the ground. *Kara...*

"Don't look, scion," Erinie pleaded. "She'll kill you."

Minard caught Kara before she made it to the wall and dragged her back. He gritted his teeth as Kara fought him. "Stop it, Scion. Hurry up and open the door so we can get going."

"I know you're up there, half-blood," Herald said. "Come see what is left of him."

Kara snarled at the monk. "Let me go; I need to see. I need to see."

Minard shook her. "No, scion, I won't let you. Open the bloody door!"

"Have it your way then, half-blood," Herald roared.

Something flew over the railing and landed with a wet thud ten feet from them. It rolled until it came to rest against the outer wall.

Aemon backed away, his stomach clenching as bile came to his mouth. Wrynric's eyes stared at them from a head, savagely hacked from his body. Blood pooled around it and had splattered up the wall.

The old warrior was gone. Dead at the hands of monsters as vile as the rotmen.

Kara's face contorted into several different expressions, as if she did not know how to react. Aemon turned away, unable to look anymore.

"My dear friend..." Erinie moaned. "How could she do this to you? After all you did for her."

Minard bowed his head. "I pledge to Lady Ibilirith that Wrynric's death will be avenged. Though he wasn't my brother, I'll not rest until his killers are purged."

"You see what happens to those who aid in their own destruction?" Herald screamed. "The half-blood means to kill us all. Why would anyone stand with her?"

Aemon watched Kara to see how she would react to Herald's words. She looked detached again, seemingly focused on something in the distance.

"Imogen lives through you, half-blood, and she'll try to complete what she started long ago. Her children have returned and lay waste to humanity, killing

innocent men, women and children.” Herald’s voice reached a fever pitch. “Imogen means to fight them, but her solution will doom us all, like it came close to doing long ago. The only way to stop this madness is by killing you, half-blood—for when you’re dead, Imogen’s children will sleep once more.”

A red haze descended over Aemon and before he knew what he was doing, he was at the wall, gazing down upon the Knives of Dwaycar. They stared up at him, their eyes dark and implacable behind their masks. “Kara is here to save us. It is *you* who will doom us all. Go away and leave us alone.”

A knife with blood-soaked hands stepped forward and tore off her mask. A red-haired young woman peered up at him, her face covered in jagged scars. At first Aemon mistook her for Kara—the old Kara, before she had been poisoned—but her features were so twisted with hate and madness, he wondered how he had seen any similarity at all.

“She has no idea who I am, does she?” the knife asked. It was Herald, and Aemon had no answer for her.

Herald sneered. “Make the wretched husk Erinie tell the half-blood who I am. She knows my name, what I’ve done and what I’ll do to all of you once I reach you.”

One of the other knives aimed a javelin at Aemon and he quickly backed away. He spun to face Erinie. The librarian silently pleaded with him to leave her be, her tears running streaks through the dirt on her face.

“Tell me who she is,” Aemon demanded. “We need to know the truth.”

Minard grabbed Erinie by the arm. “He’s right. Tell us.”

Kara stared at Erinie, her face expressionless. The librarian continued to weep, but Aemon had no pity for her. “Tell us. Now!”

Erinie collapsed to her knees. “It’s Semira, Kara’s half-sister and a failed scion. I think she helped Kahan attack Sunholm and aided him as he murdered everyone who wasn’t fast enough to flee.”

“Why didn’t you tell us? Why all the secrecy?”

Erinie winced, as if struck. “Because Wrynic told me not to. We weren’t certain she was involved; it was only rumor. One sighting during the fighting, a few suspicions.” Erinie glanced at Wrynic’s head. “I think he knew she was with them, but he didn’t want to admit it. He loved her very much, and I thought she loved him back.”

They all looked at Kara to see how she would take the news, but her eyes still gazed unblinking into the distance. Minard waved a hand in front of her face. “Scion?”

Perspiration ran down Kara’s cheeks and lines of concentration marked her brow. The monk tried to get her attention by shaking her, but she did not react.

“Scion, I’m sorry,” Erinie sobbed. “I should have told you sooner.”

“I can hear you up there, Erinie, you sniveling husk,” Semira raged. “Show yourself so I can bury my javelin in your vile little face.”

“Go eat a jamalgana egg, Semira,” Erinie screamed back.

Semira laughed, “Trust me, I’ve eaten one already. I had to, when I joined the Knives of Dwaycar.” She paused a moment, then continued. “Half-blood, listen to me now. I want you to know—we will stop you. We’ll hunt you until you’re dead and we have ended your threat to humanity.”

Erinie grabbed hold of the pouch Aemon had seen her filling with black powder earlier and got back to her feet. "Go back to whatever darkness spawned you, Semira!"

The librarian threw the pouch over the railing, then spun around and opened her arms wide to drag Aemon, Minard and Kara to the ground. A second later, an explosion ripped through the antechamber, bathing them in hot air and a shower of concrete.

The walls shuddered and the ground shook as tons of concrete cascaded downward from the roof, filling the lower level with a cloud of dust and debris.

When the tumult was over, Aemon raced to the wall with Erinie and Minard to find the chamber floor inundated with rubble. There were no signs of Semira or the other knives, though the expanding dust cloud made it hard to see. A chunk of roof fell and shattered on top of the rubble pile. They leapt back as another piece smashed on the wall beside them.

Before they could recover, Kara sprang to her feet and ran headlong toward the door at the far end of the level, leaving her walking staff behind. Reaching the door, she paused to use the passkey.

Aemon's heart rate doubled. The door began to open and she was already preparing to enter.

"Hurry and stop her before she gets away," Erinie said as she raced after Kara.

Aemon and Minard sped after her. The door was only half open when Kara crawled under it and used the passkey to close it again. Erinie and Minard dove through just as it started to descend. Aemon, a few paces behind, leapt through the narrowing entrance, his feet less than an inch from being crushed.

Leaping to his feet, Aemon grabbed Kara before she could get away. "Hey, what are you doing?" he snapped. "Are you trying to leave us behind? What has gotten into you?"

The look Kara gave him made him back away and almost fall over Erinie. It was not Kara standing there... It was a stranger.

The passkey hung loosely around her neck, its light now sinister, bathing them all in blood red. Kara's mouth twisted into a sneer, her eyes dark wells of ice, cold and fathomless.

"Get out of my way, scum," she hissed. "I must get to the manufactory before my brother can stop me."

Aemon jumped aside as she walked right at him. When she had gone by, she sprinted away from them.

Without checking on the other two, Aemon hurried after her.

Chapter 27

Kara.

Kara had lost the battle for control. When she had seen what her sister had done to Wrynic, the presence had finally been given a chance to overwhelm her. Now it had snatched her body away and this time, she didn't seem to be

getting it back. She could still see and feel what happened to her physically, but few other senses remained. The sensation of watching the world go by with her own eyes, yet not being the one in control, terrified her.

The female presence controlling Kara used the passkey for light as she ran through the rubble-strewn corridors, leaping over deep craters blasted into the ground. Soon they entered a wider passage that looked familiar to Kara, for she'd trod it in her visiondreams.

They were close to the Metal Man.

"Wait up," Aemon called from behind her. Kara couldn't answer him, as much as she wanted to, for she was a passenger in her own body.

Who are you and what have you done to me? Kara asked.

You have become what you were born to be.

What was I born to be? Why have you taken my body from me?

It was never your body. It was made for me.

They rolled under a half-open door and almost fell into another crater. Once they were back on their feet, the woman said in Kara's voice, "I want you to know this before you die. In this body, I shall right the wrongs I helped unleash and will save the human race."

The woman's presence felt vengeful, bitter and hostile. Kara knew her intentions were not good. *I know who you are,* Kara said. *The ghost woman on the surface warned me of you.*

The presence seemed surprised by her revelation as Kara felt her fingers clench around the passkey. *Who was this woman?*

She said she didn't remember her name, Kara replied. *She called me Imogen, Mother of Steel Children. But I'm not Imogen. You are.*

The presence laughed, *Yes, I am Imogen, once called Mother of Steel Children.*

Paralyzing fear gripped Kara. Maybe the prophecy was true. Kara, or at least Imogen using Kara's body, would unleash something terrible upon the world.

You should not have been having visions of the surface. I thought Radashan told Ahnna to allow no one access to that part of the code. Kara could sense Imogen's rage. *Or perhaps that was another one of his lies. He was, after all, the one who went on to betray me.*

Radashan? How did Imogen know of Radashan the Founder? Or was it another man with that name?

Imogen tightened her grip on the passkey. *Regardless, the surface belongs to the enemy. To go there is to die.*

The ghost woman had mentioned the code and wondered if it had become corrupted, but she had never mentioned anyone called Ahnna. Could that be the ghost woman's forgotten name?

Kara decided to turn the conversation toward finding out what Imogen planned. *This place is Annbar, isn't it? You used to live here.*

Did the ghost woman tell you that? No matter. Yes, this place is Annbar. Once, tens of thousands lived down here after they fled the surface.

Where are you taking me?

Imogen lifted her head high. *We are going to the manufactory. An old friend waits for me there.*

Your friend is the Metal Man, isn't it? You were with me in my underground visiondreams.

Indeed. I guided you to him, for I will need his skills in the days ahead.

Kara felt a wave of exaltation coming from Imogen. With every step she took, Kara became more afraid. *What do you intend to do when you get to him?*

Have patience, dear, Imogen mocked. You will find out soon enough.

They reached another antechamber, this one almost twice as large as the one where Kara hoped Semira had died. Eight doors led from the room, and a square shaft some twenty feet wide cut through the floor at its center. Three of the doors stood open, one with a dark-green mat of moss growing out of it, the other five were closed.

The door that drew Imogen's attention was the large one at the far end of the room at the top of a ramp. It was a formidable and imposing barrier, as if those who had built it had never wanted anyone to enter.

Or perhaps they hadn't wanted something set free...

The words of the Prophecy of Ibilirith hung heavy in Kara's thoughts.

"The Ancient Enemy shall return and with them the Scion who shall carry a glowing... and the Scion shall use it to unseal the wards and unleash that which must not... Harvesters the Scion will use to destroy... Human life... Forever."

Was this door a ward?

A surge of joy filled Kara's body. *Ah, there it is. Containment Barrier One. My brother is too late.*

"Kara, stop, please!" It was Aemon, and he was close.

Imogen ran through the chamber toward the door, holding the passkey before her, ready to jam into the console. The door was covered in ancient writing and to Kara's surprise, she could read the ancient words and understand them.

They read: Warning. Biohazard containment. Level five clearance required.

Kara gasped, *What's in there?*

The instruments of my revenge.

Imogen began to speak, her voice sounding like Kara's but deeper, more commanding and tinged with a strange accent. "Omega, zeta, kappa, nu, sigma, alpha. Imogen Vrana: Clearance epsilon."

"Containment protocol active," a computerized voice said. "Exposure to containment measures: lethal."

Kara knew Imogen had been expecting this. "Override system safeguards."

"Confirmation code?"

"Beta, zeta, delta, niner."

"Confirmation code confirmed: Overriding system safeguards."

A panel slid open, revealing a computerized slot. Imogen inserted the passkey into it and a moment later, there was a hiss of pressurized air as the ground shuddered. She stepped back and waited. The motors driving the doors emitted heat as they struggled to turn gears corroded by eons of disuse.

Imogen stamped her foot. "The barrier better open, or I will—"

A hand fell on her shoulder and Imogen was spun around to face Minard.

Sweat ran down his face, and his teeth were bared. He wrapped a hand around the hem of Kara's robe, lifted her off the ground and slammed her against the

door, his nose an inch from hers. “Scion, what are you doing?” he shouted over the grinding gears. “I ordered you to stop!”

Imogen seethed with hatred but her voice was as sweet as expensive ale. “I—I am sorry... I must get inside before he comes to kill me. Please put me down; you are hurting me.”

No... don't fall for it, Kara wailed, hoping Minard could somehow hear her. Please kill me before she can open the ward! I'm the threat your patriarch thought I was. I am the Scion of the Prophecy!

Erinie and Aemon came to stand beside Minard, their chests heaving as they fought to catch their breaths. “What’s on the other side of the door?” Erinie asked between breaths.

Imogen placed her hands over Minard’s. “Please put me down. I am sorry I ran off. I was afraid.”

Please, Lydan, Roryur, Ibilirith, let them know Imogen is lying, Kara cried. They have to know. The Mother of Steel Children wanted to kill all three of them, when they had exceeded their use. Please...

Kara fought to regain control of her body, but the earlier battle with Imogen had sapped her of what little strength she had left. Her attempt at seizing it back was over before it began.

She felt powerless.

Minard slammed her against the door again. “What’s on the other side? Tell me or I’ll choke the life out of you.”

Do it, Kara screamed. Kill me! She means to kill you all.

“It is the library,” Imogen gasped, looking from Minard to Erinie with fake desperation. “I need to get in there and find out how I can stop the enemy.”

Aemon put his hand on Minard’s arm and made him lower Kara to the ground. The monk’s grip slowly eased and he backed away to let Aemon speak to her.

“Kara. Tell us what is happening to you, so we can find a way to help you.”

Oh, Aemon, please kill me! You promised you would if I became a threat.

“I am alright, but I need to get inside before he gets to me,” Imogen said.

The gears stopped grinding together, but the door didn’t rise. Aemon banged on it with his mace. “It does not look like it is going to open. What are you going to do?”

Imogen dropped the submissive façade and snapped, “Oh, *thank you* for your astute observation, genius. Now shut your mouth so I can think.”

“There she is,” a voice hollered from the other side of the chamber. Six black-clad figures ran toward them, each crying out for the blessing of Lord Dwaycar.

Kahan had come.

Chapter 28

Aemon.

Aemon stood stunned as Kahan raced along the passage. Somehow, he had survived his attack on the temple and pursued them all the way through the

Great Dark to the Dead City. The dark brother charged into the room. Five female knives came up behind him, two wielding javelins, the rest short swords and torches.

“Protect me,” Kara cried.

“Get behind me and stay there,” Aemon ordered her. He moved to the top of the ramp to cover her. Minard and Erinie remained at the bottom, preparing themselves for combat.

Kara pounded her fists on the door. “Hurry up and open, you stupid thing. I gave you my authorization code.”

The sound of rending metal made the hairs on Aemon’s neck stand on end. “Finally, it is opening,” Kara exclaimed. “But, *by god*, it is taking its time.”

Kahan skirted the shaft at the center of the room and pointed at Minard. “Monk, you must stop her before she opens the ward.”

He motioned for the other knives to fan out, though one stayed several feet behind him to guard his back. When the rest had formed a loose line, he took a few cautious steps toward the ramp, his eyes on the monk. “You have one last chance to make amends for your order. You had the scion in your grasp and you let her go. You know what she is, and what she will do.”

Minard gestured at him with his staff. “You attacked Lady Ibilirith’s temple, killed my brethren, extinguished our sacred lights and desecrated our holy shrines. Who are you to speak to me of anything?”

“I am Kahan, first son of Gwyndelon, the Shadow Trainer of Dwaycar. My ancestors were among those who sought to purify the caverns of the technologies of Ibilirith.”

“Which makes you my bitter enemy.”

Kahan shook his head. “We may be enemies, but that does not mean we cannot come together in this time of need. The scion you defend is a threat to us all. She *must* be killed and the item around her neck destroyed—before she can unleash great horror.”

Kara spat on the ground beside Aemon. “Go away, maggot. No one will stop me this time. I will save humanity from the enemy.”

The level of anger in Kara’s voice surprised Aemon. It almost did not sound like her.

“You see how she rages,” Kahan said. “She is our enemy, and we must stop her. The metal beasts that ravage Stelemia are here because of her.”

“Keep him talking as long as you can,” Erinie whispered to Minard out of the corner of her mouth. “The door is about an inch off the ground.”

Minard looked upon the dark brother as if he were ox dung stuck to a boot. “I know the prophecy. I know all the teachings of Holy Ibilirith. Why do you believe in her words? Your *traitorous* master was her enemy.”

“They were also brother and sister,” Kahan reminded him.

Aemon glanced at the door and found it had only risen two inches. “Kara, climb under it as soon as you can, and I will follow you in.”

The cold look she gave him made him uneasy. Was it still Kara standing there? He was no longer sure.

Kahan took another step forward. "Our orders may be different, but here and now, we share a common goal. Like you, we who follow Dwaycar want to save humanity, and the only way we can do that is by killing the scion."

He bowed but kept his eyes on Minard. "We believe in Divine Ibilirith and her words of prophetic wisdom, but we care not for her machines, nor her sacred lights. Our legends tell us that her technologies once brought doom upon the world and that my order was created to curb technology's spread, to prevent it happening again."

Aemon noticed Erinie's hand behind her back mixing reagents into a pouch, out of view of the Knives of Dwaycar. What was she planning?

Kara shouted over Aemon's shoulder, "I do not know who Dwaycar is, but he sounds as dumb as my brother was."

Aemon rounded on her in confusion. "You *know* who he is."

Kara glared at him as if he were a fool. "Go kill that man, would you? I am sick of hearing his voice."

What in Lydan's name had come over Kara?

Kahan made an agile flourish with his sword. "Monk, this is your last chance. The ward will soon open enough for the scion to climb under it. If you let her enter, you will doom us all. The extinction of the human race will be on *your* shoulders." He held out his right hand, palm upward. "Stand with me, brother... and save us all."

Minard studied Kara over his shoulder. She looked back at him with bared teeth. Aemon's heart kicked. The indecision on the monk's face was plain to see.

Sure, Kara was acting odd, but that did not mean she wanted to kill everyone. Aemon started to sweat. The prophecy never claimed the scion wanted to destroy the world. It said the scion would *unleash* something which would bring about the end of all life.

What if Kahan was right? Regardless of Kara's intent, she could unknowingly unleash something that would fulfill the Prophecy and doom them all.

We are so close. I cannot allow doubt to find a place in my heart.

It had to be the passkey changing Kara, or maybe it was her wounds, or even fatigue. Possibly all three!

"Kill her, monk," Kahan pleaded. "Before it is too late!"

Minard sighed deeply, then spun to face Kara. "As much as I don't want to listen to the dark brother—his words ring true. Scion, I don't trust you any longer. Not after seeing the changes come over you since we arrived in this city."

Erinie pleaded with him, "Please, no, she's here to save us. Arden—"

"Was a heretic," the monk finished for her.

"You made a pledge to protect the scion, remember?"

"I remember, but I also promised the scion that I would kill her if she became a threat. I don't think we should let her through the door. Her hostility to us is clear."

"The prophecy is mere words on a computer. It means nothing," Erinie sobbed. "Arden's vision is real—Kara will save us. Please, don't do this."

Minard started up the ramp toward Kara. Erinie cursed him and shoved a small handful of black powder into the pouch behind her back. "I won't let the dark brother turn us against one another," she said, then hurled it at Kahan.

He dove out of the way, but the knife behind him was not as quick. The bag struck her and exploded. Kahan and the other knives were thrown aside as the blast tore through the chamber.

Aemon ducked behind Minard, who had almost been blown on top of him from the force of the shockwave. Kara launched herself to the ground in front of the door, while Erinie lay on her stomach with her hands over her ears.

When the dust settled and the echo had run its course, Aemon sat up and found Kahan already getting to his feet, his black armor ragged, torn and oozing blood. A small crater was all that remained of where the dead knife had stood. The other four knives looked uninjured and were already moving to attack.

Kahan held his sword high. "Bless us, Lord Dwaycar." He limped toward the ramp.

Erinie sprang to her feet and ripped out her dagger while Minard retrieved his staff and got into a defensive crouch. Aemon grabbed his mace and crawled over to scoop up the fallen torch.

One of the knives threw a javelin that flew past him and struck the floor beside Kara. She batted it away dismissively, then climbed back to her feet. "Get up and protect me, fool," she snapped at Aemon.

He staggered to his feet and swung to face the knife bearing down on him. There was no time for fear or hesitation. She was almost upon him.

The knife let out a feminine battle-cry and lunged forward with her sword leveled at Aemon's guts. He sidestepped the knife's blade, and it missed him by an inch. The momentum of her attack sent her past him and smashing into the door beside Kara. Before the knife could recover, Kara kicked her viciously in the side of the knee, breaking her leg.

Clutching at her leg, the woman screamed. Her pain was short lived, as Kara took the knife's head in her arms and snapped her neck. Shoving the body aside, Kara looked up at Aemon. The reflected glow of the passkey in her eyes made them look like they were on fire.

Kahan lunged for Kara, but Minard struck him on the arm, interrupting the dark brother's momentum. Aemon backed away as Minard engaged the wounded Kahan and another knife in a frantic battle to stop them reaching Kara. Erinie fought another enemy in a fierce clash of sword-versus-dagger—and even with the smaller weapon, seemed to be holding her own.

"You must kill her," Kahan cried, as he blocked the monk's relentless attacks with his torch. "I have seen the end times in my dreams. Stop this!"

Minard did not relent but drove Kahan back toward the shaft at the center of the room.

With a brief respite, Aemon searched for the final knife. He found her creeping around the edge of the room, beyond the edge of the fighting. She had evidently planned to launch a surprise attack. Aemon moved to put an end to her plans.

Suddenly, Kahan ducked Minard's staff and barged past him. Recklessly running up the ramp, he launched himself at Kara. Aemon swung his mace and shattered the dark brother's arm. Kahan screamed as his sword clattered uselessly to the floor. Aemon went to finish him with a second blow, but the dark brother somersaulted backward down the ramp and deftly landed on his feet.

Minard charged Kahan, swinging his staff in a wide arc, while the other knife engaging the monk trailed after him. The dark brother backed away from Minard, using his torch to keep the monk at bay. Aemon hurled his torch at the knife running to skewer Minard from behind and struck her in the legs, sending her face-first into the ground.

When he strode over to finish her, she looked up at him. He saw himself reflected in her eyes as he drove his mace down into her skull. Warm blood and brains splashed over him. Part of him recoiled from what he had done. Another part—deeper and hidden in shadow—relished in it.

The knife had been his enemy and he had vanquished her.

A foul stench wafted from under the door as it neared three-quarters of a foot off the ground. Another half-minute and Kara would be able to climb under it.

Minard and Erinie drove Kahan and the other knife back. With no threat near, Aemon took a moment to catch his breath.

It was then he saw the final knife racing along the wall toward Kara.

Chapter 29

Kara.

Imogen spun and Kara saw one of the black-garbed knives creeping toward her. Kara couldn't help but cry out in fear.

Shut up, I need to concentrate, Imogen snapped.

The knife, seeing she was discovered, charged forward and vaulted up the ramp. Aemon dove in front of Kara and swung his mace at the woman but she deftly ducked under his blow and slashed at his stomach. Her blade cut a jagged gash across his leather armor, though Kara couldn't see if it drew blood.

Grasping his stomach with one hand, Aemon swung again. The knife was inside his arc of attack and his arm uselessly slammed into her side. She head-butted him and sent him reeling backwards in a spray of blood.

Do something, Kara screamed. *She's going to kill him!*

Imogen glanced at the door. It was almost high enough for her to slide under it. Foul air spilled through the gap, air no living thing had breathed for millennia.

Kara could no longer see Aemon. *Please, look at him, he needs help.*

I told you to shut up, Imogen snarled, though she swiveled her head so Kara could see him again.

Kara witnessed everything Imogen saw, but it was like being in the audience at the theater. You could watch, but not control the direction of the story.

Except this was real.

She caught the sounds of Minard and Erinie fighting, but unless Imogen turned their way, Kara would never know what was happening to them. Her companions could die, and Kara wouldn't even know it.

Sprawled flat on his back, Aemon parried a downward thrust of the knife's sword. The sharp tip struck the concrete an inch from his head. Imogen let out a

low growl and shouldered into the knife, sending her tumbling down the ramp onto her stomach. When she came to a stop, Imogen leapt onto her back.

The knife shrieked, and tried to reach around to strike at Imogen with her gloved hands. Burning hatred filled Kara, like none she'd ever known before. It wasn't her hate, but belonged to the Mother of Steel Children.

Imogen tore the mask from the knife's face with such force, a chunk of her bangs came with it. The maskless knife turned her head sideways to scream. She was a dark-skinned woman, near Kara's age, nothing like the monster she'd seemed a moment before.

Gripping the knife by the hair, Imogen started to pound the woman's face into the concrete. "Die, you putrid piece of *human* filth," she shrieked as blood began spraying everywhere.

The knife wailed, her legs kicking frantically.

Again and again, Imogen drove the woman's face into the concrete and Kara had to watch it all. She felt the blood spurting over her, could feel the knife's body jerk with each blow, and felt the ecstasy building in Imogen as she dealt death.

By the time someone lifted her off the body, there was nothing recognizable left of the knife's head except a bloodied mane of dark hair. Imogen fought her way out of her assailant's arms, then spun around to strike them in the face.

Aemon flew sideways into the door and slumped to the floor. Groaning, he peered up at her, blood pouring from his nose. Terror filled his eyes as Imogen bore down on him.

Kara felt the bloodlust in Imogen still. *No, don't kill him. Please don't kill him.*

Erinie called out a warning to Kara. Imogen spun sideways as another knife charged her. The librarian ran after her, but the knife would be at the top of the ramp before Erinie could stop her.

Imogen grabbed Aemon and with a strength Kara never possessed, hurled him at the oncoming knife. He slammed into her legs, knocking them out from under her. Aemon rolled to the bottom of the ramp and didn't move.

Kara moaned, *Aemon... I'm sorry.*

Suddenly, the ground shuddered as the ancient gears driving the door shattered. The door, now three feet above the floor, slowly began to descend. With a cry of rage, Imogen quickly rolled under it. She kept rolling until she was clear, then nimbly jumped to her feet. They were in a dark chamber, the only light coming from the passkey and the torches outside.

A figure dragged itself under the door. A surge of hope filled Kara. Was it Aemon?

Her hope withered. It was the knife Imogen had thrown Aemon at. Then her hope renewed. If the knife could kill Imogen—

Then Kara saw the hilt of a dagger protruding out of the back of the knife's right thigh. The dagger almost got caught on the door as it descended. Kara's hope died. The knife was wounded. She wouldn't stand a chance against Imogen,

Hands grabbed the knife's legs from the other side of the door and she kicked at them. The hands withdrew before the door could close on them and the knife pulled her legs in, just in time.

The last voice Kara heard before the door slammed shut was Kahan's. "Kill her, Carrisa, kill her before it is too late!"

Kara was cut off from her friends, alone and afraid.

Carrisa looked up at Imogen as she dragged herself across the floor. The black-clad woman reached around, and, gritting her teeth, ripped the dagger from her leg. “Come here, scion, so I can finish this.”

When she neared, Imogen backed deeper into the chamber. “Tsk, tsk, tsk. You poor, wretched little fool. You are going to die a horrible death. The air in here is poison, and it will burn through your lungs until you drown in your own blood.”

No... You need to live so you can kill me. Imogen must be stopped.

“I care not what happens to me.” The woman grunted, her face tight with pain. “I’m but a servant of Lord Dwaycar and I must stop you. You don’t know what you’ll unleash.”

Imogen stopped backing away. “I know exactly what I will unleash. I will save the human race by making it better than it ever was. Flesh withers—but metal is forever. Raising the passkey high, Imogen cried, “And so I shall bring an end to the sickness that pervades this world. The sickness of un-transcended life.”

“No...”

“Yes. Your master is a fool if he thinks he can stop me now. Humanity’s transcendence awaits.”

Kara wanted to scream endlessly into the darkness closing around her. Imogen was the Scion of the Prophecy, and it was too late to stop her.

Carrisa slashed at her with the dagger but Imogen danced away. The knife wheezed as the toxic gas ate away at her lungs. Kara thanked whatever Divine would listen that it was not Aemon down there. If he ran away quickly enough and left Stelemia behind, maybe he would escape whatever doom Imogen would bring down upon it.

Assuming he was still alive...

“I bet you are in pain,” Imogen mocked Carrisa. “More pain than you have ever felt before.” She took a deep breath and savored it. “I can breathe this all day. This body is special.”

Coughing violently, the knife crawled on, throwing her mask away, as if discarding it would help her breathe. Carrisa was a middle-aged woman with graying hair and pretty, blue eyes. Her face contorted into a grim rictus. “Please stop, scion. You must not fulfill—” Her voice broke into a long, agonized gasp for air.

Imogen cackled and danced merrily around her, like a lady would at one of the Priest King’s celebrations. Kara was horrified. How could Imogen take pleasure in the woman’s suffering? Carrisa was Kara’s enemy and possibly had a hand in killing her friends back at the Golden Keg—along with who knew how many others—yet Kara still couldn’t take pleasure in watching her suffer.

“My Lord, please... It hurts so much,” Carrisa cried. “Give me the strength to strike her down.”

Imogen rubbed her hands together gleefully. “Why would he listen to you? You have failed him.”

The woman fought against her pain and pressed forward. Imogen no longer danced around but waited for the knife to reach her. By the time she was within striking distance of the dagger, Carrisa seemed to no longer possess the strength

to lift it from the floor. Blood ran from her mouth, eyes, ears and nose and pooled around her.

She was finished.

“Stop, please... don’t do—”

Imogen kicked her in the face. “Shut up and die, maggot.”

With that, she turned and strode away, leaving Carrisa to drown in her own blood.

USING HER DARK-VISION and the glow of the passkey, Imogen opened the inner door and entered the next room. The long, empty concrete chamber was also poisoned, but it had no effect on Kara’s body. “Are you still inside me?” Imogen, using Kara’s own voice, taunted.

Kara felt desperate and alone, like she was being dragged through a nightmare she couldn’t escape. *Why are you doing this?*

You will know soon enough.

A hard mental shell slowly solidified around Kara and she began to lose touch with her own body. She clawed the shell with her mind but the more she fought, the harder it became. *I should have known what was inside me, Kara cried to herself. I should have killed myself long ago. Now, it’s too late. Imogen is too strong.*

Kara struggled to come to grips with her panic. *I am stronger than this. I picked myself up after watching Berda and the rest die, and I watched Mother fade away. I can do this. I can take back my body.*

She backed off in her struggle against the mental shell and gave herself time to prepare for one final push.

An electric hum grew louder the deeper Imogen moved into the quarantined facility. Unlike the rest of the city, there was no dust, dirt or rubble strewn across the floor and the walls were completely intact. Whatever had caused the devastation in Annbar had spared this section.

Imogen passed doors with bio hazard logos on them. Kara had never seen the symbol before, nor should she have been able to read the warning signs beside them. Yet, she could. She possessed knowledge of things no one else in Stelemia had.

Perhaps part of Imogen’s knowledge had melded with her own.

Entering a natural cave, Imogen headed toward a large metal door at the end of the passage. The stalagmites looming at the sides of the path looked like griever gathering to watch a funeral procession. The glow of the passkey silhouetted them against the limestone wall, making them sway as the light bobbed up and down as Imogen walked.

Aching fear made Kara squirm as they neared the door. It was the one from the visiondream. The one from which the Metal Man had spoken to her.

Imogen punched the air in triumph. “At last, I am here.”

The passkey grew so bright it lit the entire length of the passage with its sinister red glow. It reminded Kara of the glow of the lava around the temple. Hot and deadly.

Imogen held the passkey high overhead and a beam of white light engulfed her. “Welcome, Mother,” a voice said.

It was the voice of the Metal Man from Kara's dream. The thought of reaching him had once brought Kara comfort. Now it filled her with dread. Whatever Imogen had planned, he would help her bring it to fruition.

"Let me in, Ardamus," Imogen said in the same language the people on the surface had used. Except now Kara could understand it.

Air hissed and gears whirred as the door began to rise. Imogen paced impatiently as she waited for it to open. When it had half risen, she ducked under it and entered a small, brightly lit room. The door thudded shut behind her and a white mist pumped into the room. It felt slick and wet on her skin but Kara noticed she could barely feel her body anymore.

Imogen was close to snuffing her out.

She needed to wait for the right moment to attack. If Imogen was distracted, perhaps Kara could catch her off guard and break the shell closing her in before Imogen could stop her.

The mist dissipated and an inner door slid open. When Imogen went into the next room she stopped as a man made of metal approached. He was six feet tall with small, yellow optical sensors set in a square-shaped, expressionless face. Above his optical sensors was a human brain encased in a transparent protective case. Running from the brain and into his limbs were electrical wires protected by a layer of transparent plastic tubing. The brain had the same gray pallor as a corpse and pulsed like a heart. The sight was repulsive.

"Ardamus, my love, after all this time."

"It is good to see you again, Mother. Ryhana's coding sequences worked."

"Something went wrong. I am here, but this body is only a half-blood and I had trouble taking control of it."

"Half-blood. Interesting. But that does not explain why you would encounter trouble seizing hold of it."

Imogen pursed her lips. "There is something different about this host. Not only did I have an uphill battle taking control, the original host still fights me, even now."

Wrynic had said there was something different about Kara too, as had the ghost woman. But what was it that made her different? Wrynic said it wasn't because she was a half-blood.

Kara put the thought aside, as Imogen continued to speak. "I wonder if Ryhana was smarter or more conniving than I gave her credit for, and tampered with the code in some way."

"I hope not." The Metal Man shifted his weight. "Anyway, you are here now and we have much to do."

They walked side by side along a metal corridor, with pipes and wires running along the walls. "It seems I am not the only one who has returned," Imogen said. "My brother, Dressen, is in ruined Annbar as we speak and has been trailing me for some time. He fights alongside a bunch of lunatics who worship someone called Dwaycar." She grimaced. "Somehow, my dear brother has convinced them that they need to kill me because of a prophecy or some such nonsense."

"I observed the fighting at Barrier One on the monitoring system. You appeared to have the situation under control. You even had allies."

Imogen snorted. “I see you have not lost your tact for pointing out the obvious. Of course I had things under control. Such primitive weapons were no match for me.”

“I suppose not.”

“Dressen’s return is yet another sign I was wrong to put my faith in Ryhana. I am glad I got to watch her genetically engineered pets devour her. It was most pleasing to hear her scream as they spilled her guts and ate them whole.”

Ardamus let out a pale imitation of a laugh. “I wondered what happened to her. I always assumed she ran away with the others or died in the fighting. Anyway, what does it matter if your brother has returned? Dressen was weak and not willing to do what needed be done. No doubt, he remains that way.”

“He may have been weak, but I underestimated him. I needed him to stand with me, but like the rest of the traitors, he refused to see the big picture. He would not sacrifice the few for the many. Feelings came before duty to him.” Kara felt Imogen's rage building. “He did not see the future as I did.”

Ardamus opened a metal door and ushered Imogen through. “Few saw things the way you did; not even me. That is why you harvested me and put me into this *wretched* metal body. I learned the hard way.”

Imogen ignored his comment and dug her nails into her palm. “My brother inhabits the body of a young woman, like I have.”

Kara squirmed. *Is she talking about Semira? Could her sister have had someone inside her too?*

“The weakness of flesh was always the bane of you two,” Ardamus said. “When I was still made of muscle and bone... I remember how you used to make me pleasure you with my—”

Imogen slapped him on the back of his protective brain casing. “Keep it to yourself, fool. I am not interested in hearing it.”

Ardamus’s optical sensors flashed and one of his metallic hands closed into a fist. “I apologize, Mother.”

Imogen continued, “The body Dressen inhabits is no ordinary woman. It is my host’s half-sister, and a full-blooded scion at that.”

But Semira is dead, Kara thought. Erinie's explosive saw to that.

After a long moment, Ardamus opened his fist. “He was your sibling in life and so he is again.” He swiveled his head to face her as they walked into another natural cave, this one lit by a row of lights running along the roof. “Has your brother retrieved his armor?”

“No, not yet—but he will.”

“What of yours? Do you know where it is?”

“I do.” Imogen tightened her jaw. “Someone placed it in a secure hold, but a group of fanatics has built a temple to a goddess of light or some such nonsense over it. This vile flesh and blood I possess was in that temple and I managed to gain control over it temporarily. I tried to get to my armor, but something inside my host fought me and I was too weak to stand against it.”

A sudden, terrible thought occurred to Kara as Imogen finished speaking. Either the Order was mistaken on who was entombed under their temple or...

Imogen was Ibilirith!

But how could someone so evil come to be seen as the holy Divine of the sacred lights? A Divine who had helped put the ancient enemy to sleep during the War in Heaven? Perhaps, most confusing of all, was why Imogen would write the prophecy to warn people of her own return. Perhaps Kara had been right when she had said Dwaycar wrote it.

If Imogen was really Ibilirith and had come to fulfill the Prophecy, then the only chance Stelemia had was for Kara to take back control and stop it from happening. Kara only had the energy for one more attempt at it, so she had to wait for the right moment to strike.

Imogen stopped Ardamus and kicked a stalagmite until it broke in half. Satisfied with herself and her impressive strength, she motioned her companion to keep walking. "Twice I came close to entering my tomb, but each time I was thwarted. God, it made me angry, and I had no one to take my frustrations out on." Her eyes narrowed to slits. "The first thing I will do when I get back to the inhabited caverns is retrieve my armor from that so-called temple, then drag all the fools worshiping that stupid goddess of light back here to undergo the metamorphosis."

"How unfortunate for them," Ardamus said. "I am glad you only had me harvested."

They stopped at another secure door and Ardamus entered his authorization code. While they waited for it to open, Imogen said, "Now to the matter at hand. My firstborn are already here."

"I know. Our sensors picked up their signals and I knew the time had come. I activated the manufactory to prepare for your arrival."

"How long was I gone?"

The number of years Ardamus rattled off made no sense to Kara.

Imogen put her hands on her hips. "That is far longer than I expected," she snapped. "Could you do *nothing* to hurry things along, you fool?"

If Ardamus was annoyed, he didn't show it. "How would I know what host Ahnna would put you in? I could not even find your genkey because some fool ran off with it during the fighting in Annbar."

genkey? Kara searched her new memories. *Yes, the passkey must be what he had called the genkey.* She tried to find more information on it, but quickly gave up. The scale of memories and knowledge Imogen possessed was too daunting for Kara to come to grips with in the little time she had left.

Imogen hissed through her teeth. "You would have found it, if you had bothered looking."

Ardamus's brain pulsated a dull red. "I deny that accusation most vehemently, Mother. I did look for it."

"Yet it was out there right under your nose, in ruined Annbar."

He paused. "How odd then, that I did not find it."

Imogen snapped her head around to glare at him. "Did I detect a hint of sarcasm in your voice?"

"Sarcasm?" Ardamus huffed. "I am incapable of sarcasm, as you well know."

The door finished opening and he led her through. "Truth be told, I assumed your genkey lost forever and I prepared myself to have to languish here for eternity."

Imogen rolled her eyes and followed him down a concrete corridor lined with windows and metal doors. Inside the darkened rooms on the other side of safety glass were old-world things Imogen knew well, as they seemed to dominate much of her memories. Within the spotlessly clean scientific labs beyond the glass were microscopes, scanning devices, precision instruments and a myriad of other items. The next set of rooms, lit by bright electric lights, were huge. Each contained metal cages, some small enough for rats, others large enough to house half a dozen amalgamas.

As they walked deeper into the facility, Kara felt herself fading. She hoped the right moment to strike at Imogen's mental shell came soon, for she didn't know how much longer she could hold on.

Imogen laughed at her plight. *I know you are up to something in there, Kara. You will not succeed. Soon you will be but a bad memory.*

"I have been busy while you were away," Ardamas said, distracting Imogen and giving Kara time to gather her remaining energy to prepare for the final assault. "Over the years, I have used the harvesters to add to our numbers, but when I sensed your genkey had been discovered again, I accelerated production using fresh organic material. Our harvesters left through South Gate Four and passed into the inhabited caverns. They raided trade caravans in an isolated area the prisoners called the Limestone Caves so there would be no witnesses."

"How many people were harvested?"

"We procured one hundred and four fresh souls. They have undergone level one transcendence and their remaining flesh has been placed into appropriate units."

Imogen's mouth became a flat line. "We need more."

"I agree. That is why I restarted the iron mine, so we can gather the material to build more harvesters in the manufactory." Ardamas paused at another door, his metallic hand poised on the button to open it. "Something interesting to note: the belongings of the men we harvested were far regressed from the technology their ancestors possessed when they fled Annbar."

"Yes, I know. They use swords and staffs and wear primitive makeshift armor."

"Much of the past is forgotten, it seems. I took some of the surviving captured men and interrogated them. They spoke in a language I could barely understand and it took me hours of *unspeakable* torture to learn it."

"Thousands of years of isolation and darkness will do that, I suppose. I am lucky; thanks to my host, this flesh comes equipped with the knowledge of their barbaric language."

"One more thing," Ardamus said. "They have completely forgotten the surface."

Imogen waved a hand dismissively. "The surface is an icy wasteland. What good would it do them anyway?"

"None, I suppose, but I cannot help but think there is something to be said about the loss of such knowledge. The Sun and stars are almost as much a part of the human experience as sex or voiding one's bowels. Whole cultures were centered around their worship."

"Oh, do not bore me with philosophical musings on what it means to be human. I strived my whole life to ascend above my mortal flesh and blood, and I never achieved it... until now."

Ardamus pressed the button and the door rose. "A friend of yours is here. She will be pleased to see you."

Something flew at Imogen and she raised a hand to protect her face. "Squawk, squawk, squawk," came a strange, high-pitched sound.

Imogen lowered her arm. A two-foot-tall metallic bird with multifaceted crystal eyes hovered in the air, its wings sending out small gusts of wind as they flapped. "Asura, is that you?" Imogen asked, her voice almost breaking.

"Squawk, squawk," came the reply.

The bird landed on Imogen's shoulder, dug its talons into her robes, then nuzzled its cold beak against her cheek. Imogen scratched Asura under one of her wings and the metallic bird let out a contented squawk. "I missed you, my darling little baby," Imogen cooed softly into its ear.

Ardamus laughed again, the sound like a metal bar being dragged across stone. Imogen motioned him to keep moving, still immersed in her pet. He led her into a room filled with functional computers and monitors, the whir of their fans the only sound.

Imogen glanced at a few of the displays as she walked by. On one was the image of the Capital Spire and on others, Radashan Crevice, the River of the Gods and what looked like the glowing arch of phosphorescent bacteria they'd passed under on the way to Annbar. The last monitor along the wall displayed three people running through concrete corridors, one limping badly.

Kara squirmed. They looked like her three companions, and it was definitely Aemon who was limping. At least they were still alive. *Goodbye, Aemon, my friend. You should have left me to my fate back in the Limestone Caves. Who would've guessed things would turn out the way they have?*

Another screen caught her eye. It showed the ruins of the Golden Keg. Her home.

What was this place? Had Ardamus been watching her?

The Metal Man led Imogen toward a glass window with a pitch-black room beyond. When he got there, he faced her. "Welcome home, Mother. Come see what your beloved children have wrought for you."

Imogen strode over to the window and peered into the dark room. Ardamus pressed a button on the wall, lighting rows of lights that revealed a vast, open space beyond the glass. Through eyes once her own, Kara saw line after line of metal men standing still in neat rows. Some were nearly twice as tall as men, others short and fat, while others still were human skeletons bound with wires and gears, their eye sockets filled with darkened optical sensors.

And that was only the first row.

Imogen walked out onto a catwalk and stood overlooking the host of metal men. When she held up the passkey, it bathed them all in fel light. "I have returned, my children, my life-infused saviors!"

As one, half a thousand optical senses lit up. They stared up at Imogen and waited silently for their mother's command. Imogen basked in their love and began to make plans. She would need more flesh and blood to make additional life-infused children, and she knew just where to find it.

While Imogen was busy planning, Kara used the last of her energy to attack the shell clamping shut around her. As Kara assaulted the shield, Imogen's body

jerked and spasmed. Asura flew off as the two women's wills fought to overpower each other.

Just die, worm, Imogen raged. Your life is over.

You're insane; you must be stopped.

As they fought, Imogen clenched her jaw so hard several molar teeth broke. Mustering all her strength of will, Imogen unleashed it against Kara all at once. "Not this time," Imogen screamed. "Not by you. Not by anyone."

Kara was beaten into submission and could fight no more. She became trapped in a hardened shell of psychic energy that drained her of what little will remained.

You lost, Kara. But before you die: see the future of the human race.

Imogen spat out blood and broken teeth, then dug her nails into the catwalk railing, the passkey as bright as the Lost Sun. "Come forth, my children. We march to war!"

The last thing Kara heard was the clang of hundreds of metal feet marching forward in unison.

Then there was nothing but darkness.

Epilogue

Semira.

Semira struggled to climb out from under the rubble. Curse Erinie and her concoctions. Lucky Semira and her fellow knife, Jamina, had well-honed reflexes. Both women had dived for cover against the door the half-blood had escaped through and were sheltered from the worst of the cascading concrete. The same couldn't be said for the other two knives, who lay crushed under tons of rubble near the center of the room.

Jamina lit a torch, then helped Semira out from under a chunk of concrete slab. When Semira was on her feet, Jamina handed her a sword. "Thanks," Semira said.

Jamina's eyes widened in surprise. Clearly she'd expected to maintain mission silence. Knives rarely spoke to one another unless they had to. All of them were mere tools for the Luddite Council, who prostrated at the feet of the great tourmaline colossus of Dwaycar.

Pulverized concrete dust filled the air and both were covered in it, turning their black armor bone gray. It was hard to breathe and Semira felt grit grinding between her teeth.

They picked their way over the rubble toward the exit Kahan had taken, Semira in the lead, Jamina a step behind. Semira had told him to go that way, and he had bowed to her wisdom and left. If only he had always listened to her...

I have failed you, she said to the voice in her head. I almost died, and now the half-blood is gone.

Yes, you failed me, but there is still time. I need you. My sister is close to entering the containment door. You must hurry.

The voice came to her more clearly now, and sometimes when he spoke, it was hard to know if it was his voice or her own. She remembered things she'd never

seen, remembered places and people she'd never known. Her own memories, like the ones of Arden and Liana, were fading.

But the guilt was still there, feeding on her like a parasite. The guilt for all she had done.

Wrynic...

Where the floor wasn't cracked or strewn with rubble, Semira could follow faint, dusty footprints left by Kahan and the other knives. Had her eyes not been so keen, even in low light, she may have missed them; but like her mind, her body was changing. The other knives had seen the changes and marveled at them. Semira was stronger than Kahan and the other knives, and could outrun and outfight any of them.

She'd become so powerful, the shadow trainer had called her the Herald of Dwaycar.

None of them knew she had a voice in her head that told her things no one else knew. They thought it magic that Semira could track the half-blood through the endless dark of the Nether.

It was no magic. It was the unnamed man inside her head.

She felt invisible fingers brush her soul. *You are special to me, my love. That is why I am here with you.*

His words brought her comfort. She had failed him, but he still loved her.

Semira and Jamina's journey led them to a vast living quarter with doors built uniformly into the walls. Many of the doors had been smashed inward, revealing small apartments with beds, tables and kitchens, all covered in thick layers of dust or broken to pieces. Above and below them were floor after floor of similar quarters.

This place was called Annbar. Once, tens of thousands of people made their homes here. Mothers, fathers, sons, daughters. In the end, all of them were grist for my sister's mad plan. His voice became quiet, almost as if he was speaking to himself. I witnessed so much horror, so much death, so much depravity. And for what? Her cowardice? How could she have sunk so low?

Semira had no idea what he was talking about, but she listened, for she liked it when he spoke to her. They made their way along a broken balcony, following Kahan's footprints. The prints led them toward a set of stairs. When they arrived, they found that one of the above levels had fallen and brought down dozens of floors below it.

Kahan had used a grappling hook to make the ascent up the broken stairwell. Climbing the rope, Semira and Jamina found themselves on a balcony, three floors above where they'd started. The apartments on this level were larger than the ones below; suggesting the people who'd lived there had enjoyed a higher social status.

Huge sections of the wall and floor had been blasted into ruins and dozens of support pillars had been shattered. Seeing the destruction of the supports, Semira was surprised the roof hadn't collapsed.

Kahan's footprints led them to a mangled metal door. It appeared as if something had broken through it from the other side. What could have smashed through a five-inch thick metal door like that?

This destruction is the work of my sister's creations. There was a battle here, and those that fell were harvested and placed into her machines.

They climbed through the hole in the door and made their way through passages strewn with rubble. Soon they heard noises in the distance, the sounds echoing along empty corridors. They began to sprint, leaping over craters and broken pillars until they burst into a large antechamber.

Kahan was there, battling a tall, dark-skinned monk who swung his staff, driving Kahan back toward the dark shaft at the center of the room. Their leader was injured, and the other knives with him were dead or missing. Behind the monk, a woman scrounged through a bag while another man pounded his fists against a large metal door. Then the man at the door saw Semira and shouted a warning to his two companions.

Semira and Jamina charged forward. When Jamina hurled her last javelin at the monk, he ducked under it, then shouted for his friends to flee. Semira got a better look at the woman standing at the base of the ramp and slid to a stop.

Erinie! You wretched husk.

Semira noticed the librarian's hands digging into a pouch. What was she up to?

You are too late, the voice inside her screamed. My sister has entered the manufactory.

Burning hot fingers clenched around her soul, the pain causing Semira to collapse to her knees, the scar on her lower back throbbing. The man inside her was livid with rage and he was taking his frustrations out on her. Erinie was so close, but the maelstrom inside prevented her from moving to kill the librarian.

When Erinie saw Semira, her mouth fell open. "You..."

All Semira could do in return was let out a pained gasp. *You let her in, he raged. You let her in. How can we stop her now?*

Sneering, Erinie hurled something on the ground in front of Semira. It exploded into a thick cloud of acrid smoke that began to fill the chamber. "Stay there and die, traitor," the librarian hissed from somewhere in the haze.

Semira coughed and spluttered and realized the smoke was toxic. Pain and rage continued to buffet her, making her unable to flee. Kahan was wheezing and coughing too, but Jamina made no sound.

No, I can't die. Semira coughed up blood. Not after all I have been through, all I have suffered, all those I've had to kill... It can't have been for nothing.

To her surprise, she suddenly stopped coughing and was able to breathe the noxious gas as if it was normal air. When the smoke dissipated a few minutes later, she found Kahan curled into a fetal position near the edge of the shaft.

He must die for his failure, the voice said. He must be punished.

The rage simmered still, the scar ached, but the fingers let go of her soul and she was able to move again. Jamina tentatively peered into the chamber from a nearby corridor, evidently having escaped before the poisonous gas could overwhelm her.

Semira and Jamina were the only survivors of the twenty-five knives who had stood in the ruins of Sunholm. Since then, Kahan had led the rest to their deaths along with dozens of reinforcements brought in to assault the Temple of Sacred Lights.

They had lost. *He had failed them.*

Climbing to her feet, Semira padded over to Kahan. He was gravely wounded and wouldn't live long. His armor tattered and bloody, one arm broken along with

his jaw and his left eye socket, the eye itself hanging by the retina against his cheek.

If only he'd let Semira off her tight leash, she would have killed the half-blood long ago. Instead he had talked and tried to make deals, like he had at the bridge before the temple of the machine worshipers. Had he just attacked and killed the half-blood back then, so many lives could have been saved. He knew the human race was at stake, yet he bantered words. Semira snarled. *Words! What a fool.*

Kahan got what he deserved.

He looked up at her and groaned, "Dwaycar,, I have failed you." The effort of speaking brought blood to his mouth as the poison burned through him. "I did all I could... We all did. Now... the world is doomed."

Semira yanked off his mask, ripping the retina out of his skull. She stamped her foot on the eye, splattering it on the floor. He screamed and held his uninjured hand over the empty eye socket.

Kahan was younger than she'd expected, no more than thirty, handsome, with a perfect mouth and square jaw. No wonder the shadow trainer had killed all her other sons and chose him to lead the knives. Had it not been for the swelling, bruises and empty, bloody eye socket, any woman would lust for a face like his.

He must die. He is useless to me now. My rage must be sated.

Kahan tried to roll onto his back but the effort became too much for him, so he gave up. He cried out in agony and spat blood. When he could speak, he said, "I am sorry."

Semira felt nothing for him or his suffering. The boiling rage was all she knew. But it wasn't her rage.

Jamina came up beside her, staring down at their leader. Kahan looked up at her, uncovering his eye socket to reach up to her. "Help me."

Before Jamina could assist him, Semira motioned her back. The other knife hesitated until Semira swung to face her, then backed away hurriedly.

Kill him. Kill him now. Lest my rage overwhelm you.

Semira took hold of one of Kahan's legs. "What are you doing?" he gasped, as she dragged him toward the edge of the shaft.

"You failed."

When she reached the edge, she dropped his leg. He tried to grab her. "Wait. Stop. Please..."

Ignoring his mewling, she pushed him off the edge with her boot. His scream echoed long off the walls of the shaft until it faded to nothing.

Semira spun to face Jamina, as the knife dropped her torch. The two women stared at one another for a long time. Then Jamina bowed her head and walked backwards until she disappeared into the darkness.

My rage is sated, for now, the man inside said. You and I must go on a long journey. We will bring no light, nor food, nor water. We will not need them.

Semira left her dead companions to their eternal sleep and followed the guidance of his voice out of ancient Annbar, with its lost secrets. Arriving back in the Nether, she journeyed through endless dark, dripping passages, jagged caves and cold underground streams, passing dangerous, twisted beasts that saw her but kept their distance. Days blurred as one, and she neither ate nor slept, walking or sometimes crawling, as though she were in a dream.

As she ventured deeper into the Nether, her mind was slowly replaced by an ancient being that had lived inside her for her whole life. Hour by hour, pieces of him were put together like a child's puzzle until an almost complete picture of him had appeared in her mind's eye. She now knew his name, but he would not let her speak it.

Soon, we will be as one. But do not be afraid, my love. I am who you were born to be.

Semira arrived at a choppy lake lit by a blinding white beam of light, shining through a large crack in the rocky chamber roof. A cold wind tousled her hair and sent wisps of gray mist swirling over the water.

We must be near the surface, the man inside said. That light belongs to the Sun. The world is no longer shrouded in darkness, which means the ice that covers it should begin to thaw.

You mean the Lost Sun?

Yes, my sweet, your Lost Sun. You are likely the first person in many, many years who has seen its light. One day, when my sister is no more, I hope humans can live under it, like we once did.

Following the light beam downward, Semira's eyes settled on a small island at the center of the lake. Chunks of ice floated in the water and the flakes of snow falling through the crack settled on its surface and floated there like trade ships in Crystal Lake.

He made her walk to the lake's edge and wade into it. She would have screamed as her body sank into the icy water, but her mouth no longer obeyed her.

As she swam, a school of silver fish nibbled at her clothes. Sometimes their sharp teeth bit into her skin and tore off small, ragged chunks of flesh. As she bled, more fish came to feed until they were all around her, biting and snapping, then darting away so others could move in to feed.

It took Semira twenty minutes to reach the island and when she emerged from the water, her now-naked body misted in the hazy light. Blood oozed from a hundred bite wounds and ran down her legs to freeze on the gravel shore. A small, crude, snow-covered stone building was all that stood on the otherwise featureless island.

His cold rage filled Semira, as cold as the icy waters she had swum. This is where the ungrateful laid me to rest? Far from their homes and their fires? I saved them, and this is how they repaid me!

Semira walked over to the building and found there was no way to enter. It was as if those who built it had not wanted what was inside to ever be set free.

You must dig, my love. Dig with your hands.

So she dug and dug and dug. When she was done, her hands were bloody and two fingers were broken. The pain was unbearable but the force that compelled her was powerful, and now had almost complete control over her body.

By the time she unearthed the burial chamber, there was little left of the woman that had been Semira. She was still conscious of her body and could make sense of what she saw, but no longer remembered her own name and had little memory of what had brought her to this forgotten tomb. She felt guilt, sorrow and pain, but little else.

The only thing in the burial chamber was a plain stone sarcophagus in the center of the room. Semira limped over to it and found the lid cracked with age. Using her mangled hands, she pushed the stone slab until it fell to the floor and shattered into dust. When the dust settled, she saw a set of intricate black armor laid in six pieces inside.

My armor. After all this time. Now, my love, you will be mine.

Piece by piece, Semira put the armor on. It was heavy and cold, but fitted perfectly. The final segment was the helmet. When she lowered it onto her head, sharp metallic barbs shot into her back and dug their way into her spinal cord.

The pain was excruciating.

The man, now in control, walked her from the crypt into the beam of sunlight. It was under that light he finally let her scream.

So she did, long and hard, letting all her rage, guilt, pain and sorrow out until her voice broke. By the end of it, her consciousness had faded to almost nothing, having been replaced by the ancient male presence now made whole by the armor.

“I make one final demand of you, my sweet,” he said with the voice that once belonged to her. “Say my name.”

He looked up so Semira could see the light of the Lost Sun. *You’re Dwaycar, the Betrayer*, she whispered in his mind.

“Betrayer!” he roared. “It was *I* who was *betrayed*. Go to the light of your Lost Sun, and be gone. I no longer have need of you.”

Dwaycar let her soul float up the beam, toward the blessed light. She was halfway up when something stopped her ascent.

The light of the Lost Sun flickered once, then died, plunging Semira into darkness.

